University of Bath

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

PHD

The Experiences Of Left-Behind Children In Rural China

A Qualitative Study

Xiao, Lina

Award date:
2015

Awarding institution:
University of Bath

Link to publication

The Experiences of Left-behind Children in Rural China: a Qualitative Study

Lina Xiao

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Bath

Department of Social and Policy Sciences

December 2014

Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

Abstract

This study aims to capture how left-behind children in China experience their life with their parents' migration and how they exercise agency to negotiate with structural and cultural contexts when living under these circumstances. The fieldwork was conducted in a middle school in a rural region of the inland province Hunan, with the data mainly being obtained from in-depth interviews with 16 focal left-behind children. An integrative theoretical framework is proposed to explain the dynamic process of living with parents' migration by explicating the interaction between structure, culture, and agency.

The research findings indicate that the left-behind children's experiences can be conceptualised as "ambivalence" in that they incorporate simultaneous existence of opposing emotions towards their parents' migration. Such experiences are grounded in the structural and cultural contexts associated with migration on the one hand, and on the other, provide the driving impetus for children to reproduce and/or transform their structural and cultural contexts by adopting agentic strategies either more engaged with the present or more directed towards the future.

An integrated theoretical framework has been developed to capture a dynamic understanding of left-behind children, wherein ambivalence is proposed to act as a bridging concept to link agency with structure and culture. This framework challenges the univalent orientations in conceptualising agency as rational choice or resistance and emphasises the mutual sustaining relationships between culture and structure, which could contribute to the debates in the sociology of childhood field by advancing theoretical integration so as to transcend the agency/structure dichotomy. By highlighting left-behind children's ambivalent experiences, this research further contributes to the literature that challenges the image of passive victims attributed to them, and adds to the knowledge on how to address their needs as well as to facilitate their exercising of agency, which can inform related policy and service provision.

Chapter I Introduction

Left-behind children have increasingly raised public concern and been the subject of research interest as unprecedented large scale rural to urban migration in China has meant their number has increased exponentially in recent decades (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; Duan, Lu, Guo, & Wang, 2013; Tan, 2011; Ye & Pan, 2011; Ye, Wang, Wu, He, & Liu, 2013). The majority of pertinent extant studies, have, however, tended to focus on the problems related to left-behind children or discussed them in terms of their being subject to the impact of their parents' migration. Moreover, there are very few studies that address these children's own experiences of being left behind in terms of their agency in dealing with their parents' migration and those that have have tended to be descriptive rather than systematic. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the dynamics of how left-behind children experience life from their own perspectives and how they exercise agency to negotiate structural and cultural contexts while living with their parents' migration.

1.1. Background

Within the broader context of globalization, the uneven development of urbanization and industrialization across the world has resulted in the emergence of inequalities between countries and also between regions within a single country. Consequently, vast numbers of workers, amongst them many parents, have chosen to migrate from developing to more developed regions for better job opportunities (Cortes, 2008; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). However, owing to economic constraints and policy barriers, few can migrate together with their family members, and thus large numbers of children have been left in their hometowns (Asis, 2006; Bryant, 2005; Duan et al., 2013; Kandel & Kao, 2001; Lu, 2014; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). It is in this sense that this group of children has been given the label "left-behind children". Their special circumstances have prompted widespread social concern regarding their wellbeing and researchers have been urged to improve knowledge regarding this specific population of children, so as to provide a more robust basis for the design and implementation of relevant policies (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; de la Garza, 2010).

In particular, data for 2010 shows that China hosts a population of approximately 61

million left-behind children who have one or both of their parents migrating out, which can be predominantly attributed to internal rural to urban migration due to unbalanced regional development (Duan et al., 2013). To some extent, these migrant workers and their children are comparable to their counterparts in international migration contexts, in that the rural-urban bifurcation is underpinned by a series of institutionalized arrangements which deprive migrants of full citizenship in their host cities and restrict their access to the related public services and social benefits (Chan, 2009; Kandel & Kao, 2001; Lu, 2012; Wen & Lin, 2012; Yeoh & Lam, 2007).

With regards to research in both the international and the Chinese rural-urban migration contexts, the focus of investigation has been greatly influenced by the view that left-behind children can be adversely affected by the migration of their parents (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Duan & Yang, 2008; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). Although the research findings present a mixed and inconclusive picture regarding the negative influences on children's mental health, educational achievement and social behaviour, at the heart of the debate remains the detrimental impact of parents' migration on these children (Duan & Yang, 2008; Fan & Sang, 2005; Jones & Kittisuksathit, 2003; Pottinger, 2005). With so much attention being paid to the negative aspects, the circumstances of left-behind children tend to be interpreted as being problematic, with this being clearly evident in the accounts of academics, government and the mass media in contemporary China (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; "Boy's death highlights tragedy of China's left-behind children", 2014; "Heartbreaking partings for 'left-behind children'", 2014; "'Left-behind' children pains China", 2014; Tan, 2011; Y. Wu, 2013; Zhou & Duan, 2006).

The focus on the impact of parents' migration also leads to left-behind children's agency being overlooked, in that they are usually regarded as passive recipients of environmental influences (Tan, 2011; Ye & Wang, 2006; Zhou & Duan, 2006). Consequently, children's experiences have not been sufficiently addressed in terms of both research and intervention strategies (Toyota, Yeoh & Nguyen, 2007), with more attention having been directed to specifying the variables representing their attributes and outcomes rather than consideration of the whole person who is capable of acting with agency.

It is worth mentioning that there is a growing body of work that seeks to capture

children's own perceptions and their exercise of agency, as informed by the sociology of childhood which stresses children's voices, experiences and agency (Asis, 2006; Dreby, 2007, 2010; Hoang & Yeoh, 2014; Murphy, 2014; Olwig, 1999; Orellana, Thorne, Chee & Lam, 2001; Zhang, 2013). However, these studies mainly focus on purpose and intention when conceptualizing agency and do not systematically address its dynamic interplay with structural and cultural contexts. Given this limitation, this researcher draws on social theory debates regarding agency, culture and structure to locate children's experiences within the interactive processes in which they exercise agency to negotiate with social and cultural contexts. Hence the research questions for this study are formulated as follows:

1. How do left-behind children experience their life with their parents' migration?

2. How do children practice agency to interact with structure and culture when living with their parents' migration?

A qualitative approach has been adopted to address these research questions that stress children's points of view within dynamic social and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A middle school in a rural region of the inland province of Hunan has been chosen as the location for my fieldwork. The data collected from in-depth interviews with 16 left-behind children serve as the main source of data for analysis, with participant observations, focus groups and documents as well as official records providing further contextual information.

1.2. Contribution to Knowledge

By elaborating on left-behind children's experiences with parents' migration through their own perspectives, and explicating their strategies of action in response to this regarding the dynamic interplay between agency, structure and culture, this research contributes by:

1. Shedding light on left-behind children's diverse and often conflicting experiences as well as demonstrating their agentic engagement with evolving situations, thereby challenging the attribution that they are passive victims;

2. Building knowledge regarding how to address left-behind children's needs and to

facilitate their exercising of agency that can inform policy and service provision targeted at these children and their families in China;

3. Proposing "ambivalence" as a core construct to capture a dynamic understanding of left-behind children and incorporating it into a framework, where it serves to link agency with structure / culture, thereby advancing theoretical integration.

1.3. Organization of Chapters

This chapter opens the thesis by introducing this research in general. In chapter two I set left-behind children in the broader context of globalization, make a critical review of the literature pertaining to this population in both international migration and Chinese internal migration settings, and identify the research gaps. The third chapter presents a theoretical framework integrating agency, structure and culture to capture children's experiences and agency. The rationale for my qualitative research design, the process of data collection and analysis, along with the particular ethical issues concerning research with children are presented in chapter four.

The next three chapters form the main body of the research findings. Chapter five unfolds the themes of "money" and "love" emerging from children's narratives. It depicts their struggles between the material benefits and emotional loss caused by their parents' migration. In chapter six the mixed feelings of "lonely" and "free" among left-behind children are captured. Next, in chapter seven the complexities regarding the children's experiences of "here", the rural hometown, and "there", their parents' work town and how these shape their current life and aspirations for the future are explored. In addition, the various strategies of action that the children adopt to deal with each dilemma are analysed by locating them in the dynamic interplay among structure, culture and agency in each of these three chapters.

The concluding chapter presents a synthesis of the main findings of this research and proposes an integrated framework for capturing left-behind children's experiences, with "ambivalence" serving as a core construct to link agency with structure / culture. In addition, implications for policy and practice, the limitations of this research and recommendations for future studies are presented.

Chapter II Mapping Left-behind Children in the Global and Chinese Contexts

Left-behind children have become a worldwide concern with the phenomenon emerging alongside unprecedented trends in migration that have occurred during the processes of globalization, urbanization and industrialization. That is, as parents migrate from developing to more developed areas to pursue better opportunities, a large number of children have been left under the care of one parent, extended family members or friends (Antman, 2011; Asis, 2006; Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Graham & Jordan, 2011; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). Consequently, publicly shared anxieties have focused on the possibility that these children can be negatively affected by such family separation (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; Cortes, 2008; Parreñas, 2005). Extensive research has been conducted to examine the economic, social and emotional impact of migration on such children (Cortes, 2008; Kandal & Kao, 2001; Lu, 2012, 2014). Moreover, there is a growing body of work that seeks to capture these children's own perception and exercise of agency (Artico, 2003; Asis, 2006; Dreby, 2007; Hoang & Yeoh, 2014; Murphy, 2014; Olwig, 1999; Orellana et al., 2001). These works provide useful insights with respect to understanding the experiences and circumstances of children left behind in China.

