

**What is the status of
liushou ertong (left-behind children) in China?**

Assessing the state of the field for a recent research agenda

**Student: Youna Zhang
Supervisor: Professor André Laliberté**

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School of Political Studies

Faculty of Social Science

University of Ottawa

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Abstract:

This research paper seeks to explore the past and current state of the literature on the issue of left-behind children in China. By using primary and secondary sources, this study identifies dominant areas of research on this topic, as well as attempts to assess the gaps in the literature. Finally, the paper proposes recommendations and future research agendas on this topic.

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Introduction

The issue of migrant workers has garnered much attention in recent literature. This is not surprising, as at the end of 2015, the total number of migrant workers was 277.47 million, which was approximately 36% of the total number (774.51 million) of employed people in China in 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2015). Of the 277.47 million migrant workers, 168.84 million of them left their hometowns and worked in other places, whereas 108.63 million worked in their own localities (Ibid). Recently, the Chinese government has announced that by 2030, one billion of its citizens will live in cities. This means urbanizing 310 million rural residents by 2030, in addition to China's existing urban population of 690 million (Gao, 2013).

Unlike migrants in many other countries, most of China's rural workers cannot become permanent city residents due to a range of economic, social and institutional barriers imposed by the Hukou system (or household registration system) in China (Gao, 2013). Given the sharp income divide and economic situations between rural and urban China, many rural Chinese people are forced to move to large cities to find work as temporary workers, and make the sacrifice to leave rural family members behind. This results in a large number of the rural population being left behind, such as children.

Rapid industrialization, massive urbanization and strict family policies have altered the lives of children in China drastically since the 1980s. On the one hand, with industrialization and economic development, the economic situations and the well-being of these children have generally improved. However, on the other hand, the unbalanced economic growth in recent decades has generated serious consequences for the well-being of children in rural areas (Chen, Yang & Ren, 2015).

Statement of Problem and purpose of the study

A new body of research has emerged in China since the 2000s, which expresses concern regarding rural outmigration and the impact it has on left-behind populations, such as left-behind children (Jacka, 2012). The topic of liushou ertong (留守儿童), or left-behind children, has generated fervent discussions in recent years, particularly following two incidents in Bijie, a city in the south-western province of Guizhou. The first incident took place in 2012, where five street children died of carbon-monoxide poisoning after they had clambered into a roadside dumpster and lit charcoal to keep themselves warm (“Little match children,” 2015). The second incident took place in 2015, where four left-behind siblings died after drinking pesticide following abandonment by their parents (Phillips, 2015).

In 2013, the All China Women’s Federation released a report indicating that by 2010, there were an estimated 61 million left-behind children (All-China Women’s Federation, 2013). Of these left-behind children, 29 million had been left in the care of others and 2 million were left just to fend for themselves (“Little match children,” 2015). This 61 million figure represents one fifth of all the children in China, and in recent years, the country's state-run media appears to have been given license to discuss the tragic consequences (Sudworth, 2016). Although there has been an increase in rural children accompanying their parents, single-person migration remains the dominant pattern in the internal migration flow in China (Wen & Lin, 2012), meaning that the trend of left-behind children will likely persist, if not increase in the years to come. With events such as the pesticide incident and others such as left-behind girls aged 8 and 9 being sexually abused by their teachers (Wu, 2013), ignoring this phenomenon is no longer feasible. The phenomenon of left-behind children in China is therefore an important area of investigation.

Current situation on left-behind children in China

In May 2016, the non-profit organization Growing Home, along with the China Institute for Educational Finance Research of Beijing University, the Institute of Population and Labor Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Capital University of Economics and Business, published a report entitled “Rural boarding school students development report” (《农村寄宿制学校学生发展报告》). The research took approximately eight months, with researchers examining the situations of two north-west provinces, including five counties, 137 primary schools and over 17,000 rural boarding students. The report shows that left-behind children are at a disadvantage in terms of sleep quality, mental health, international relationships and academic performance, with 65.7% of students suffering from severe depression. Those left-behind children with a migrating mother are the most vulnerable and at risk children (Wei, 2017).

In June 2016, the Nanfang Zhoumo (南方周末, or Southern Weekly, a newspaper that is circulated widely in Southern China) dedicated their entire effort to publish a report on left behind children entitled “All together – Report on left-behind children in China” (《在一起——中国留守儿童报告》). Shortly afterwards, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs and other Chinese ministries sprang into action: for the first time, the Central government announced the launch of a nationwide rural left-behind children investigation. Approximately six months following the announcement, the Ministry of Civil Affairs announced that there are currently 9.02 million left-behind children in rural China (Ibid.). A year following the announcement of the investigation, Nanfang Zhoumo reporters returned to the provinces of Hubei, Sichuan and

Guizhou in order to assess the implementation of some of the initiatives dedicated to left-behind children (Ibid.). Despite some challenges, the findings indicate a rather positive and hopeful outlook for the left-behind children in China. Below are a few examples from Hefeng county, Hubei province.

In 2016, the local government in Hefeng county, along with local supporter, constructed a small house for the purpose of providing a communication platform for left-behind children and their migrant parents. The project was entitled “Linking the home and the school – Affectionate and warm little hut” (家校连心·亲情小屋), and provided a safe place for left-behind children to escape to, as well as place for them to communicate with their parents via video calls. Although the initiative is a positive and encouraging one, the little hut was only visited 30 times by left-behind children between February 20, 2017 and May 8, 2017, due to factors such as parental and children’s lack of information on this initiative, parents’ working hours, and children’s school hours (Ibid.).

Since early 2017, numerous teachers have assumed more responsibilities in caring for left-behind children in Hefeng county. For example, many have assumed the role of psychological counselors to the children. This is not an easy role as every left-behind child face different challenges and has different personality traits. As such, sometimes the help provided by the teachers may not be the type of help that is needed. Although the teachers mean well, they lack the professional knowledge and training in psychology, and may not respond adequately to the unique conditions some left-behind children face. Although the local government has attempted to provide training to teachers, only theoretical lectures can be provided. Lacking training in practical situations, the teachers can only apply limited knowledge. Finally, there is

insufficient number of teachers to help all the left-behind children in need. In an interview with Nanfang Zhoumo, one of the local teachers explained that the county will channel their efforts in recruiting more teachers with psychology backgrounds (Ibid.).

To assist left-behind children further in boarding schools, schools in Hefeng county introduced professional social workers to assist with psychological counseling, and this proved successful. Some schools also made an effort to enhance classrooms in order to provide left-behind children with telephone and computer capacities for them to communicate more with their parents, as well as areas reading, music and arts and crafts stations for those in need. Social workers however often struggle to make ends meet due to their poor remuneration, and often must leave rural schools in search for better opportunities (Ibid.).

Another official government report published by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (Wang & Zhao, 2016) confirms some of the statistics as noted in the article published by Nanfang Zhoumo. The report indicates that in 2016, there were 9.02 million left-behind children in China. The Ministry attributes the sharp decline in numbers to three factors. First, they reported that the 2013 All-China Women's Federation numbers were based on the 2010 census in China, and only used 1.26 million rural families as the representative numbers to calculate the estimated numbers of left-behind children. The 2010 figures of 61 million were therefore grossly overstated. Second, from 2010-2016, numerous changes took place to assist rural migrants economically and socially. For example, a lot of migrant parents have been able to enrol their children in urban schools. Third, in the last couple of years, a lot of rural villages have become urban cities. And finally, many employment opportunities were created in the last few years to assist rural families. For example, in 2015, it was estimated that the number of left-behind children was approximately 1 million in Guizhou (one of the poorest provinces). In 2016

however, that number dropped to 80,000 in 2016 as a result of increased employment opportunities near rural migrants' homes. The Chinese slogan is now "Making money and family care are equal priorities" (挣钱顾家两不误).

The impressive drop in numbers of left-behind children is worthy of mentioning. Although progress has been made to address the issue of left-behind children situation in China and the situation seems to be improving, much more still needs to be done.

The purpose of this research is to conduct an exploratory study to understand the state of past research in the English literature (i.e., articles written in English only) on the issue of left-behind children in China, and to propose future research agendas on this topic. As a mean to inform the research found in the English literature, the study will also examine what has been written on the topic in China from a primary source, namely the People's Daily newspaper. The study will identify the different perspectives found in the English literature that assess the issue left-behind children. For example, is the phenomenon a health issue or a care issue? From the data obtained, this study will attempt to assess the gaps in the literature. It is hoped that this study will add a new component in the left-behind children literature and contribute to possible future research agendas.