In the case of China, the issue of left behind children is usually associated with internal migration. This is not only the outcome of globalization and industrialization, but has also been shaped profoundly by China's institutionalized rural-urban bifurcation (Lu, 2012; Xiang, 2007). Given this, to gain insight into such children's situations, it may be necessary to take into consideration the specific features of China's social, economic, political and cultural contexts (Duan et al., 2013; Duan & Yang, 2008; Tan, 2011; Xiang, 2007). Therefore, this chapter aims to capture the characteristics of left-behind children in the broader contexts of international migration, and the specific setting of Chinese internal rural-urban migration.

2.1. Globalization, Migration and Left-behind Children

2.1.1. Globalization, migration and family separation

It is proposed that accelerating rates of globalization reinforce labour migration flows.

This is owing to it increasing the inequalities existing between nations and/or regions, and sustaining the growing demand for low-skilled, low-paid labour in industrialized regions as well as the large pool of potentially mobile labour found in developing areas (Simmons, 2005). This migration reflects the nature of the global political economy, i.e. the uneven development that can be observed between developed and developing countries and between urban and rural areas. Further, it has been estimated that the total number of international migrants increased considerably over recent years from 175 million in 2000, to 232 million in 2013 (United Nation, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2013). This comprised 3.2% of the world population in 2013, with the majority being labour flowing from developing to developed countries (UNDESA, 2013).

It is against the backdrop of this imbalanced structure that individuals choose to move to developed nations for better job opportunities. However, a large number of migrants when they arrive in receiving communities actually live on the fringes of society, as they are faced with low wages, unsecured contracts, little personal time and demands for high levels of flexibility from their employers (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008). The development of restrictive immigration policies can further jeopardize their situation as migrants often have to accept temporary visas or may even remain undocumented. Given these circumstances, they are also vulnerable to being "trafficked" and exploited through exposure to dangerous working conditions without access to social benefits (Simmons, 2005). Considering these difficulties, uncertainties and constraints associated with the process of migration, most potential workers choose to leave their family members and children in their hometown when they themselves take up temporary work in distant places, with the intention of sending back remittances to support those left behind (Falicov, 2007; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). In this sense, the decision to undertake migration is not made simply for individual interests, but rather, is a household strategy based on the goal to reduce economic risks and maximise economic welfare at the household level (Stark & Bloom, 1985).

For a considerable length of time, much of the literature on migration has been dominated by discussion of remittances, poverty relief and household welfare (Adams & Page, 2005; James, 1991; Russel, 1986; Stark & Lucas, 1988). In recent years, the social and emotional impact of migration on the left behind has attracted extensive research interest (Antman, 2012; Asis, 2006; Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Graham &

Jordan, 2011; Kandal & Kao, 2001; Lu, 2012), yet their lived experiences have not been sufficiently addressed in the extant literature. As Toyota, Yoeh, and Nguyen (2007) proposed, we should: bring the left behind to the centre of migration research and, in so doing, re-examine the complex relationship between migration and those left behind, i.e. the "migration-left behind nexus". In addition, research needs to be carried out in order to understand the dynamics and experiences of the lives of the left behind. More specifically, amongst family members who are left behind, children are attracting increasing levels of academic research interest (Atico, 2003; Dreby, 2010; Hadi, 1999). According to some rather incomplete data collected from different resources, around the developing world, such as in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Mexico, Ecuador, South Africa, and Moldova, there are millions of left-behind children living apart from one or both parents (Bennett, Hosegood, Newell, McGrath, 2014; Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Latapí, 2009; Lu, 2014; Reyes, 2007; Save the Children, 2006). This situation has stimulated worries that the well-being of these children may be jeopardized by family disruption (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Hoang, Lam, Yeoh, & Graham, 2014).

2.1.2. Conceptualizing left-behind children

The term left-behind children generally refers to those young people living in their hometown with one or both parents migrating to other places for work for an extended time period (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Reyes, 2008; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). According to the existing literature, their typical living situation involves being: cared for by the one left-behind parent or other extended family members, supported by remittances from the migrant parent(s), connected with the absent parent through letters, parcels, the telephone and internet, as well as their waiting for family reunification either back in the hometown or at the parents' adopted place of work (Olwig, 1993; 1999; Orellana et al., 2001; Philpott, 1973; Reyes, 2007).

There is widespread public concern that left-behind children can suffer socially and psychologically from family separation as informed by attachment theory, object relation theory, and related studies on children experiencing divorce, abandonment, and parental death (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Falicov, 2007; Graham & Jordan, 2011; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Potter, 2010), which have indicated that parent-child separation can have adverse effects on children's education and mental health. However,

the distinct feature that differentiates left-behind children from those who have been separated from parents for the reasons listed above, is that separation owing to migration does not mean the breakup of family relationships. Instead, migration is intended primarily for improving the welfare of the whole family, mostly in economic terms, and family reunification is expected to happen in the future (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008). Therefore, the migration of parents is often regarded as entailing economic benefits, improved life opportunities and hope for the future (Yeoh & Lam, 2007).

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of left-behind children needs to be located in local contexts. Although western culture has a powerful influence over the world, developing areas, including countries as diverse as Mexico, South Africa, the Philippines, Ghana, Romania, and China that host left-behind children are very divergent in terms of their social, economic and cultural dimensions (Benett et al., 2014; Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2014; Bryant, 2005; Coe, 2012; Cortes, 2008; Duan & Yang, 2008). Thus, it is to be expected that perceptions regarding left-behind children vary across different cultures and are closely related to the definitions of childhood, the concept of the family and the notion of migration, as well as other conditions in the sending and receiving communities. For example, the expression left-behind children in English is underpinned by very specific cultural assumptions. That is, by using a passive form of the verb "leave", the term implies that the children are passive recipients of parents' migration choices with the combination of "left" and "behind" defining the status of the children in relation to those individuals who have moved away (i.e. the migrants). The implicit belief is that those left-behind should be taken with their parents during migration and a normal family should be nuclear and, most importantly, living together (Xiang, 2007). By contrast, in Chinese, the expression for left-behind is "*liu shou*", and it carries quite different meanings and expectations, for it not only has the meaning of being left in the hometown, but also connotes to "stay and hold the fort" (Xiang, 2007). It implies that migrants along with their family members are not accepted as regular members of the community in the adopted city and should, eventually, return to their hometowns.

Moreover, it should be noted that for the children of migrants, the separation and reunification processes are rather complex and dynamic (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Indeed, many children's statuses can change between periods spent in leading lives left behind to that of migration together with their parents and therefore, no single term, neither that of left-behind nor that of "*liu shou*", can capture fully such

fluid experiences (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001). Nonetheless, to be consistent with the academy in this research area, the familiar and more established term of left-behind children is used.

2.2. Studies on Left-behind Children: International Migration

2.2.1. Cost-benefit analysis as the dominant paradigm

Cost-benefit analysis is the dominant paradigm used for studying left-behind children in the contexts of international migration, which focuses on the impact of parental migration and tends to treat such children as passive objects or dependants of migrant parents (Dobson, 2009; Lu, 2014; Orellana et al., 2001; Reyes, 2007). An earlier wave of research primarily addressed issues concerning the benefits of remittances on children's well-being (Adams & Page, 2005; James, 1991, Russel, 1986; Stark & Lucas, 1988). Regarding which, many researchers have claimed that remittances can improve the financial situation of the whole family with extra money being available for expenditure on daily consumption, housing, health care and education costs (James, 1991, Russel, 1986; Stark & Lucas, 1988). As for left-behind children, these beneficial impacts have been linked to their positive educational and health outcomes. Studies carried out in Mexico, El Salvador, Pakistan and Sri Lanka revealed that children from remittance-receiving families experience lower school drop-out rates than those from other families, because remittances can relieve household budget constraints that prevent children from continuing their schooling (de la Garza, 2010; Kandel & Kao, 2001; Lahaie, Hayes, Piper, & Heymann, 2009; Mansuri, 2006; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2004). Moreover, by allowing additional consumption of educational goods and reducing the need for child labour, remittances can positively affect the levels of educational attainment (Arguillas & Williams, 2010; Kandel & Kao, 2001). Children left behind in the Philippines, Albania and Moldova were found to not only achieve better academic results, but also participated more in academic organizations and extra-curricular activities (Arguillas & Williams, 2010; de la Garza, 2010; Edillon 2008). Further, a positive correlation between remittances and health status has been documented. For instance, Frank and Hummer (2002) reported that children born to remittance receiving households in Mexico were less likely to be exposed to health risks at birth. Similarly, Hildebrant and McKenzie (2005) revealed that remittances from

Mexican immigrants in the United States improved children's health outcomes, whereby lower rates of infant mortality and higher birth weights were found among their left-behind children.