Literature Review

The articles in this literature review were chosen from a list of articles found on Google Scholar. A large number of articles on left-behind children before 2010 originated from Chinese sources, such as local Chinese universities, and are in Mandarin only. These articles are inaccessible on the Internet and through university search engines outside of China. As such, the

literature review is limited to those articles that are available in English academic journals. A few others were found through general searches on the Internet on China left-behind children.

Literature on left-behind children in China only recently surged in the English academic journals and the subject has been assessed from various perspectives. Although there is a lack of general theoretical frameworks when examining the situation of left-behind children, some dominant research patterns have emerged, such as case studies related to left-behind children's general well-being, physical health, psychological health (including mental health, emotions, behaviours), and education.

General frameworks

There is generally a lack of theoretical framework which guides the studies of left-behind children. Nonetheless, there are a few relevant frameworks which need to be considered when examining the left-behind children phenomenon in China. From a global migration perspective, Toyota, Yeoh, & Nguyen (2007) suggest that research needs to bring the left-behind population close to the broader migration research, as it is vital to gain more insights on migration and how it affects broader social change. They also ask questions about how migration and non-migration are institutionally constructed, particularly in the case of China. Here, there is an emphasis on social roles as determined by the Chinese culture, which often leaves wives, children and the elderly at home in rural China, while the father, the able man on which the family relies on, leaves to find work.

Biao's (2007) study analyzes the issue from an institutional perspective. Similar to Toyota et al.'s (2007) argument, the author suggests that numerous institutional constraints (e.g., Hukou system, high costs related to internal migration, lack of health care and access to education) prompt individual to weigh the decision to migrate or not. Rather than seeing left-

behind children as a result from migration however, Biao (2007) explains that it is the rural communities as a whole that have been left behind economically and socially, and in turn, these communities are no longer able to provide any support for those left behind there. As such, the author believes that policies should address institutional arrangements and unequal social relations.

Ye et al. (2013) provides a possible explanation for lack of theoretical framework. The authors rightly argue that the majority of case studies assess left-behind children's well-being from an individual and/or family level. They however believe that research should focus on levels beyond individuals and households. What they propose is to incorporate biopolitics of migration and politics of social care in the analysis of left-behind populations (Ye et al., 2013, p.1133). In this context, the authors argue that "instead of viewing migration as a threat to social stability, policies should be geared towards regulating to facilitate migration – reducing discrimination against migrants and red tape that hinders the free flow of labor" (Ibid.). As for the politics of social care, the authors believe that the state has become increasingly less reliable in providing social care. As such, social care is becoming a profitable market under the disguise of false "love" and "care" from those who make a profit in social care of and by migrant workers and that of their left-behind families (Ye et al., 2013, p.1137).

Case studies

Turning to case studies and the well-being of left-behind children, the literature shows that the topic has been assessed mainly from psychological, educational, and familial/social perspectives, with the majority of the articles focusing on the psychological aspect. Fang, Su, Gill & Birmaher's (2010) study examines the behavioural and emotional problems associated with left-behind children, and conclude that these children experience a high level of

psychopathology¹. The emphasis of this study relates to the psychopathology of children raised by different caregivers, such as relatives, non-relative, and children with history of left behind. The results show that left-behind children with more issues “were younger children from biological families with low education levels and who were left behind for longer periods, left in the care of younger caregivers with low education and low socioeconomic status and received less support from teachers” (p.659). Similarly, Jia & Tuan (2010) found that left-behind children are more prone to significant loneliness and adverse psychological consequences compared to non-left-behind children.

Ye & Pan (2011) focus on the impact of parental migration on their left-behind children, and argue that migration affects left-behind children’s well-being negatively, such as increased workloads for the children, little study tutoring and supervision, and the lack of parental affection. Comparisons were drawn based on before and after migration took place, during which a comprehensive list of general life factors, such as daily routines, school, and emotional well-being were assessed. The authors concluded that those children who are taken care of by grandparents were the worst-off.

Chang, Dong & MacPhail’s (2011) study assesses the impact of parental migration from a time use conceptual framework. The result of their study demonstrates that migration of a household member substantially increases the amount of domestic and farm work undertaken by the left-behind family members, such as the elders and the children. Parental migration thus leads to a lower level of well-being for the left-behind children, and potentially altering further the gender and intergenerational divisions in rural China.

¹ Psychopathology in this case means mental illness.

Gao (2013) argues that left-behind children can suffer from grave physical and psychological damages as a result of parental outmigration. Cases such as severe injuries, juvenile delinquency, increased rates of sexual activities, drug uses, and illicit activities among youth, and sometimes even death, take place without proper parental supervision and guidance in life.

Although Jacka (2010) focuses on the impact of migration on left-behind women, the results can be transferrable to left-behind children. What is important to note in this research is that, as opposed to supporting Biao's (2007) claim that rural communities as a whole have been left-behind, Jacka explains that Biao's argument only provides a superficial and sometimes misleading picture of how migration affects families. Instead, Jacka suggests using the left-behind family as the nucleus of analysis and focus on intra-family relationships/conflicts. This means that how family deals with rural outmigration depends on their own context and situation. The same can be suggested about left-behind children: how a child copes with parental migration will depend on the individual and their familial situation. As Gao (2013) quotes Professor Nie, from the Central South University and an expert on left-behind children, that not every child will display or feel the negative consequences of parent outmigration, "but when they do, it shows the seriousness of the situation" (p.34).

Regarding education, Lu's (2012) results show that parental migration has not given left-behind children a significant advantage in educational prospects as their parents had hoped, with younger children more susceptible to the disruptive effect of parental out-migration. In situations where left-behind children are not succeeding at school, education becomes a bigger weight on their shoulders in addition to coping with their parents being away (Ye, 2011). Finally, without

parents present, left-behind children often lack the support they need in their education, such as homework (Ibid.).

Of the studies in this literature review, the article which considered the most factors in assessing left-behind children is Lijun Chen, Dali Yang and Qiang Ren's (2015) report on the state of Chinese children. Based on nationally representative household survey data, the report is a collaborative piece between the University of Chicago and Peking University, and attempts to provide a comprehensive view of the conditions of today's children in China. The report's main focus is to examine the development disparities between children of rural and urban China, as well as between children who have different living situations (e.g., left-behind and migrant children). By doing so, the authors hope to identify the most vulnerable groups of children in China and address their developmental deficits.

Unlike most the studies that focus on select aspects of child development, Chen et al.'s report take into consideration all major domains of child development, including economic well-being, physical health, psychological and social-emotional well-being, educational achievements and cognitive development, and family and community contexts. They also develop models to assess the association of family and social contexts with child development. Although comprehensive, one can argue that this report analyses the state of all Chinese children, and is not specific to left-behind children, which can focus on some aspects of their well-being and not others given their unique challenges. It can also be argued that given its publication year, the authors would have reviewed the prior literature on children, and therefore would have been able to assess the gaps. Literature on the left-behind children, for example, became more prominent since the early to mid-2000s. Nonetheless, the report supports the findings that left-behind children are worse off compared to rural non-left-behind children, children living in urban areas,

and migrant children² in all major aspects and factors examined in the report. It also supports the mixed results findings in educational achievement and cognitive development³, which is discussed further in the following section.

Mixed results

Contrary to the negative results as per the above section, some studies show that not all left-behind children experience negative impacts from parental migration. Rather, some positive factors may offset other negative ones.

Biao (2007) argues that left-behind children's situation may not be worse off than those who are not left behind. The reason behind the indifference of satisfaction relates to monetary contributions, as although those family members who have migrant workers experience loneliness, they feel greater satisfaction due to greater monetary returns from the migrant members, leading to increased security and emotional satisfaction.

Su et al.'s (2012) results show although left-behind children reported loneliness as the most common and important experience, no significant differences in school satisfactions and happiness were reported among left-behind children and children with parents. The authors also investigated whether parent-child communication might alleviate the negative psychological impact of parental migration, and concluded that parent-child communication showed a significant effect on life satisfaction, academic satisfaction and happiness.

Wen & Lin's (2012) study assess the similarities and differences in psychological, behavioural and educational outcomes in the psychosocial contexts that parental migration generated for left-behind children. The results demonstrate that left-behind children showed

² Migrant children are those children from rural China who travel with their rural migrant parents to urban China.

³ Such as rural boys obtaining lower cognitive test scores than urban ones, and being less satisfied with their school and less engaged with school work than urban children.

negative results in terms of health behaviour and school engagement, but not in perceived satisfaction with life and study, compared to those who do not have migrant parents in the same community. Similar to Biao (2007), the authors also attribute the mixed results to remittances that migrant parents provide to their children despite of the lack of communication, bonding and emotional support they may provide.

Additional sub-themes: gender and support

Nguyen, Yeoh & Toyota (2006) emphasized in their article the importance of a multidimensional approach in studying the left-behind phenomenon by taking into consideration not only the economic impact of remittances but also factors such as gender effects and social networks. The literature on left-behind children in China does assess the gender impacts of parental migration on left-behind children, as well as highlights the importance of support networks.

Some authors found that there is a significant increase on labour burdens for girls compared to boys as a result to parental migration, such as assuming the role of caretakers for their grandparents, as grandparents are sometimes unfit to care for the children (Ye & Pan, 2011; Ye, 2011). Chang et al., (2011) found similar results, where girls must not only assume more domestic roles (care for elders and siblings among others), but also take on more farm work. With migrant parents away, girls are also more prone to emotional and attachment issues than boys (Fang et al., 2010; Gao et al., 2010). Given these negative impacts, it can be argued that girls may have more difficulties in coping with parental migration, resulting in more severe emotional and physical conditions. It could also interfere with schooling (Chang et al., 2011), with girls showing a higher drop-out rate than boys (Gao et al., 2010). It must be noted however that some studies show no gender differentials. For example, Jia et al.'s (2010) findings show

that there was no significant difference between boys and girls in terms of health-related quality of life.

Some of the studies also point to the importance of community support in assisting left-behind children. The most prominent type relates to teacher and school support. For example, Ye & Pan's (2011) study shows that teachers and friends may provide critical support for study and emotional support. Wen & Lin's (2012) study shows that support from teachers matters much more than support from peers. In fact, the authors suggest that school engagement is very responsive to social contexts, and therefore may be the most amenable to social and policy interventions. Fang et al.'s (2010) study shows that children who receive less support from teachers are more disadvantaged than those who do receive support. Jia et al.'s (2010) article further suggests school as an appropriate venue for left-behind children to address health and emotional related problems. Finally, Biao (2007) argues that with the increase in trend of migrant parents leaving their children in the care of school teachers, community-based markets for services should be further explored. In this context, even rural local officials have indicated expectations for local schools and believe that schools can and should do more for left-behind children (Ye, 2011).

Some limitations

Four limitations in relation to this literature review will be outlined. The first relates to the lack of theoretical framework found in the scan, as mentioned in a previous section. Only selected general theories are mentioned, such as migration in Toyota et al.'s (2007) article and Biao's (2007) focus on the institutional argument. Ye et al.'s (2013) call for the incorporation of biopolitics of migration and politics of social care could be a solution for future studies on left-behind children, particularly if the studies can tie in political economy.

The second limitation relates to some of the methodologies used and the limitations of the case studies. Many articles report the presence of selection bias, and question whether the results can be generalized as data are taken from different regions in China (Wen & Lin, 2012; Ye & Pan, 2011; Su et al., 2012; Jia & Tian, 2010). A second methodological limitation relates to the data in the case studies. Some of the articles reported the lack of types of data which could have been used to strengthen studies. For example, Su et al. (2012) note that their data were limited regarding the differences between children with one parent migrating and children with both parents migration (p.163). Other studies use the China Health and Nutrition Survey⁴ for their analysis (Lu, 2012, p.332; Chang et al., 2011). Although it is a very comprehensive survey, it does not necessarily focus on left-behind children. More specific and targeted data on left-behind children across China should be gathered for further analysis.

The third methodological limitation is that a lot of the studies in this literature review are cross-sectional studies. It is therefore difficult to draw any causal conclusions from the data, the related factors, and their outcomes (Gao et al., 2010; Jia & Tian, 2010; Jia et al., 2010; Chang et al., 2011; Su et al., 2012). Mixed results from case studies may not be surprising, as positive impacts, such as parental remittances, versus negative impacts, such as parental absence, will depend on the weight each child attributes to the positive or negative consequences of parental migration. As seen from this literature review, there are a variety of factors that need to be taken into consideration when inquiring into this phenomenon. Not only must a large number of factors be taken into consideration, but also the differences in geographic locations of Chinese rural areas, the different features of the different rural communities, family differences, and children's individual differences. Myerson (2015) notes that as a result, the empirical literature faces

⁴ This survey can be found at <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/china>

significant challenges in identifying the total impact parental migration has on Chinese left-behind children. It would be important in future research on left-behind children in China to assess the total impact.

Finally, a fourth limitation relates to the self-reporting nature of some of the questionnaires for the studies (Gao et al., 2010; Jacka, 2010; Jia & Tian, 2010; Jia et al., 2010; Su et al., 2012). Unreliability of answers could result, such as children not fully understanding the questions, children refusing to answer truthfully for fear of reprisal, and children not having enough support to answer the questions. One method suggested by Ye (2011) to address the unreliability of answers is to opt for storytelling where the children can provide detailed accounts of their experiences through the recording of their daily lives (p.628). Though this method may be time consuming, it may provide more insightful information on the impact of parental migration it may cause to the left-behind children.

Most of the authors provided recommendations at the end of their article based on the factors assessed in their study. Consequently, recommendations are scattered amongst numerous disciplines. It would be beneficial for future studies to provide succinct groupings or categorization of these recommendations.

Methodology

To assess the current state of research on left-behind children in China, a two-track method for data gathering has been adopted. Given that this is an exploratory study, it will adopt a purposeful sampling method, as this method is useful in exploratory qualitative research, particularly for case-studies (Suri, 2011).

Primary source

The first track will be to assess how prominent the issue has been discussed in China by using a primary source: newspaper articles. As media outlets in China are heavily controlled by the Central Chinese government, newspaper articles will help in identifying country-wide issues and policies raised in relation to left-behind children, as well as determine whether the issue is of increasing importance to the Chinese government.

The newspaper chosen is the Renmin Ribao (People's Daily). People's Daily is the largest newspaper in China and has publications in foreign languages, such as English. It is the official Central government's newspaper, and as such, reflects the government's opinions and perspectives. However, because of this restriction, the newspaper is also heavily biased. Nonetheless, the articles in the newspaper would be indicative of whether the Chinese government is ascribing importance to left-behind children in China and the degree of importance. It is one of the most read newspapers in China.

Given that research on this topic began gathering momentum in the early-2000s, a time period of 2002-2012 was chosen for newspaper articles in Mandarin related to left-behind children in China. A ten-year period would provide a sufficient time frame to assess whether discourses on and importance/attention assigned to this topic has changed over the years. This time frame also coincides with the Hu Jintao administration. The Hu administration has been recognized to have advanced policies towards the well-being of migrant children, particularly in the area of equal education in urban areas (Davies & Ramia, 2008; Lan, 2014; Xiong, 2015). This positive development could also be indicative of potential policies developed in addressing the issue of left-behind children. Results from the search on People's Daily could confirm

whether the Hu administration recognized the importance of addressing the issue of left-behind children in China.

An initial search was conducted by using the search words “留守儿童” (left-behind children) in the Mandarin edition of the Chinese People’s Daily printed publications online (人民网, or the People’s Internet) from January 1, 2002 to December 31, 2012⁵. Other publications, such as the Mandarin overseas edition were not included due to scope and length of this research.

Upon inputting the time frame in the search engine, the results showed that People’s Daily online database for print Chinese newspaper articles only begins with articles published in 2006. Accordingly, the time frame has been adjusted to 2006-2016 and the previous claims on Hu became invalid as the time period extends to two administrations (Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping’s administration). Once the results have been gathered, the newspaper articles will be divided into categories in order to assess the most salient themes. It is anticipated that the articles found on the People’s Daily website will all be positive articles in addressing the issue of left-behind children (such as policies adopted to address the issue and the care communities provided to these children), as People’s Daily is the largest Chinese Central government controlled newspaper.