However, not all left-behind children appear to benefit from their parents' remittances, because migration related debts or the paucity of the money sent home might result in a family having less money than before, and thus a child's life could be made even harder (Simth-Estelle & Gruksin, 2003). Moreover, putting the emphasis on economic factors may serve to over-simplify the effects of migration as well as to under-estimate the costs that migration could impose on the overall wellbeing of left-behind children (Cortes, 2008). With regards to this, a significant body of literature has focused on the social and psychological costs for children of living with parental migration, but to date, the research findings are rather contradictory and inconclusive (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Bryant, 2005; Choe, Hatmaddji, Podhisita, Raymundo, & Thapa, 2004; Cortes, 2008).

Turning to education, in spite of the positive effects recorded in the remittance-based research mentioned above, negative educational outcomes for left-behind children, such as: higher dropout rates, worse academic performance and lower aspiration for higher education, have been documented in the outcomes of extensive studies in Mexico, Ecuador, Moldova, Thailand, and Albania (Chiquiar & Hanson, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Jampaklay, 2006; Kandel & Kao, 2001; McKenzie & Rapoport, 2011; Nobles, 2013). More specifically, factors including: lack of parental supervision and monitoring, increased levels of household responsibilities, length of separation, mother's migration, and children's negative reactions to parents' migration were identified as accounting for the children's poor academic performance and school attendance (Cortes, 2008, 2013; Jampaklay, 2006; Pottinger, 2005). Kandel (2003) posited that the children's poor motivation to engage with education could be explained by the alternative route to economic mobility offered by migration coupled with the relatively low returns to local higher education that migrants experience in the receiving countries leading to the children perceiving a depreciation in the value of education. In addition, the absence of individuals who can provide powerful role models in the hometown community further narrows the children's horizons, resulting in them selecting international migration as their preferred vocational choice (Naw, 2007; Reyes, 2007).

Research outcomes on the mental health of left-behind children also present a mixed picture, with feelings of fear, anger, resentment, sadness, depression, rejection, abandonment and loss having been observed by researchers in the Philippines, Nicaragua and Jamaica (D' Emilio, Cordero, Bainvel, Skoog, Comini, & Gough, 2007; Jones, Sharpe, & Sogren, 2004; Parreñas, 2005; Pottinger, 2005). Risk factors for mental health problems identified in the literature include: their receiving inadequate preparation for separation, changes in those appointed to look after them, children's negative reactions to parents' migration, being exposed to violence in the home and/or the community, being of an older age when left behind as well as lengthy periods of parental absence (Pottinger, 2005; Smith, Lalonde, & Johnson, 2004). However, studies of school children in the Philippines found little or no evidence that children of migrants suffered greater psychological problems, on average, than the children of non-migrants (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Graham & Jordan, 2011; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2004). This could be put down to there being a culture of migration such that in some communities parents' migration has been normalized and modern communication systems effectively facilitate parent-child relationships (Graham & Jordan, 2011). Another possible reason is that the support from the extended family offsets the negative impact of parental absence (Bryant, 2005).

In the research evidence no consensus has been reached regarding the issue of such children's tendency to adopt risk-taking behaviours. For instance, work carried out in Mexico found that problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse were greater for adolescents with migrant fathers (Cortes, 2008). From the other side, results from the 1994 Family and Youth Survey held in Thailand showed that having both parents present in the household while children are growing up reduces the probability that an adolescent (young people aged between 15 and 19) would smoke, drink alcohol, or have premarital sex (Choe et al., 2004). The conduct problems of left-behind children have also been reported in Moldova (Vanore, Mazzucato, & Siegel, 2014). However, the findings of other investigations based in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines reported that having migrant parent(s) makes no difference regarding the probability of children engaging in problem behaviours (Asis, 2006; Choe et al., 2004; Jones & Kittisuksathit, 2003).

Contradictory results also emerge in the research concerning the issues of abuse and neglect. Some researchers revealed that migration significantly increases the risk of

children being subjected to these （Cortes, 2008; Crawford-Brown, 1993; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). In these circumstances, the migration of mothers, rather than that of fathers, was found to be much more significant regarding children being physically and/or sexually abused (Crawford-Brown, 1993). Moreover, the emigration of social elites from the home community is offered as an explanation for children being at risk, because their absence decreases the community's capacity to protect and nurture its children (Cortes, 2008; Naw, 2007; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). In contrast, a 2003 school-based study in the Philippines found no significant difference between the children of migrants and those of non-migrants in terms of reports of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse (Scalabrini Migration Center, 2004).

In sum, the extant academic research provides a mixed and inconclusive picture regarding the costs and benefits that parental migration brings to left-behind children. Although variations regarding the methodological approaches, the research sites, sampling strategies and instruments may partly explain the evident inconsistencies in study outcomes, the complex impact that parents' migration can incur on left-behind children should be acknowledged. That is, whilst left-behind children may gain resources from their parents' migration, at the same time they can face many challenges from their absence, including: emotional distance with migrant parents, lack of supervision and care, and increased levels of household responsibilities. Moreover, the prevailing structural and cultural contexts of migration and being left behind as well as the children's own actions can have significant mediating impact upon the social and psychological outcomes of these children (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Hoang & Yeoh, 2014; Lu, 2014; Mazzucato, Cebotari, Veale, White, Grassi, & Vivet, 2014). In the literature reviewed above, effects such as: the importance of members of the extended family, the normalization of migration in the home community and children's negative reactions to parents' migration have been identified. It has to be noted, however, that much research to date has relied on deploying standardized research instruments developed in the contexts of western countries, which may have inhibited scholars from achieving a more contextualized understanding of the phenomenon of interest. In particular, the opinions of adults have been used widely when investigators are assessing children's situations and outcomes and as a result, the child's perspective has not been sufficiently addressed.

2.2.2. Children's perspectives

An alternative paradigm is one that seeks to capture children's own perceptions and constructions of living with their parents' migration, which draws on recent sociological theorising of childhood that regards them as autonomous social actors (Asis, 2006; Dreby, 2007, 2010; Hoang & Yeoh, 2014; Olwig, 1999; Orellana et al., 2001; Parreñas, 2005). Proponents of this paradigm argue that the children's experiences and actions should be brought fully into the study of the left-behind as their world is partly created by themselves and thus, must be understood from their own perspectives (Dreby, 2010; Hoang & Yeoh, 2014).

In line with this view, Olwig (1999) examined four life stories of left-behind children living with grandparents in Caribbean families. This scholar revealed that, in the children's eyes, remittances are not just money but represent the strong economic and social presence of the migrant parents, which supports them as valued family members and affords them respect from the extended family. Moreover, from the remittances they can feel emotional support from their parents, feel they are loved and cared for, and can believe that their parents are working away from home for their benefit (Olwig, 1999). The author further contends it is the personal loyalty and family obligations entailed in such parents-child connectedness that enable these children to construct their home despite the physical separation across national borders (Olwig, 1999).

Dreby's (2010) ethnography in Mexico demonstrated that left-behind children were not powerless in their families, even though they suffered from parental migration. By presenting negative emotional and behavioural reactions towards migrant parents, these children could exert pressure on their parents to adjust the family's migration trajectories, such as return home more frequently, put more resources into their children's education, or sponsor their migration. Consequently, the researcher concluded that separation from parents could magnify children's power towards their migrant parents and enable them to wield more influence upon the family's decision making (Dreby, 2010).

In the context of the Philippines, Parreñas (2005) revealed how left-behind children experience their lives in transnational families was deeply influenced by the conventional gender division of labour between the father and mother. Children from father migrating families were more likely to accept their fathers migrating to fulfil the

role of breadwinner, and the problems they reported were mostly about social discomfort and emotional gap. In contrast, children from mother away families usually struggled to recognise the economic contribution of their mothers, and tended to blame them for the insufficient care they provided, claiming that they had been abandoned. Another study conducted in the Philippines by Asis (2006) reported that left-behind children have their own perceptions about parents' migration, for example, they could see it as providing an escape from parental control and that they could grow from such experiences. That is, they could seek social support, take responsibility and resolve their own problems in their own ways so as to make sense of the challenges and opportunities brought about by parental migration.

Moreover, there is a qualitative study conducted in Vietnam that has examined the left-behind children's agentic engagement in the process of migration decision making and transnational communication in terms of how they imagine and construct parental migration (Hoang & Yeoh, 2014). The authors contend that children are constantly making meaning of and negotiating with both the macro and local socioeconomic contexts. In so doing, although they have avoided over emphasising agency by shedding light on the constraints of structure, their approach has resulted in a dualism that regards the contexts as contradictions of agency.

In sum, these studies provide an alternative perspective with respect to how left-behind children experience and deal with parents' migration, with the emphasis being placed on the children's constructions and narratives in the processes of being left behind. However, a clearer theoretical framework needs to be developed beyond these descriptive accounts to allow for further analysis of left-behind children's experiences. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that the children's narratives are embedded in their cultural contexts and thus more cultural sensitivity is needed in such research endeavours.

2.3. Left-behind Children: Chinese Rural-urban Migration

China has experienced highly centralized economic, social and political systems since 1949. In the late 1970s, economic reforms were initiated, with the target of building a market-oriented economy and reintegrating the country into the global economic system.