Secondary source

The second track will be to conduct a general search for academic journals on left-behind children. Only academic journals have been chosen given the scope of this research paper. The results from the search will inform the discussion on how important the issue is in the academic circles, as well as the perspectives from which academics examines this issue (e.g., from a

⁵ The search engine with the words “留守儿童” (left-behind children) can be found at <http://search.people.com.cn/cnpeople/news/getNewspaperResult.jsp>

physical health perspective, mental health perspective, family/community perspective, etc.). The analysis from the academic journals may also inform gaps in the literature, if any, for a future research agenda on left-behind children.

The Google Scholar search engine was used to identify academic journals of relevance in relation to left-behind children. The words “China left behind children” were used for the search. Although the search may generate a large number of articles, no specific time frame was assigned for the search as it was expected that the quantity of academic articles will be less than newspaper articles found in the People’s Daily. Given the scope, length and linguistic limitations of this paper, the researcher did not use other key search engines such as the Chinese search engine Bai Du (百度)⁶.

Upon obtaining the results from Google Scholar, two levels of selections will take place. The first will be a general one, where the researcher will scan the results pages for relevant articles on left-behind children in China. Once a results page no longer generates significant results (e.g., less than two relevant and/or accessible articles per page), the research will end there and include all results prior to that page. Given the scope and the length limitations of this research paper, only abstracts of the articles selected after the second level selection will be used for data analysis. It is hoped that the abstracts will provide an indication of how the academic circle views the issue of left-behind children and the types of discourses adopted to analyse this issue.

The second level of selection will be to identify the final list of articles from the first level of selection which will then be used for the abstracts’ analysis. Titles will be used as the reference point in the selection of the relevant articles. Once all the relevant articles on left-

⁶ Bai Du is a Chinese search engine similar to Google. It is the most widely used search engine in China.

behind children in China have been identified, the corresponding abstracts will be sought. Once the abstracts are gathered, key themes of each article as per their abstract will be identified in order to categorize the perspectives of analysis on Chinese left-behind children, as well as to identify the most dominant themes/perspectives in the literature.

As noted in the literature review section, Chen et al.'s (2015) report on the conditions of today's children in China provides the most comprehensive factors listed to assess left-behind children in this review: economic well-being, physical health, psychological and social-emotional well-being, educational achievements and cognitive development, and family and community contexts. As such, the grouping of the articles will follow the same five categories found in the report of Chen et al.

For the category of economic well-being, Chen et al. (2015) lists poor living conditions, poverty, parents' education, unemployment or underemployment, and low family income (p.14). In addition to these keywords, remittances will be added to the category as it is an important factor of economic well-being for left-behind children. For the category on physical health, factors include overall physical functioning, illnesses and hospitalization, body mass index, nutrition and healthy lifestyle (Chen et al., 2015, p. 15). For the category on psychological and social-emotional well-being, factors include mental health, emotional health, self-esteem, self-efficacy, depression, anxiety, and happiness on the psychological side. For social-emotional well-being, factors include social withdrawal, inability to communicate, aggressiveness and antisocial behaviours (Chen et al., 2015, p. 19). For the category on educational achievements and cognitive development, factors include ability to learn, school engagement, school satisfaction, study performance, and self-evaluation (Chen et al., 2015, pp. 23-25). Finally, for the category on family and community contexts, factors include family functioning, family and

community relationships, and parental or caregivers' involvement in child's life and education (Chen et al., 2015, p.29).

Results

People's Daily Articles

A total of 1874 articles from January 1, 2006 to December 31, 2016, were found in the People's Daily online search engine for articles that contain the words “留守儿童” (left-behind children) either in the titles or in the body of the articles. However, a large number of articles in the search engine were inaccessible or missing. Some were also duplicates. Accessibility to articles only began as of April 2, 2006, with the article “Nong cun xin shi” (Village news, Li, 2007) and ends on December 21, 2008 with article “Dang qi, piao yang zai zhi shi gao di” (Party flags, fluttering in the highlands of knowledge, Ni, 2008). The subsequent articles are unavailable on the People's Daily search engine⁷ until the January 4, 2016 publication, article entitled “Qin qing lian xian” (Connecting with those who care, Li, 2016). The last article selected for analysis was published on December 30, 2016, entitled “Li Keqiang zhu chi zhao kai guo wu yuan chang wu hui yi” (Premier Li Keqiang presides over the State Council Executive Meeting, 2016). A total of 443 articles were retained for analytical purposes. From April 2, 2006 to December 21, 2008, a total of 190 articles either had the words “liu shou er tong” in the titles or the body of the articles. In 2016 alone, there were 253 articles.

Following the collection of the articles, they were divided into categories for salient themes. Four categories were identified. The first category contains 63 articles that can be called critiques (批评). They involve critiques of Chinese government policies towards left-behind

⁷ The University of Ottawa's library records only provide publications in English from the overseas newspaper.

children, as well as those who are concerned with this social phenomenon that believe more should be done by society and the government. The critiques are mostly written by celebrity sources (you mingqi de ren 有名气的人), such as former government officials, professors, scholars, and some are written by the people (laobaixing 老百姓).

The second category contains 79 articles that involve suggestions (jianyi 建议). Most of the content relates to suggestions on how the Chinese government should adequately implement existing policies on left-behind children or how society can further help the left-behind children. Most of the authors are local Chinese citizens, but some are written by Chinese who live overseas.

The third category contains 82 articles that relate to official statements on the Chinese government's policies and actions (zhengfu yanxing 政府言行) in addressing the issue of left-behind children.

The fourth category contains 185 articles that relate to the sympathetic actions from the people of China (minjian tongqing 民间同情). These are direct actions that citizens have taken to help the left-behind children and have been published by the People's Daily.

Given the limited length of this research paper and to reduce repetitions, not all the articles retrieved from the search in the People's Daily are listed in the reference section, and only some will be used in the discussion section/data analysis section.

Google Scholar Articles

The results of the Google Scholar search generated approximately 622,000 results with the search words “China left behind children”. For the purpose of this paper and as it is impossible to analyse all the articles on left-behind children in China, the first level of selection ended on page 20, as beginning on page 21, there were less relevant articles on the subject. From this selection process, the total number of articles retained from the 20 pages in Google Scholar was 200.

A second level selection concluded with a total number of 113 articles published between 2005 and 2016. The other articles were excluded as some articles were on left-behind children from a different country, some were books, some duplicates, some were inaccessible, and some were on other left-behind populations. A large number of articles originating from a Chinese source were not available or inaccessible from overseas. However, most of the abstracts were available. For those abstracts that were unavailable or inaccessible from outside of China, some of them were retained for analytical purposes as the titles were sufficient in providing an indication of the perspective the authors have adopted to assess left-behind children in China. For example the article “The causes of and preventive measures for juvenile delinquency in left-behind children in rural China” (Wang, 2006) was not accessible through Google Scholar or university journal search engines⁸. However, the title itself is indicative of the related discipline adopted to assess the topic. Those unavailable/inaccessible articles with more ambiguous titles without a theme indication, such as “The left-behind children in rural China” (Duan & Yang, 2008), were omitted.

⁸ The University of Ottawa and the University of Carleton library databases were consulted.

Once the keywords have been identified from the abstracts and the category/categories have been assigned, the results show that 14 articles assessed or used factors/variables related to the physical health of left-behind children; 17 articles assessed or used factors/variables related to the economic well-being of left-behind children; 30 articles assessed or used factors/variables related to the educational achievements and cognitive development of left-behind children; 59 articles assessed or used factors/variables related to the family and community contexts of left-behind children; and finally, 70 articles assessed or used factors/variables related to the psychological and social-emotional well-being of left-behind children.

Three factors of interest also emerged from the results: gender, age and grade. 11 articles used the school grade factor/variable to assess the state of left-behind children; 15 articles used the age factor/variable to assess the state the left-behind children; and 29 articles demonstrated the different impacts parental migration may have on boys versus girls.

Similar to the newspaper articles, given the large number of articles, as well as the scope of this research paper, only selected articles will be used in the discussion section/data analysis section.

Discussion/Data analysis

People's Daily Articles

The newspaper articles search generated anticipated results. The majority of the articles took a positive tone on the issue of left-behind children. First, regarding the government's policies and actions towards left-behind children, all articles portrayed a positive picture of those policies and actions. Many of the articles do not address the issue of left-behind children as a standalone issue. Rather, it is amalgamated into larger policies on, for example, education, and is

only mentioned briefly as a part of these policies (e.g., Jiang, 2006; Jia, 2007; Xie, 2016; Shi, 2016; and Zhang, 2016). This demonstrates that although the Chinese government recognizes the presence of this issue, it may not view it as a priority issue.

Regarding the critiques category, it is surprising to note that the People's Daily would permit the publication of these critiques. However, upon further reading, it is evident that articles critiquing the Chinese government only provide light criticism, or rather, suggestions. For example, some articles will not overtly state that the Chinese government is doing something wrong in addressing the issue of left-behind children (e.g., Fu, 2006; Ding, 2016; Wu, 2016; Wu, Wang & Shi, 2016; and Xiao, 2016). Rather, they would say the Chinese government should pay more attention to the issue. This approach is consistent with Chinese approaches, as it is uncommon to directly criticize the Chinese government due to potential consequences. This limited approach will not be sufficient to push the Chinese government for further action.

Regarding the category of suggestions, although there are a large number of suggestions on how the Chinese government should adequately implement existing policies on left-behind children or how society can further help the left-behind children (e.g., Liu, 2007; Yang, 2007; Zhou, 2007; Jiang, 2008; and Qu & Zhao, 2016), there is no mention of education equality (pingdeng jiaoyu 平等教育) in urban and rural areas. The only suggestions on education equality come from articles suggesting that the Chinese government should provide sufficient money to teachers in rural villages and to further develop the rural education system for left-behind children (e.g., Mao & Song, 2007; Guan, Cao & Yang, 2016; and Zhu, 2016). This is indicative of the inherent problem in the rural/urban divide, where instead of welcoming with open arms rural children into urban schools, urban citizens prefer rural children to remain in their

villages given the already competitive education scenery of urban China (Davies & Ramia, 2008; Lan, 2014; Xiong, 2015). The rural/urban divide and the traditional thinking of the urban residents could further exacerbate any attempt at addressing the issue of left-behind children.

The articles in this category are also indicative of the lack of policy implementation, which remains a challenge for many Chinese social policies. Although it is the Central government that oversees and develops policies, it is the local government who is responsible for their implementation. There is very little communication and coordination between the levels of government in China, and often times, local governments do not receive sufficient funding and support from the Central government to implement the policies. As such implementation of policies is not always adequate nor is there willingness from local government officials (Davies & Ramia, 2008). This is a significant barrier for the left-behind children, since only with adequate implementation of policies that seek to address this issue will their situation be able to improve.

Finally, the articles on the sympathetic actions from the people of China occupied the largest portion of the results. This also demonstrates the seriousness of the situation, as these are people who saw and felt disheartened by the suffering of left-behind children and provided assistance to them. In China, citizens cannot directly request the Chinese government to take action, and the Chinese government usually encourages assistance from the people as long as they do not interfere with government functioning (Teets, 2013). The publication of these positive articles is, as a result, a strategic move by the Central government in showing the public that it does implicitly recognize the severity of the issue, but uses a positive spin through the publications of these stories.

In sum, it is evident from the People's Daily online search that the issue is generating increasing attention. The fact that there were 253 articles on or related to left-behind children published in 2016 as opposed to 190 published from April 2, 2006 to December 21, 2008 supports this claim.

Two concerns also emerged as a result of this search. The first indicates that the people of China believe the Chinese government can do more to help the left-behind children in China. The second notes the lack of implementation of policies to address this issue. Despite of these concerns, it is encouraging to see Chinese citizens take action themselves to help the children.

Academic Articles

The Google Scholar articles search generated results that support the literature review and the findings from the People's Daily online article search, albeit most of the articles found in the literature review have been taken from the Google Scholar research.

Emerging patterns and themes

Quantitative patterns

A pattern has resulted from the analysis in relation to the publication location and accessibility of the articles. From 2005-2010, 43 articles were published in Chinese sources that are inaccessible from overseas, whereas only 14 articles were published in English academic journals. Beginning in 2010, more articles were published in English academic journals, and their number steadily increased until 2014, when there were no longer any Chinese articles present⁹. This could be indicative of the progression on the issue, where during the mid-2000s,

⁹ In 2010, 11 articles were published from Chinese sources and were inaccessible overseas, whereas 7 articles were published in English academic journals. In 2011, 10 articles were published from Chinese sources and were inaccessible overseas, whereas 6 articles were published in English academic journals. In 2012, 5 articles were published from Chinese sources and were inaccessible overseas, whereas 6 articles were published in English academic journals. In 2013, 3 articles were published from Chinese sources and were inaccessible overseas, whereas

most of attention was internal. Starting in the late 2000s, the issue began to generate more attention outside of China, particularly following the reporting of the two incidents in Guizhou mentioned in the introductory section of this paper. For those articles that have been published in English journals, the majority of them are authored by Chinese academics. This suggests that the issue of left-behind children remains a domestic issue and a niche topic. Future research will not only need local Chinese academic circles to continue investigating this phenomenon, but also encourage non-Chinese academics to examine this topic, as they may be able to provide different and valuable perspectives and/or solutions to this issue.

The results show that the category of psychological and social-emotional well-being had the largest numbers of articles, followed by family and community contexts, educational achievements and cognitive development, economic well-being, and physical health of left-behind children. Most of the articles did not focus solely on factors in one category, but rather assessed a wide range of cross-cutting factors. It is evident however that psychological issues, particularly those related to mental health, emotions and behaviours, remain the most problematic consequences as a result of migrant parents.

Main cross-cutting categorical factors

Using the categories provided by Chen et al's (2015) report to assess the situations of left-behind children, the most common cross-cutting factors found in the articles are combinations of those found in the categories of psychological and social-emotional well-being, family and community context, and educational achievements and cognitive development. This

seems logical, as the factors in these three categories are closely interrelated. It can be argued that impacts in one area of the left-behind children's lives will inevitably affect the others.

For example, similar to the current study, Qin & Albin (2010) also conducted a literature scan on left-behind children. Their focus was however solely on the mental health of these children and the databases used were Chinese databases only. The literature review was conducted for studies published between 2001 and 2008. The authors found 53 studies and grouped the studies in categories, and concluded that emotions and social behaviours were the two major areas that affected left-behind children mental health. Other factors, such as life events, personality traits, coping mechanisms and social support can be argued as the four main predictive factors for left-behind children's mental health.

Zhou et al. (2011) examine psychological resilience amongst urban migrant children and rural left-behind primary and middle school students in Sichuan Province. In addition to psychological factors that were taken into consideration, other factors, such as family, school and community were also assessed. The results show that left-behind school children fared better in resilience than migrant children. Left-behind children enjoyed more intimate interpersonal relationships in their schools, families and community compared to migrant children. Left-behind children were also able to obtain more psychological support. These findings are worth noting as most of the literature on left-behind children portrays a rather dire situation compared to other children groups in China. However, this one demonstrates that another group of children may require even more attention: migrant children. Because this research does not assess the state of migrant children, it is difficult to assess gaps in current studies and provide suggestions for future studies. It would however be useful for a comprehensive literature scan on migrant children in future studies.

Beh & Ye (2012) examine the left-behind children phenomenon in Wuxi county, Chongqing. More specifically, the authors examine models that assist left-behind children and grouped them into four categories: care model, society support model, rural school and education model, and policies support and empowerment model. The results show that although the left-behind children's situations are improving, they are improving at a slow rate. For example, in the care model, left-behind children "have been treated as passive beneficiaries rather than active actors", resulting in the negligence of their real needs (p.184). Within the rural school and education model, although the need for boarding schools has been acknowledged by society, there is a lack of teaching resources, non-standardized management, and difficulty associated with caring for all children in a big class (e.g., 50 or more students) (Ibid.). The authors believe that a community care model, a bottom-up approach, may be more appropriate in fostering a happy and harmonious environment for left-behind children (p.185).

Shen & Shen (2014) examine the psychological issues encountered by left-behind children in rural areas. These issues relate to left-behind children's inferiority complex, alienation, emotional issues, behavioural issues, and attitude issues. The authors attribute left-behind children's psychological issues to several factors, such as a lack of parental education, inappropriate education by their guardians, inadequate school education and lack of social interactions.