Thereafter, capital investments from wealthy industrialized countries flowed in to make China the new manufacturing centre of the world (Chan, 2009). Consequently, a large number of low-skilled jobs have been created in the cities and migrant workers from underdeveloped rural areas provide the main source of human resources needed to fill these positions (Hare, 2002). This process has resulted in millions of children being left behind in rural hometowns with one or both parents working in the more developed cities.

2.3.1. Chinese rural-urban migration

Rural-urban migration has been strictly constrained in the People's Republic of China since the 1950s. The *Hukou* (household registration) system is the main mechanism used to control residents' free movement and was established to serve the needs of the highly centralized political and economic system by registering every person in his/her place of residency, further facilitating the government's control over society (Chan & Zhang, 1999). According to this system, any person wanting to live outside their registered local area must seek approval from their home local authorities and those at their intended destination.

Under the *hukou* system, the place of residency is divided into two distinct categories: urban and rural. This was deliberately designed in 1958 to support the Big Push industrialization programme that extracted resources from agricultural sectors in order to subsidize industrial sectors that were mostly located in the cities (Chan, 2009). Living in the priority cities, residents with urban *hukou* registration were entitled to basic social welfare and subsidies, such as: waged employment, medical care, pensions and housing (Chan & Zhang, 1999). By contrast, the rural population, approximately 85% of the whole population, were excluded from state-supplied welfare and limited to working in agriculture sectors so that they could produce low priced food and materials for industry (Chan, 2009).

Until the economic reforms carried out in the late 1970s, mobility in China had been very tightly controlled. Under this arrangement, there were very few people that lived outside their place of residency (Chan, 2009), and rural-urban migration was the exception and not the rule (Zhao & Liu, 1997). As a result, a deep urban-rural chasm was generated and has become a major divide in China's social stratification, with most of the low-income population residing in the rural areas (Chan, 2009).

In the late 1970s, as market-led economic reform was initiated, strict control over internal migration was gradually relaxed. Some rural residents were allowed to migrate to cities for employment with the stipulation that they presented valid IDs and the required certificates (Yang, 1993). Yet, the rural migrant workers were not allowed to register in the *hukou* system of their place of work and their access to related welfare and services was restricted. In spite of this, the large discrepancies between rural and urban incomes and the lack of work opportunities in rural areas still exerted push and pull influences, which encouraged workers to move from rural areas to the cities (Hare, 1999; Zhang & Song, 2003).

Figure 1. The trend of rural to urban migration in China
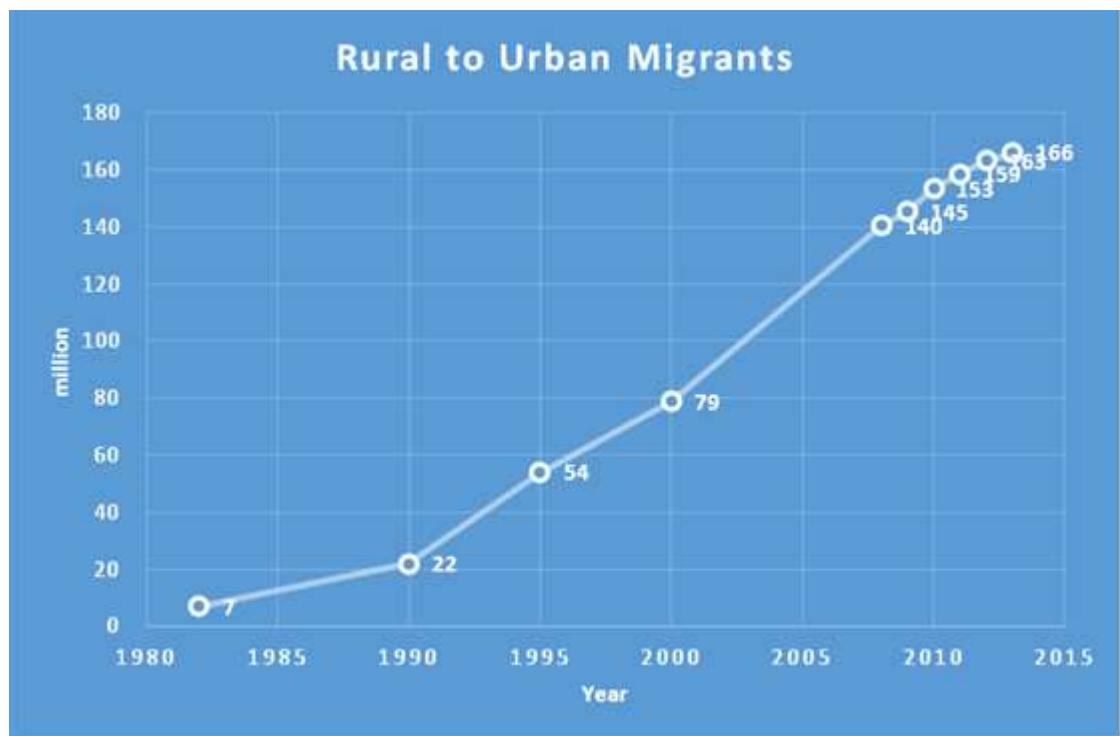
Source: data from 1980 to 2000 (He, 2007, p. 133); data from 2008 to 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Figure 1, drawing on data from three national censuses held in 1982, 1990, and 2000, the "China One Percent Population Sample Survey" held in 1995 (cited from He, 2007, p. 133), and the "China Migrant Worker Monitoring Report" of 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014), shows that the level of rural-urban migration has increased exponentially over this period. The first census in 1982 reported that there were around 7 million rural migrants, and by 1990, the number had reached nearly 22 million. This

had doubled by 1995 to 54 million, while the 2000 census witnessed another major increase to 79 million. The "China Migrant Worker Monitoring Report" of 2013 showed that from 2008 to 2013 the number had climbed from 140 million to 166 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

Most migrant workers are young, work in the private sector, have jobs in factories or service industries and receive lower incomes than many urban residents (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Wong, Chang & He, 2007). Without registration in the local *hukou*, they generally live a marginalized life in the cities, as they are not entitled to permanent residency rights or many of the associated social benefits, including public housing, medical care and social insurance (Hare, 2002; Wong et al., 2007; Solinger, 1999; Zhao, 1999, 2002).

Accordingly, the children of rural migrants are denied rights to access education and health services on a par with their urban counterparts, because of their rural *hukou* status that they have inherited from their rural parents. In general, considerably more effort and money are needed for a rural migrant parent to bring up a child in the city, with higher educational costs in destination communities being the prime reason for leaving children behind in the hometown (Duan, Yang, & Wang, 2005). Additional reasons cited for leaving children behind include: the higher living costs in cities, no spare time for carrying out parental care duties, the floating status of the parents, and children's poor adaptation to city life (Duan et al,, 2005). Moreover, as the forms of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) vary among the different provinces, even those children who have migrated with their parents have to return to their registered place of residency before starting high school so as to get accustomed to the different school curriculum (Liu, 2013; Ye, Murray, & Wang 2005).

In recent years, the Chinese government has launched a series of public policy actions to improve the welfare of rural migrants, including: regulating labour contracts and minimum pay, providing training and employment services, enlarging social security coverage, extending urban public services, and conditionally allowing rural migrants to register under urban *hukou* in middle and small scale cities (Wang, 2008). As far as migrant children are concerned, after 2001 they were guaranteed access to compulsory education (lasting for nine years) in receiving destinations, although sometimes extra fees were required, but since the New Compulsory Education Law was passed in 2006

they have enjoyed free compulsory education (Wang, 2008). The strictly controlled high education admissions policy has also been relaxed since 2013 to allow children of migrants to attend the NCEE in their host cities ("National College Entrance Examination Reform", 2014). There remain, however, many obstacles in policy implementation, as most local governments have set restrictive regulations on these children's entry qualifications, especially in large cities ("National College Entrance Examination Reform", 2014).

In spite of these improvements, there has been no substantial change in the *hukou* system in large cities (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). In fact, policy issued by the central government in 2014 is aimed at strictly controlling the population in large cities (Yan, 2014) by making permanent residency in these cities much more difficult, especially for people working with low profile jobs. Therefore, rural migrants still have little chance to possess local *hukou* even after years of working and residing in large cities. To some extent, they are deprived of their citizenship by the *hukou* system, even if they are citizens of the country (Chan, 2009). Such institutional arrangements still prevent parents from settling down in host cities with their children, especially in the large cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or those in Guangdong province.

2.3.2. The situation of left-behind children in China

In China, left-behind children are generally understood as being children that live in rural areas with one or both parent(s) having migrated for work. The National Bureau of Statistics of China has not provided clear census data regarding left-behind children and currently, the most reliable data comes from inferences drawn from the National Census of 2000, the 1% National Population Sampling Survey carried out in 2005 and National Census of 2010. According to these sources, in 2000, there were about 24 million left-behind children in rural areas aged below 17 years (Duan & Zhou, 2005). Five years later, this figure had climbed to 58 million (Duan & Yang, 2008) and this increase in left-behind children appears consistent with the rise in the overall numbers of rural-urban migrants. According to an estimation based on National Census of 2010, there were 61 million children being left behind in the rural areas, making up 38% of all children in these areas and 22% of all children in China (Duan et al., 2013). Among these left-behind children, 47% had both parents migrating out, 36% had only the father migrating, and 17% had only the mother migrating (Duan et al., 2013).