Zhao et al.'s (2014) study compares the social anxiety of left-behind children and non-left-behind children in Changfeng county, Anhui. The results demonstrate that compared to non-left-behind children, left-behind children displayed a higher level of social anxiety, higher level of neglect, lower level of parental education, lower quality of life, lower family function and

poorer living conditions. In sum, compared to non-left-behind children, left-behind children are much more disadvantaged.

Weak academic performance and the importance of the education system

Another major emerging theme arising from many of the articles demonstrate weaker academic performances of left-behind children compared to non-left-behind children due to lack of mental, emotional and behavioural health. The authors of these articles attribute an important role to the education system, and emphasize that teachers and schools should provide more support to the psychological health of left-behind children, and at times, should be the center of considerations in order to address the problems faced by these children.

For example, Liang, Hou & Chen (2008) examine the academic situations of elementary school students in the province of Sichuan. The results show that left-behind children experience more disruptive and negative effects in their school work, particularly those children with two migrating parents or a migrating mother.

Yao & Mao (2008) examine left-behind children's state of mental health in their school environment in 10 western Chinese provinces based on their familial situation. Mental health characteristics include academic self-concept¹⁰, teacher-student relationship, teacher-student relations, and student attitudes towards school. The results show that children who live with both parents have the best academic psychology; left-behind children with two migrant parents perform better than those with one migrant parent; and left-behind children with the mother as the migrant parent fare the worst compared to other left-behind children.

¹⁰ Academic self-concept refers to individuals' knowledge and perceptions about themselves in their academic performances. For more on the concept, see Bong, M., & Skaalvik, E. M. (2003). Academic self-concept and self-efficacy: How different are they really? *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(1), 1-40.

Yu & Zhong's (2008) research assesses family care and education issues which emerge as a result of rural parents leaving their children behind. The results indicate that left-behind children suffer from the absence of parents in their education and experience deviations in educational expectation and achievements.

Liu & Jin (2010) investigate the mental health conditions of left-behind children/students in Xiushuihe Central Primary School, Faku County, Shenyang. The results indicate that left-behind children are more prone to severe mental health issues compared to the non-left-behind children, particularly in the areas of learning anxiety, loneliness, and the tendency for self-blaming.

Lee (2011) compares the well-being of left-behind and non-left-behind rural children and examines the extent to which parental migration affects children's welfare in relation to school and general health conditions. The author's findings demonstrate that compared to left-behind children, non-left-behind children were better off in terms of school enrollment and years of schooling. Left-behind children were more prone to develop mental health issues, generally demanded more recognition from parents and peers, and were more likely to develop injurious habits, such as smoking. The author recommends further comparisons of the well-being of children in order to assess the extent to which the education and health of children of migrant workers are influenced due to the unequal education system.

Hu, Lu & Huang (2014) examine the psychological and behavioral outcomes of migrant and left-behind children, including psychological issues in the school environment. The results show that left-behind children exhibit more the psychological and behavioural issues compared to migrant children. The authors also conclude that children who attend rural schools and

children at schools with higher ratio of migrant students are more likely to have psychological and behavioral problems.

It is not surprising that education surfaces as one of the dominant research areas in left-behind children research, as Chinese people have always placed education as one of top priorities in life. It is engrained in children's heads that if one wants to succeed in life, then one must study and obtain the highest possible level of education. In the context of left-behind children, it is expected that at least some aspects of their education will be disrupted as a result of parental migration. As Ye (2011) notes, many studies demonstrate that one of main objectives and justifications for rural parents to migration is for the education of their children.

Economic well-being

A smaller number of articles (17 of them) consider economic well-being. Of the 17 articles, only 5 articles (Biao, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2006; Hu, 2012; Démurger & Xu, 2015; and Zhang et al., 2015) discuss the effect of remittances when assessing the well-being of left-behind children. For example, Démurger & Xu (2015) explore the reasons behind parental migration, as well as the length of migration in Wuwei county, Anhui province. The authors conclude that left-behind children play a key role in determining the length of migration for parents. Particularly, the authors find that “having children of school-age is a motivation for migrant parents to extend their length of stay in the city, a result we interpret as illustrating the need for migrant parents to accumulate money for their offspring's education” (p. 17). Although economic solutions seem a priority for migrant parents, the authors also believe that non-economic factors should be taken into consideration when assessing migration and left-behind children.

Another example is Zhang et al.'s (2015) study, which assess healthy eating habits of left-behind children of a rural township in Henan Province. Results show that financial

remittances from migrant parents are an important source for being able to include higher cost foodstuffs, such as meat, in left-behind children's diet. Furthermore, the lack of remittances from migrant parents has a direct impact on the food choices carers of left-behind children (e.g., grandparents), which can lead to severe malnutrition (p.490).

The small number of articles that discuss the issue of remittances is interesting to note as it can be argued that remittances could potentially increase the general well-being. One explanation for the smaller number of articles assessing economic well-being of left-behind children may be attributed to the fact that given the rural to urban migration phenomenon has taken place since the 1980s, much the previous literary work has discussed remittances in the broader migration context¹¹. It would therefore be beneficial for future research to assess the impact remittances may have on the general well-being of children.

Other influencing factors

There are four additional common factors which emerged from the results that influence the experience of left-behind children. One factor is at the family level, the family functioning factor. The other three are at the individual level: age, grade and gender. These four factors could also impact future research.

Certain articles have addressed the family functioning factor (Xiao, 2007; Zhao, Lin & Cao, 2008; Xu, 2009; Jiang, 2010; and Gu et al., 2011). For example, Zhao, Lin & Cao (2008) examine the situation of left-behind children's mental health, family intimacy and their life adaptability. Their results show that the key factors which affect the family function of left-

¹¹ See for example Rozelle, S., Taylor, J. E., & DeBrauw, A. (1999). Migration, remittances, and agricultural productivity in China. *The American Economic Review*, 89(2), 287-291; Cai, Q. (2003). Migrant remittances and family ties: a case study in China. *Population, Space and Place*, 9(6), 471-483; Taylor, J. E., Rozelle, S., & De Brauw, A. (2003). Migration and incomes in source communities: A new economics of migration perspective from China. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 52(1), 75-101; and Du, Y., Park, A., & Wang, S. (2005). Migration and rural poverty in China. *Journal of comparative economics*, 33(4), 688-709.

behind children were their migrant parents' working conditions, their general living conditions, gender and grade. The mental health of left-behind children is closely linked to their family intimacy and adaptability.

Another example is Xu's (2009) study. The author examines left-behind children from a social-ecological systems theory, and attributes the problems faced by these children to the lack of care they receive at home, the lack of motivation and help in school, mental health struggles, and more physical injuries. He believes this to be a grave social issue, and recommends that migrating parents and other family members communicate and assist these children further; that schools should provide better a better boarding system for these children; and that improvements to the Hukou be brought forth, such as equal education for urban and rural children.

Family functioning should be an area subject to further exploration, as it is an important factor which contributes to the well-being of vulnerable populations and those with physical and mental illnesses¹². Furthermore, given the importance of family in the Chinese culture¹³, future research should consider family functioning as one of the core factors in assessing the well-being of left-behind children in China.

Most of the articles which include the age, school, grade and gender factors demonstrate that left-behind children with different ages, and/or who are in different grades (e.g., Chen & Xie,

¹² See for example Tschann, J. M., Kaiser, P., Chesney, M. A., Alkon, A., & Boyce, W. T. (1996). Resilience and vulnerability among preschool children: Family functioning, temperament, and behavior problems. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 35(2), 184-192; Drotar, D. (1997). Relating parent and family functioning to the psychological adjustment of children with chronic health conditions: What have we learned? What do we need to know?. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 22(2), 149-165; Dyson, L. L. (1997). Fathers and mothers of school-age children with developmental disabilities: Parental stress, family functioning, and social support. *American journal on mental retardation*, 102(3), 267-279; and Shapiro, J., Perez, M., & Warden, M. J. (1998). The importance of family functioning to caregiver adaptation in mothers of child cancer patients: testing a social ecological model. *Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing*, 15(1), 47-54.

¹³ As evidenced for example in this literature search, whereby the category of family and the community contexts (59 articles assessing those factors) was the second largest category after psychological and social-emotional well-being (70 articles assessing those factors).

2007; Zhang et al., 2007; Qiao, Chen, & Yuan, 2008; and Wang, et al., 2015), and/or is a boy or a girl (e.g., Song, 2008; Gao et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2010; and Wang et al., 2011) , will respond differently to parental migration. The pattern which emerged is that younger children who are in lower grades in school and have little family/community/social support are the worst-off left-behind children. For example, as Tao, Guan, Zhao & Fan (2013) note, some subpopulations, such as younger male left-behind preschool children who are fostered by caregivers with lower levels of life satisfactions and parent efficacy, and came from poorer family with less social support, were at a higher risk of mental health than other children (p.126).

Regarding gender differentiations, girls will be more likely to develop psychological and social-emotional issues than boys (e.g., Song, 2008; Gao et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2010; and Wang et al., 2011), whereas boys will be more likely to develop physical health related issues than girls, such as injuries (e.g., Shen et al., 2009; Jian et al., 2011).

There are numerous additional factors that have been identified by authors. To note a few, Pan et al.'s (2013) study, for example, assesses the long-distance communication between left-behind children and their migrant parents, particularly via mobile phones. The results show that the infrequent communication between left-behind children and their parents may affect their well-being. The authors recommend more frequent communication and suggest the exploration of “new designs and multi-channel platforms on mobiles phone to help left-behind children better connect with their migrant parents” (p.1156).

Tao et al (2013) examine the mental health of left-behind preschool-aged children in the Anhui province and associated risk factors, including care provided by their caregivers and parenting efficacy. The authors recommend future studies focus on other underlying factors that affect the mental health of left-behind preschool children.

Wang et al. (2015) examine the prevalence rate of depressive symptoms in left-behind children in Chongqing in order to explore the associated socio-demographic and communication factors. The results show that depressive symptoms among left-behind children in Chongqing are most prevalent amongst those who have both parents as migrants, who are in lower grades at school (e.g., grades 2-3), who belong to the lowest income group, and who have infrequent communication with their parents. Depression-related risk factors were therefore, among others, parental absence, low frequency of parent-child communication, and infrequent communication by letter on sensitive issues, such as feelings, school and life. The authors recommend that these factors are worthy of further examination.

Ai & Hu's (2016) study focus on the "moderating function of psychological resilience on social support and left-behind children's loneliness" (p.1070). The results demonstrate that left-behind children who reported a low level of psychological resilience and received more social support reported lower scores in loneliness, compared to those who received little social support. However, the impact of social support on loneliness was much smaller in those left-behind children who reported a high level high psychological resilience, compared to those who reported a low level of psychological resilience.

As noted in the literature review, the large number of factors affecting left-behind children renders it problematic to assess the total impact of parental migration on left-behind children, as every individual, community, county, city and province face different challenges. It would therefore be important to assess each region's need and adopt targeted interventions to address the different situations.

Recommendations, policy development and implementation

From a policy development perspective, it is evident from the Google Scholar search results that there is a variety of factors that require to be taken into consideration when assessing and providing policy recommendations on how to address the issue of left-behind children.

More efforts from families, schools, society and the government

Most articles provide some form of suggestions, such as addressing education of left-behind children, having teachers and other non-family members of the rural communities play a larger caring role in their lives, or coordinated efforts from society, government and families. For example, in regards to more efforts from schools and teachers to assist left-behind children, Liang, Hou & Chen (2008) recommend that teachers and schools must make an effort to address this issue and take on a familial role to help these children. Yao & Mao (2008) propose measures such as better teacher-student relations and increased school-parental communications and relations. Liu & Jin (2010) suggest that school education, family education and other social aspects should be at the forefront of considerations when addressing the issues of left-behind children.

In regards to a concerted effort to assist left-behind children from society, Yu & Zhong's (2008) for example, suggest that families, schools, government and the broader society all must act in a concerted manner to solve the existing education issues faced by left-behind children. Xu (2009) suggests that due to the missing family function encountered by the left-behind children, family, school and society must adopt a coordinated approach and complement each other to minimize the impacts experienced by left-behind children, and foster a positive environment for their quality of life and development. Qin & Albin (2010) advocate for more support from families, schools, local governments, local organisations, doctors, and nurses. Hu, Lu & Huang

(2014) recommend the promotion of equality in the education system and increasing financial support from the government to rural and migrant schools. Shen & Shen (2014) recommend that countermeasures to address problems faced by left-behind children should include improving family education; making full use of resources in school education and more involvement of schools; increasing coordination between governments, communities and schools to build better education and supervisory systems for left-behind children; and helping left-behind children adjust adequately to the left-behind situation.

Specific regions, communities and groups

Many of the articles identified the need to focus on left-behind children in specific regions and communities, as well as those belonging to specific groups. These left-behind children are most at risk of developing psychological, physical and behavioural illnesses as a result of migrating parents.

In regards to geographic disparities, according to a 2013 joint report published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the 2010 Chinese Population Census indicated that half of the rural left-behind children were located in six major provinces: Sichuan, Henan, Anhui, Guangdong, Hunan and Guangxi. Other provinces and areas with high rural left-behind children populations are Chongqing, Jiangsu, and Jiangxi, where left-behind children accounted for more than half of the total rural child populations (Chen, Duan & Wang, 2013, p. 6). The articles from the Google Search confirm the focus on left-behind children in these provinces and areas: out of the 113 articles selected for analytical purposes, 65 of them conducted studies in the 9 provinces and areas as identified by the report. Future policy and program interventions should focus on the

geographical disparities and target left-behind children first and foremost in these provinces and areas.

In Qin & Albin (2010) literature scan on left-behind children for example, the authors recommend that “the problems of left-behind children should be addressed according to the geography and the economic development in the different provinces of the country” (p. 13). This was also noted in the literature review of this current research. In this context, Qin & Albin (2010) argue for the development of more prevention and support programs that are appropriate according to the situations of communities and provinces (e.g., economic, age, gender) in order to address, for example, the mental health of left-behind children. Beh & Ye (2012) also recommend that intervention programs should be based on the models proposed to better the lives of left-behind children, such as better care for left-behind children, better protection for migrant workers, and enhanced economic development for western China. Future policies and programs should assess the different regional contexts and the needs of left-behind children in order to adopt measures most appropriate to assist the most vulnerable groups.

In regards to specific communities and most vulnerable groups amongst left-behind children, not only does the geographical factor become important, but also factors at the individual level. Yao & Mao (2008), for example, recommend that future studies and programs should focus more on left-behind children with the mother as the migrant parent, as according to their study, this group fares the worst compared to other groups of children, such as children who live with both parents, and left-behind children with one or two migrant parents. Liang, Hou & Chen (2008), as well as Wei (2017), also recommend more focus on those children with a migrating mother. Qin & Albin (2010) believe that influence of gender requires further investigation, particularly on the differences in mental health between male and female left-

behind children. Tao et al. (2013) recommend targeting preschool-aged children as one of the most vulnerable left-behind children populations and providing adequate prevention programmes to improve the social support network and parenting efficacy for these children (p. 127). Zhao et al. (2014) recommend that future interventions should target left-behind children who have a low quality of life, low family function, high prevalence of physical abuse, are female, come from an ethnic minority or have many siblings (p.669). Future research and/or program development could therefore focus on these most vulnerable populations amongst the left-behind children.

As noted in previous sections of this research paper and as seen from the above, the large variety of factors to be taken into consideration when analyzing the situations of left-behind children makes it difficult to assess the total impact of the different situations of left-behind children in different regions, communities and households¹⁴. Given this the large spectrum of factors to be taken into consideration, as a first step, it may be useful to develop targeted policies to address the needs of left-behind children. Although the academic articles provide general directions regarding policy and program development, there are specific and targeted questions that have not been addressed. For example, should policies be developed from a public health and mental health perspective to address the most prominent psychological problem factor? If yes, which Chinese Ministry should be responsible for developing these policies? Should the Ministry of Health of China be responsible for developing such policies or would the National Health and Family Planning Commission lead on these policies? Or again, should policies be developed on education to address the issue? If yes, should the Ministry of Education be the lead ministry of this issue? Future studies could potentially dedicate some focus to these questions in

¹⁴ See for example Qin & Albin (2010). The authors identified a large variety of concepts of mental health and mental health problems which have been described in numerous ways by the different authors (p.12).

order to give further directions and weight to policies and programs that assist left-behind children.