It is important to note that the geographic distribution of left-behind children is uneven across the nation, being highly concentrated in Sichuan, Anhui, Henan, Guangdong, and Hunan, with children in these provinces making up 43.64% of the whole population of such children (Duan et al., 2013). As main sending areas for rural urban migrants, most of these provinces lie in the underdeveloped middle and western areas (Duan et al., 2013). Most of the left-behind children are looked after by the left-behind parent and grandparents and only a small proportion of them are under the care of siblings, other relatives, friends, and teachers (Duan et al., 2013; Ye & Wang, 2006).

Figure 2. Left-behind children in rural China
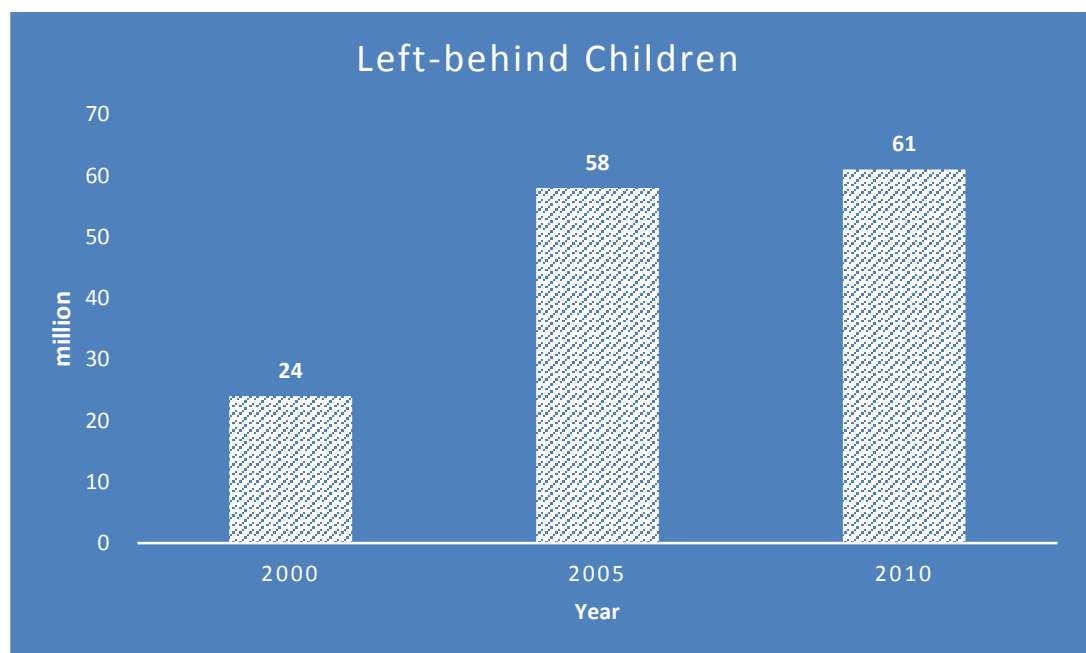
Source: Duan & Zhou, 2005; Duan & Yang, 2008; Duan et al., 2013

2.3.3. Review of studies on left-behind children in China

Left-behind children have always been viewed as a group that is suffering from their parents' migration by the Chinese government and the mass media, typically described as living in an unstable environment, lacking parents' care and love, and receiving inadequate discipline and guidance (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). Following these concerns, many studies have been conducted to identify the problems of left-behind children in relation to education, mental health and social behaviour, but their findings are inconsistent and remain contested.

Regarding concerns that the migration of parents adversely affects children's education,

a survey of 8,627 students in 10 western provinces reported that left-behind children were worse in academic performance than those children living with both parents (Yao & Mao, 2008). Similarly, through a randomised survey of 1,010 children in Anhui and Jiangxi, researchers found that parents' migration significantly affects children's educational performance when both parents migrate or when a non-parent guardian is the principal carer, with boys being more vulnerable to such impact than girls (Zhou, Murphy and Tao, 2014). Moreover, some comparative studies also reported that left-behind children were worse off in terms of their school enrolment and years of schooling than children with both parents at home (Lee, 2010; Wang, 2012). Scholars propose that lack of role models, inadequate discipline and guidance, an unsupportive family environment, grandparents' lower education status, and lower academic motivation are the reasons accounting for these children's inferior performance (Fan & Sang, 2005; Kong & Gu, 2004; Lee, 2010).

Findings that contrast with those of the above studies have been presented in several other works. Zhu, Li & Zhou (2002) reported the difference in academic achievements is only marginal when comparing left-behind children with non-left-behind children. In addition, Chen, Huang, Rozelle, Shi, and Zhang (2009) examined changes in school performance before and after parents' migration, and elicited that there was no significant negative effect of the migration on school performance. In fact, the findings from Chen et al. (2009) and Lee (2010) both indicate that children's education may be positively influenced when only one parent migrates. Further, the presence of mothers emerges as a critical protective factor, which may be related to traditional gender roles regarding parenting, whilst, more generally, positive family functioning and social support are also regarded as protective (Liang & Chen, 2007).

A growing body of literature has focused on the mental health status of left-behind children (Duan & Zhou, 2005; Gao, 2008; Hu, Liu, Shen, & Fan, 2007; Jia & Tian, 2010; Liu, Qu & Qiu, 2007; Wang, Ling, Su, Cheng, Jin, & Sun, 2014). Loneliness, indifference, sensitivity, and higher levels of depression and anxiety have been recorded as the main mental health issues specifically related to left-behind children (Jia & Tian, 2010; Lu & Zhou, 2013; Xie, 2007; Zhang & He, 2008; Zhao, Chen, Lu, Jiang, & Sun, 2014). Further, several studies provide empirical evidence that the mental health state of left-behind children was significantly worse than that of their counterparts (Huang, 2006; Li, 2005; Long & Shen, 2008; Wei & Zheng, 2007). By contrast, however, several

empirical studies have not identified significant differences in the general mental health of left-behind and non-left-behind children (He, Cao, Liu, Li, & Xie, 2006; Hu et al., 2007; Jia, 2008), even when the former were found to have more stressful life events than the latter (Hu et al., 2007).

The review of the literature points to a number of risk factors for left-behind children developing emotional problems, including: being cared for by grandparents and relatives or friends of the parents, the absence of mothers, extended time spent being left behind, their having negative coping strategies and poor teacher support as well as being under the guardianship of young caregivers or non-relatives, who themselves have poor education and low socioeconomic status (Chi, Hu, & Shen, 2008; Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010; Gao, 2008; Huang, 2006; Ye & Zhang, 2008). On the other hand, a relatively shorter time spent left behind, more time spent in physical and leisure activities, good relationship with guardians, social support from parents, caregivers, teachers and school friends, having high self-esteem and positive coping style as well as strong connections with migrant parents may predict better mental health outcomes (Ai & Hu, 2014; Fan et al., 2010; Hao & Cui, 2007; Hu et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2007; Liu, Sun, Zhang, Wang, & Guo, 2010; Wang, 2002).

It is generally assumed in the extant Chinese research that left-behind children are more likely to exhibit problem behaviours than non-left-behind ones, developing such traits as being selfish or violent, having poor social relations and misbehaving in school (Fan, 2004; Gao, Wang, Wang, & Liu, 2007; Hu, Lu, & Huang, 2014; Lin, 2003). Further, several scholars have proposed that left-behind children have more adaptation problems (Cao, 2006; Hao & Cui, 2007; Huang, 2004), higher levels of illegal and deviant behaviour (Liu et al., 2007), and are more likely to develop a smoking habit (Lee, 2010), when compared to their counterparts. However, outcomes of other research studies that refute such claims are available. More specifically, from a large scale investigation of 4,552 students and 3,392 teachers from 62 primary and middle schools in Hubei, Henan, and Anhui, Jia (2008) reported no significant difference regarding behaviour between the two groups. From the above literature, a number of risk factors have been found to be related to behavioural problems, including: lack of family education, longer time being left behind, greater distance from parents, and being cared by the father only or by other relatives (Chen & Xie, 2007; Fan, 2004). In contrast, presence of the mother and a caring teacher, higher level of subjective support and support utilization are

connected with less deviant behaviours (Chen & Xie, 2007; Jia, 2008; Liu et al., 2007; Liu, Li, Chen, & Qu, 2014).

To summarise, in China, there is still controversy in the extant scholarship regarding whether parental migration has a negative impact on children's lives. Several research deficiencies can be identified regarding these studies. First, most scholars set out their research from a problem perspective, hence their focus is more about the negative impact of parents' migration on left-behind children. Second, quantitative methods have been widely used in the Chinese research, most being characterised by the use of non-randomised sampling strategies, and/or lack of consistency and valid measuring instruments (Qin & Albin, 2010; Tan, 2011). Third, not many studies have paid much attention to the specific social and cultural contexts prevailing in China. Last, with the primary concern being on the impact of migration on children, most of the reviewed research has tended to regard left-behind children as the passive recipients of their parents' migration, and hence, has made little attempt to explore their agency.

Worthy of mentioning is that in the last two years, several studies have been conducted in China to explore children's own experience, construction and exercise of agency when living with parental migration. Zhang (2013) carried out multiple sites research on both migrant children and left-behind children in Beijing and Hebei, and demonstrated how these children actively interacted with their evolving environments to negotiate a sense of home. Murphy (2014), through her fieldwork in rural Jiangxi, revealed how the left-behind children engaged with the reciprocal family relationship through their agentic actions in the domain of school and study, and how their experiences and choices were affected by the socio-cultural environment. This body of work is in line with the paradigm emphasising children's perspective, as discussed in the section on international migration, and its adoption is considered to be a promising way forward for the current research.

2.4. Policy and Intervention

Among all the countries mentioned in this review, the Philippines have developed specific social policies and interventions targeting households with absent migrants. In this country, there is an extensive system of governmental and non-governmental

services for labour migrants and their families. The governmental provision includes a network of 25 Family Welfare Officers, launched to serve the families of migrants and based in areas with high concentrations of migration (Bryant, 2005). These work by: "collecting information, designing interventions, providing advice, and acting as advocates" (Bryant, 2005, p. 10). In addition to this, information and counselling services are provided by the Department of Labour and Employment and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, and families of migrants can also benefit from special credit facilities covered by a welfare fund set up specifically for overseas Filipino workers (Scalabrini Migration Center, 2004).

For those countries without specialized policies in place, the left-behind largely rely on family-based networks for support (D'Emilio et al., 2007). In some relatively better off countries they may, to some extent, benefit from some general social services. For example, in Nicaragua, the "school counsellor" programme initiated by the Ministry of Education was designed for helping the general student population, yet it is especially useful for children left behind, "as a source of authority, guidance and love" (D'Emilio et al., 2007, p. 13). In Mexico, communities with high migration rates enjoy improved basic infrastructure services (e.g. water, electricity, streets, hospital, schools, computer centres) under a programme termed the "4x1 Iniciativa Ciudadana", which mobilizes resources for community development from four stakeholders: the migrants, federal government, local government, and local residents (D'Emilio et al., 2007).

At the global level, UNICEF plays an important role in the protection of children in left-behind households. Its country office reports regarding: Ecuador, the Philippines, Mexico and Moldova, have presented a general picture on the situation of left-behind children, the roles of families, caregivers, the community, and government (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; de la Garza, 2010; Reyes, 2007). Based on such research findings, a range of policy and intervention initiatives have been brought out, aiming to improve left-behind children's situation through capacity-building programmes for children, caregivers, teachers, health care workers, and the whole community (Cortes, 2008). However, children's perspectives have rarely been addressed in these working papers by UNICEF, and there is a dearth of evidence to inform policy making and implementation regarding what are the children's real needs and what capacity and resources would enable them to achieve better outcomes (D'Emilio et al., 2007).

In China, public policy issues on migrant labourers and their children were not addressed systematically until 2006 when the State Council issued the first specific policy document on rural-urban migrant workers. In this document, the central government set the main agenda aiming to establish an inclusive policy framework, which promised to eliminate the institutional obstacles to rural-urban migration, guarantee rural migrants' access to public services and to reduce the rural-urban divide (State Council, 2006). Among them, the needs of children of migrants have been given priority, with the focus being on education and health services provision. Subsequently, related ministries and local governments were required to make substantial efforts to promote their well-being. Although it is undeniable that the government has put substantial effort into promoting left-behind children's well-being, to date, no research has evaluated the effectiveness of these projects. My pilot study in 2009 in Hunan found that many projects remain as well-meaning words or paper-based intentions, and children may not really be benefiting from them. This indicates that implementation issues need to be given more attention. Moreover, current policy and services are initiated by a top-down perspective that lacks children's perspectives. This may well encourage some local authorities to have a tendency to exaggerate the problems of left-behind children in order to ask for more financial support (Xiang, 2007), whilst ignoring the real needs of these children as well as their strengths and capabilities.

2.5. Summary

The issue of left-behind children is not a phenomenon occurring only in China. Involved in the same complex processes of globalization, urbanization and industrialization, many developing countries, e.g. Thailand, Mexico, the Philippines, Indonesia, among others, are also confronted with this matter (Cortes, 2008; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). In the international migration context or the Chinese rural-urban migration one, there are shared concerns that left-behind children are affected by the migration of parent(s) (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Duan & Yang, 2008; Yeoh & Lam, 2007).

Research indicates that there are challenges for left-behind children caused by parental migration (Bryant, 2005; Jones & Kittisuksathit, 2003; Pottinger, 2005; Yeoh & Lam, 2007; Zhou & Duan, 2006). However, in this study, it is contended that too much attention is given to negative outcomes, which tends to impose an image of the whole

population being problematic. This approach is clearly evident in contemporary Chinese accounts of the phenomenon (Ye, 2011; Zhou & Duan, 2006). It has to be noted that neither in the international nor Chinese contexts have the research findings reached a consensus that concludes that left-behind children are doing significantly worse in terms of education, mental health and social behaviour than their contemporaries. The migration of parents not only incurs risks and challenges, but also entails economic benefits, opportunities and hope (Yeoh & Lam, 2007). This researcher proposes that in order to achieve a balanced picture of the experiences of left-behind children, an investigation should not only emphasize the impacts of migration, but also incorporate, fully, contextual diversity and the children's perspectives.

However, in contemporary Chinese research and policy interventions, children's voices have been largely excluded. The children are usually regarded as passive recipients of their parents' migration, and not much effort has been made to listen to their narratives on their experiences of being left behind (Ye & Wang, 2006; Zhou & Duan, 2006). Accordingly, children's transforming capacities in structural and cultural contexts have not been sufficiently addressed (Bryant, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Duan & Yang, 2008), even though those left-behind construct and reconstruct the realities of living with parental migration (Hoang & Yeoh, 2014; Zhang, 2013). Therefore, reintroducing the concept of children's agency could help reveal the experiences of left-behind children through their own eyes, and assist in shedding light on how they deal with parents' migration. In so doing, interventions based on this may be able to understand and address left-behind children's real needs, facilitate their exercise of agency, and ultimately enhance their well-being.

Moreover, resident in different countries and areas around the world, left-behind children cannot be understood as a homogenous group, but rather, they need to be positioned within their specific social and cultural contexts. Variations in the notions of: childhood, family, and migration, and other prevailing conditions in the sending and receiving communities indicate that left-behind children face different situations, depending on these particular contexts (Toyota et al., 2007). Thus, cultural sensitivity is carefully addressed in this study with the phenomenon of left-behind children in rural China being presented in the context of its rural-urban migration and its social and cultural environment.

In sum, the aim of this study is to examine how left-behind children experience their life with parental migration and how they negotiate their social and cultural contexts to deal with it. The children's agency in interacting with structure and culture is explored to reveal the dynamics and processes of being left behind. In the next chapter a framework integrating the three dimensions of: structure, culture and agency that accounts for left-behind children's experiences is formulated.

Chapter III Theoretical Framework

As discussed in the previous chapter, most existing studies of left-behind children have focused on the impact of parents' migration, treating children as passive recipients thus ignoring their agency. Further, children's voices have been largely excluded and their experiences of being left behind have not been fully explored. Such studies are shaped by paradigms stemming from child development theory, socialization theory and family studies, which regard children as human becoming rather than human being, and childhood as a preparatory stage when children are gradually equipped with the competence to achieve adulthood (James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberge, 1994). Such conceptualization constructs children as incomplete adults, lacking in rationality and wisdom, thus they need to be protected and controlled, and have their needs met rather than their rights upheld (Devine, 2002; Roche, 1999). Under these theoretical models, children are subsumed in the research on family and school and the locus of concern is their development and socialization progress towards adulthood, rather than the experience of being a child (Brannen & O'Brienm 1995; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

However, developments in the sociology of childhood in recent decades challenge such views emanating from these paradigms and claim that the "child" should be understood in its own right and childhood itself made the focus of research (James & Prout, 1997; Jenks, 2005; Lee, 1982; Qvortrup et al., 1994). James and Prout (1997) summarized the main arguments of this new sociology of childhood, stating that childhood can be understood as a social construction and will thus vary according to class, gender and ethnicity. Moreover, children are active in constructing and determining their own lives, rather than just being the passive subjects of social process and structure. In keeping with this, their lives should be explored from their own perspectives, rather than from the adult points of view.

In contemporary sociological work on childhood, two lines of study have emerged with different theoretical emphasis. The first regards childhood as a social construction that is constituted by historical, social, cultural, and political contexts (Jenks, 2005; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Qvortrup, 2005; Stearns, 2006; Zelizer, 1985; 2005). It focuses on the impact of social structure on children and childhood, but tends to ignore the children's own specific perspectives and transforming capacities. In the second

approach, children are understood as social actors that can have a unique impact on their childhood (Corsaro, 1985; 1997; Mayall, 1996; Thorne, 1993). It emphasizes children's experiences as well as their actions and privileges children's own accounts, but often lacks consideration of the macro structural components of childhood (Shanahan, 2007; James, 2010).