Finally, it has been noted that some efforts have been made by the Chinese government, schools and communities to address the issue of left-behind children. In addition to Wei's (2017) article documenting the initiatives established by Hefeng county, many other similar initiative have been launched to assist left-behind children in disadvantaged areas of China. For example, Liu et al. (2015) indicate that in recent years in Henan and Shanxi, local governments, with the help of volunteers, have established care centers to take care of left-behind children and enriching their lives; and in other provinces, toll-free hotlines have been set-up to increase the communication between left-behind children and their parents (pp. 360-361). The challenge however is the successful implementation of these initiatives. As per Wei's (2017) article, some government officials (both at the local and central levels) and non-governmental organizations have indicated that though the initiatives may seem like good ideas and positive at the beginning, successful implementations of these initiatives can sometimes be problematic (e.g., lack of participants, lack of continued willingness from those who are helping, etc.). Combined with the results from the of the People's Daily search¹⁵, as well as the extensive suggestions provided by people of China and academia on how to help the left-behind children, it is obvious that the implementation portion remains essential to any efforts in helping these children.

As can be seen from the above, implementation remains a great barrier to achieving further results. The lack of implementation assessment from the academic community is also indicative that more should be done in this area. The questions then to ask are: how can this gap

¹⁵ One must be cautious however when assessing the results from the People's Daily, as it is the official newspaper of the Communist Party/Central Government. As such, some issues may take precedence over others or may bear more weight than others.

be bridged? Is there a willingness for the Central government to make the local government understand the severity of the issue? If yes, how can the Central government provide more support to the local government? And finally, how can the academic community demonstrate to the Central government that to address a social issue at the national level requires a coordinated approach from all levels of government and society? As previously discussed in the literature review, perhaps it is an opportune time to begin assessing the total impact of rural parental migration on their left-behind children, as well as inquire about the implementation of policies in villages, regions and provinces.

Limitations

Although this research has attempted to provide an adequate scan of the literature, numerous limitations constrained this attempt.

The first limitation relates to the literature review. Most of the articles chosen for the literature review were taken from the Google Scholar search. The researcher did not use Chinese search engines such as Bai Du, as the purpose of the research is to assess the past research in the English literature. The articles were chosen based on the language (English) and their accessibility from outside of China. As such, the limited theoretical perspectives and literature from Chinese sources (only four articles in the scan: Xiao, 2007; Luo, Wang & Gao, 2009; She & Luo, 2009; and Xu, 2009) were not considered given the lack of accessibility. Future research could focus on the past research in the Chinese academic literature, such as articles written in Mandarin only, as not only will it provide a framework regarding the Chinese perspective, but also provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the differences and similarities of perspective between the Chinese literature and the English literature on left-behind children.

Furthermore, some of the case-studies chosen were based on the five categories as per Chen et al.'s (2015) report. As such, selection biases could have occurred, as the researcher used the titles only for selection. Future literature reviews and scans should attempt to use a wide variety of search engines to locate academic articles in Chinese (such as Bai Du), as well as analyze in detail the Chinese academic literature on left-behind children, as well as conduct a more comprehensive review of the literature.

The second limitation relates to the People's Daily newspaper articles. In addition to the large amount of missing data, the scope of this research paper limited the researcher to one Chinese newspaper. The researcher was also unable to thoroughly assess all the information provided in the articles. Only a scan was used to identify the main theme of an article. Finally, the four categories identified and the grouping of the articles could be appropriate for some and inappropriate for others. Future research should attempt to obtain the results from several coders to ensure intercoder reliability of the data. It must be noted however that the newspaper articles that were retained for analytical purposes proved to be useful, as they highlighted the Central Government's priorities in addressing left-behind children, as well as corroborated with some of the findings in the academic articles, such as recommendations to adopt more policies and programs to assist left-behind children, as well as more efforts from society, government and families to provide more care for these children.

The third limitation relates to the Google Scholar articles. Although not all articles from Google Search were included, the majority of the relevant ones have been included as the researcher concluded the inclusion of articles at a search page where useful and relevant articles have been exhausted. Furthermore, as indicated in the literature reviews, Chinese search engines

were not used as the purpose of the research is to assess the past research found in the English literature

Conclusion

The issue of left-behind children remains a serious one in China. Although the number has decreased since the 2010, China must continue to address this issue.

The literature scan provided some helpful insights. First, there are numerous factors that need to be taken into consideration when assessing and addressing the problems encountered by left-behind children as a result of parental migration. Although psychological issues remain the biggest challenge for this population, other important factors such as economic, physical health, social, educational, familial and community-related factors should also be taken into consideration. The large spectrum of factors can be attributed to the different situations between individuals, families, communities and regions, as well as how vulnerable these entities are to parental migration, and their abilities to respond/cope. To bridge the factors and to assess the total impact will remain a challenge for future studies.

Second, those children who are most affected by parental migration often involve younger children with two migrating parents, who are living under poor economic conditions, and have very infrequent communication with their parents. These most vulnerable children are the most at risk to develop greater psychological, emotional, behavioural and physical issues and/or illnesses, which can severely affect a child's welfare, such as increased likelihood of anti-social and criminal behaviours (Sudworth, 2016). Even worse, catastrophes such as suicides, as in the case of the deaths of the four left-behind siblings' after drinking pesticide, can have an enormous consequence on communities and societies-at-large.

Third, to assist left-behind children, numerous solutions have been provided by newspaper articles and academic authors alike. One of the main consensuses calls for more efforts from families, schools, communities, governments and other organizations to provide more help to left-behind children so that they may better cope in the absence of their parents. Other solutions include the suggestion that policies and programs should first target the most vulnerable groups, and be developed according to regional, community and individual needs; to focus on the successful implementation of existing policies and programs; and to bring institutional changes, such as reforming the Hukou system. In general, it has been agreed that all levels of society and government must do more for these left-behind children.

As this is a small-scale exploratory study, numerous recommendations have been provided for future research agendas. First, as demonstrated in the literature review section, given the lack of a general theoretical framework under which the issue of left-behind children can be analyzed, future studies should attempt to provide theoretical frameworks for case studies. Second, as most of the authors in this literature scan seem to be from Chinese descent, it will be important not only for Chinese academics to continue researching this topic, but also for non-Chinese academics to further examine this issue, as the left-behind children phenomenon is not unique to China, albeit its severity is more pronounced in China (Toyota, Yeoh, & Nguyen, 2007). Third, as some authors have suggested, future researchers will need to address the large variations in factors as well as those differences between regions, countries, communities, families and individual children (e.g., Yao & Mao, 2008; Qin & Albin, 2010; Beh & Yeh, 2012; and Tao et al., 2013). Given these variations, it would be important to find methods that assess the total impacts of rural parental migration on left-behind children. Fourth, it is recommended that further research assess the impacts of remittances (e.g., Démurger & Xu, 2015), age (e.g.,

Wang, et al., 2015), school grades (e.g., Qiao, Chen, & Yuan, 2008), gender (e.g., Huang et al., 2010) and family functioning (e.g., Zhao, Lin & Cao 2008) on the general well-being and functioning of left-behind children in China. These factors could provide indications on how to elaborate policies to help the most vulnerable populations amongst the left-behind children. Fifth, given the numerous recommendations and assessed factors in the existing literature, as demonstrated in this research, future studies could focus on the development of specific policies to address these factors (e.g., from a mental health perspective, social perspective, communication perspective, etc.). Finally, future studies should address and assess the implementation of existing policies in addressing left-behind children (e.g., Wei, 2017).

As demonstrated in this paper, the study of left-behind children is a complex one. With policies already put in place by the Chinese government, it will now be important to assess their implementation. It will equally be important to identify which ministry will be responsible for the development of future policies addressing the most significant factors that affect children left-behind as a result of parental migration.

With a rapidly aging population and the one-child policy, rural children may be the weight bearer of China's future. Without adequate focus on this population, China's future could look grim. It is therefore time for every part of the Chinese society to adopt a concerted effort to address the education, mental health, and other areas that may affect the well-being of left-behind children.

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