Indeed, agency/structure would appear to be the key dichotomy underlying theoretical competition in the sociology of childhood (James, 2010). However, in contemporary developments of social theory, the tendency is to challenge this dualism and make efforts to examine the dynamic interaction between structure and agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). In fact, a few scholars in the field of childhood studies have addressed this theoretical debate. For instance, Tisdall and Punch (2012, p. 259) have taken a very critical stance against the over-simplification of children's own perspectives and promoted the exploration of their agency and experiences within the structural and cultural contexts in which they live, which are full of "intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalence". Moreover, Mayall (2012) argued that children's agency should be set in the dialectic processes of continuing interaction with structure and culture and called for further research to develop the study of childhood from this viewpoint. However, few empirical childhood studies have been conducted to bridge this gap and thus promote theoretical integration (Shanahan, 2007). Therefore, this researcher aims to contribute in this direction by adopting a theoretical framework integrating structure, culture and agency to explore how left behind children live with their parents' migration and how children's agency interacts dynamically with structural and cultural contexts.

3.1. Conceptualizing Children's Agency

Philosophically, the conception of human agency can be traced back to the ancient Greek tradition that treasures the autonomous individual and later, the enlightenment tradition which interprets human freedom in terms of reason and rationality (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Valentine, 2011). In recent decades, the concept of agency has attracted growing interest among social scientists as it has been closely associated with social movements active since the 1960s as well as the development of postmodern and poststructuralist thinking (Ahearn, 2001; Ortner, 1984). The emphasis put on human

agency serves to counter the notion of historical and structural determinism and brings back into the debate the idea of autonomous and responsible individuals whose actions can impact and (re)constitute the structures that shape them (Asad, 2000; Karp, 1986). The term agency itself, however, has been criticized for being elusive, vague, abstracted, underspecified, not well established in an analytical sense (Ahearn, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), and as requiring "deeper consideration and more extensive theoretical elaboration" (Dobres & Robb, 2000, p. 3).

In the history of social theory, a commonly adopted approach to defining agency has been to equate it with socially unfettered free will within which agency is based on rationality and self-awareness (Ahearn, 2001; Huges, 1988). The individual's intention, motivation, reason, choice or purpose is regarded as the defining feature of agency (Coleman, 1994; Homans, 1958; Mann, 1994), but such a perspective ignores the fact that it is constituted by "the norms, practices, institutions, and discourses through which it is made available" (Lalu, 2000, p. 51) and thus fails to theorise the socio-cultural nature of the concept (Ahearn, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). It has also been criticised for neglecting the non-rational, sometimes apparently self-defeating aspects of agency, especially for those who have severe constraints on their choices and actions (Ferguson, 2003; Hoggett, 2001).

There is another approach which conceptualizes agency as resistance, developed from subaltern, feminist and social movement studies and others focusing on powerless or oppressed groups (Ahearn, 2001; Valentine, 2011). Within this tradition, resistance to power or domination is defined as agency, such as women acting against the patriarchal status quo (Mann, 1994). This notion of agency follows an agenda of political and moral claims, where an individual's resistance to power and political influence has been positively documented, especially in the study of groups who are poor, excluded, and victimised (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). Such a conceptualization fails to recognize that agency is always complex and ambiguous: strategies like accepting, accommodating, and ignoring can be adopted by marginalized groups, when at the same time, they are resisting (Ahearn, 2001; Macleod, 1992). Therefore, the overemphasis of resistance should be cautioned against (Abu-lughod, 1990). In sum, agency cannot be reduced to resistance and oppositional agency can only be regarded as one of multiple forms of it (Ahearn, 2001; Ortner, 1995).

The third important approach to agency can be described as a social-cultural model, for it tries to break the structure-agency dualism by emphasizing the relationship between agency, structure and culture (Archer, 1995; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). In this tradition, Giddens's structuration theory is very influential, for it "explains social phenomena as the effects of interactions between agency and structures" (Depelteau, 2008, p. 51). According to Giddens (1984), human actions can shape the structures that constrain and enable those actions. That is, the individual as agent can make choices within given constraints and resources and monitor their own and others' actions reflexively, though these choices are often routinized practices (Giddens, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) further argued that agency does not simply comprise of reflexive action, for it is also constituted by non-reflexive practice, and he used habitus to account for routinized practices. Under Bourdieu's definition, habitus is not formed spontaneously from individuals' free will, but rather stems from their ongoing interactions with different social fields (Bourdieu, 1993). By conceptualizing agency and structure as mutually constitutive components, Bourdieu and Giddens have significantly advanced the development of agency in theoretical terms and greatly influenced related empirical research (Ahearn, 2001; Sewell, 1992). Nonetheless, there are critics who point out that with this approach, structure is bounded too tightly with practice and thus the mutability of the relationship between structural contexts and social actors cannot be explicated (Archer, 1996; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Although each of these three approaches has captured some important characteristics of agency, they are all mainly built upon one dimension: rational intentions, resistance, or routinized practices, and do not consider the interplay among these (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Consequently, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argued agency should incorporate these various dimensions and that it should be placed in the flow of time in order to fully explicate its complexity. They reconceptualised agency as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments - the temporal-relational contexts of action - which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). According to this definition, agency is regarded as a dynamic process situated in and interacting with temporal-relational structural contexts. As "a temporally embedded process of social engagement", agency is simultaneously "informed by the past (in its habitual aspect)", "oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative

possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). Correspondent to these temporal orientations, three constitutive components disaggregate the concept of agency: iteration (to the past), projectivity (to the future), and practical evaluation (to the present) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Each of these is discussed in turn.

Iteration is the element oriented toward the past. It indicates that actors can selectively reactivate past patterns of thought and action and integrate them into their practice to maintain stability, order, identities, meanings and interactions over time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Further, it involves several interrelated processes of interacting with past experiences: choosing a small area of reality in current situations for attention and response; identifying the similarities of the present situation with past experiences, and fitting the new experiences to the old ones; then these grouped experiences are located within socially established categories to sustain a sense of continuity (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In general, iteration represents the habitual dimension of action that requires a relatively low level of reflection, but it still entails an actor's attention and effort to engage with the past.

Projectivity is oriented toward the future. It means that actors can creatively reconstruct received structures according to their hopes, fears and desires for the future, and invent possible future trajectories of action through imagination (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This projection of future action entails a process wherein actors move beyond existing structural and cultural contexts to develop hypothetical narratives about future scenarios, recompose old schemas and habits, and work out possible new strategies to deal with the emergent problems they face (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This element of agency demonstrates that actors do not simply follow past patterns of action, but can formulate innovative thoughts and actions through negotiation with future possibilities.

Practical evaluation represents the present orientation of agency and refers to the capability of actors to make judgements and choices to deal with an emergent situation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). No new situation exactly replicates those that have been experienced before. Thus, in response to present exigencies, actors need to examine the ambiguity of this new situation against past patterns of experiences, decide on a means of resolution among possible choices, and then take concrete action to move forward

(Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This exercise of situationally based judgement is not an unproblematic application of settled rules of conduct, and thus can foster possibilities of changing received patterns of action.

However, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) propose that these three dimensions are theoretical distinctions that only remain separated in the analytical sense: in any real instance of human action, there are varying degrees of engagement with the past, the future and the present, and hence, different combinations of iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation, although one dimension might be more dominant than the other two. It is in this sense that Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 970) term their theory of agency a "chordal triad".

This temporal approach to agency can help explicate the dynamic process through which it interacts with structural contexts, in that it proposes that actors can adjust their temporal orientations to transform their relationships regarding structural contexts, thereby recomposing their reflective, imaginative and evaluative strategies to act upon evolving contexts (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In the domain of children and childhood studies, as yet, such complexities with regards to the concept of agency have not been fully addressed, although it has become a central notion widely adopted in empirical research (Durham, 2008; James, 2007; Mayall, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). The approach equating agency with free will is popular among empirical studies on children and childhood, tending to focus on the positive, competent, and rational dimension of agency in terms of children's capacities, resourcefulness and autonomy (Corsaro, 1997; Haugen, 2010; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; McDonald, 2008; Punch, 2007). There is also a growing literature that aims to shed light on the resistance dimension in children's agency (Bordnonaro, 2012; Montgomery, 2009; Rosen, 2007; Seymour, 2012; Vacchiano & Jimenez, 2012), which has been conceptualized as "ambiguous agency" by Bordnonaro and Payne for they claim it is "in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions of childhood and youth" (2012, p. 365). Other scholars have also used the terms "thin agency", "restricted agency", "limited agency", and "tactical agency" to capture the ambiguous nature of children's agency (Honwana, 2005; Klocker, 2007; Punch, 2007; Robson, Bell, & Klocker, 2007). This particular line of research has revealed the importance of problematising children's agency and the need to consider the complicated historic, social, cultural contexts in which children live. However, the notions used by these researchers appear to make a fixed claim on

agency contending that some of its properties or features are directly defined by structural "thinners", "restrictions" or "ambiguities" (Honwana, 2005; Klocker, 2007; Punch, 2007; Robson et al., 2007). Moreover, in these notions structure is merged with agency to such an extent that the dynamic interactive process between them is difficult to examine (Archer, 2000).

Corsaro (2005) is one researcher who has followed the development of the conceptualization of agency in social theory and, by adopting the temporal approach of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to illustrate children's practice of agency in their peer culture, he has demonstrated that the study of children and childhood can also make theoretical contributions to this central concept in social theory. However, his research focus is mainly on peer culture in schools and does not fully address the wider structural and cultural contexts in which children are embedded. Left-behind children in China are deeply involved in the social transition characterized by globalization and industrialization, and are faced with changing living environments and cultural values (Xiao, 2014). In this "unsettled" time (Swidler, 1986), they are situated in extremely complicated temporal and relational settings with great opportunities for developing various paths of action. Adopting the temporal approach to examine their shifting agentic orientations and strategies could allow for the capture of the complexity regarding their experiences of living with parents' migration and help reveal the dynamic process through which they practice agency in order to deal with these evolving contexts.

3.2. Structure

In the social sciences, the tradition which sees structure as primary, rigid and immutable existence that can give deterministic explanations to social life has been very influential, as illustrated in theories such as structural-functionalism and structural-Marxism (Sewell, 1992). However, to restore human agency and fully explore the efficacy of human action, the notion of structure needs to be conceptualized in a fluid and dynamic way. Many scholars have contributed to this by reconceptualising it as a dynamic and evolving process of social interaction, wherein structure and practice are mutually shaped (Archer, 2003; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). Among them, Giddens (1979; 1984) has made sustained effort in developing the notion

of the duality of structure and hence deeply shaped much theoretical thinking and empirical research in the social sciences in recent decades. His structuration theory posits structures as dual in that they are simultaneously the medium and the outcome of practices: structures constitute agency on the one hand, while agency reproduces and reconfigures structures, on the other (Giddens, 1984). From this perspective, structures are not simply constraining human agency, but also providing resources and opportunities for human action (Giddens, 1984). Moreover, the notion of "structuration" indicates that structure should not be defined as a fixed state, but rather, as an interactive process.

Although the concept of the duality of structure provides an illuminating contribution that allows for the reconfiguration of the notions of structure and agency, the central term structure remains highly underspecified in most social theorists' work (Sewell, 1992). Giddens (1984, p. 377) has given this a fuller explanation by defining it as "rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and as instantiated in action". He further contended that rules are "generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social life" (Giddens, 1984, p. 21) and resources are "the media whereby transformative capacity is employed as power in the routine of social interaction" (Giddens, 1979, p. 92) and can be classified into authoritative and allocative forms. Some critics, however, claim that Giddens's notion of structure is logically inconsistent for he defined it as a virtual existence not related to specific time and space, but resources as one of its parts can hardly be regarded as virtual: not only are material resources bonded with particular spaces and times, even human resources like knowledge and emotional commitments are features actualized in people in specific spaces and at certain times (Bryant & Jary, 1991; Held & Thompson, 1989; Sewell, 1992). Moreover, by using the term rules, Giddens makes it difficult to distinguish the actual "formally stated prescriptions" from the virtual "informal and not always conscious schemas, metaphors, or assumptions" (Sewell, 1992, p. 8) that he mentions.

In response to these challenges that Giddens' work is faced with, making a distinction between culture (virtual existence not bonded with specific practice and location) and structure (actual existence in real time and space) is a plausible solution. Sewell (1992) has proceeded in this direction by proposing there is a division between cultural

schemas and actual resources, with a mutually sustaining relationship between the two: schemas are to be validated by resources for enduring existence, and resources need schemas to inform their use and social value. This scholar reformulated Giddens' definition of resources as "anything that can serve as a source of power in social interaction" and divided it into human and nonhuman resources (Sewell, 1992, p. 9). Likewise, Archer (1996) argued that structure and culture have their own autonomy and thus need to be disentangled. She went on to develop the concept of the internal conversation to mediate between structure and agency, and introduced a temporal dimension to explain how pre-existing structures could be transformed or reproduced (Archer, 2003). Sewell and Archer's work has further clarified the domain of structure and provided a less ambiguous guide for understanding this central concept. However, the notions of structure proposed by these social theorists are still too obscure and abstract to be applied in this empirical study of left-behind children. Thus, it is necessary to resort to the discussions about structure in extant children and childhood studies, so as to give empirical elaboration and clarification to this concept, taking into consideration the specific characteristics of children's structural contexts.

Under the social structural child approach, childhood itself is regarded as a particular structural category featuring in the social structure of all societies, with it being exposed to the same social forces as adulthood (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 2006). There are countless varieties of childhood and these are not equal across different groups because differences in social, economic, and political dimensions result in distinctions among different groups of children (Lareau, 2003; Oldman, 1994; Qvortrup, 2005). Research in this vein has tended to focus on examining the impact of various social forces on children (Shanahan, 2007), such as: the decline in family size, the rise in mothers' labour force participation, the increase in mother-headed families, issues of race and ethnicity, social welfare policy, immigration and social inequality (Engelbert, 1994; Hengst, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Makrinioti, 1994). Some researchers have also addressed the influences of social forces in light of broad complex processes, including: globalization, industrialization, individualisation, democratisation, commercialization, feminization and institutionalization (Jamieson & Milne, 2012; Nasman, 1994). The social structural approach also calls attention to the fact that although different generations may be exposed to similar economic, technological and social changes, children and adults experience or deal with the impact of these changes in different

ways. This is because the unequal distribution of power and resources influences their abilities to respond to challenges (Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009).

Another line of research regarding children and childhood emphasizes children's generational position in society, and argues that inter-generation and intra-generation relationships are critical to understanding the constraints and opportunities for children to exercise agency (Alanen, 1994; James, 2012; Jamieson & Milne, 2012; Mayall, 2012; Oldman, 1994). This approach regards childhood as a relational status constructed against the term of adulthood (Shanahan, 2007) and recommends that there is a focus on relational processes and the practice of intimacy (Jamesion & Milne, 2012; Mayall, 2012). Several theoretical constructs have been formulated to describe adult-child relationships in terms of the processes that children practise agency to produce and reproduce their relations with adults. Punch (2002, p. 132) raised the notion of "negotiated interdependence" to denote the process through which children "act within and between" the constraints in family relationships. Further, Alanen (2001, pp. 20-21) constructed "generationing" to reveal the complex "social processes through which people become (are constructed as) 'children' while other people become (are constructed as) 'adults'". As far as intra-generation relationships are concerned, the tendency is to stress the point that children not only participate in adult society, but also create their own worlds through communal sharing and interaction with their peer groups and make attempts to control their lives (Corsaro, 1985). With respect to this, children's identity, friendship, language, power, and resistance strategies are constructed through their connections with peers (Corsaro, 1985; Kyratzis, 2004). Thus the children's social world is a real place with real meanings, wherein their lives are structured through a structure that is different from that of adults (Holloway & Valentine, 2000).

Taking into consideration the discussions presented above, the notion of structure in this research is understood as a temporally evolving process of social interaction that shapes and is shaped by agency. Moreover, informed by extant children and childhood studies, analytically it is disaggregated to two levels: (1) the broad social, economic, and political processes; and (2) the relational processes developing within inter-generational and intra-generational networks. This construct aims to move beyond the dualism of structure and agency so as to explore children's agency as an unfolding process interacting with structure.

As reviewed in the last chapter, most extant studies on left-behind children in China have adopted a deterministic approach to structure and analysed it in terms of static structural factors. In these works, the matter of how left-behind children interact with structure is not well established and children's transforming capacities have not been sufficiently explored. Adopting a dynamic construct of structure could elaborate upon the mutual constituting process of how children negotiate with resources as well as how these resources shape children's choice and action.

3.3. Culture

The issue of culture and agency has been subsumed under the issue of structure and agency for a long time in the sociological tradition (Giddens, 1979; 1984; Sewell, 1992). However, making no distinction between culture and structure could result in logical deficiencies and analytical ambiguity, as discussed in the last section. Moreover, this could also lead to a tendency to underestimate the significance of culture in regarding it as soft and as secondary to hard structure, and thus, ignore the mutual sustaining relationship between cultural schema and structural resources (Sewell, 1992). Therefore, to use culture as a separate concept from structure could be helpful for exploring the dynamic process of how this virtual existence shapes and is shaped by structure and agency.

In much of modern social theory and research, culture tends to be regarded as stable and consistent (Lewis, 1966; Parsons, 1951). However, some social theorists have challenged this conceptualization as misleading for understanding differences among cultures and contradictions within them. These scholars advise that it is necessary to discuss how culture can be transformed by agency (Archer, 1996; 2003; Swidler, 1986). In particular, Swidler (1986) developed the conceptualization of culture as a tool kit, suggesting that this approach could be seen as a practical analytical framework for reorienting cultural research so as to explore the interactions between culture, agency and structure.

Swidler (1986) developed her theory from Geertz's work, which defined culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate,

perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Building upon this, Swidler (1986) posited culture as a tool kit of different, and often opposing symbols, worldviews and habits from which people can choose and recompose their tools in order to develop various strategies of action to address different problems. This conceptualization frees actors from deterministic thinking that treats culture as values that can define the ends of human actions (Lewis, 1966; Parsons, 1951). This approach may provide a new orientation for research on culture and action, for it can facilitate exploration of how actions are enabled as well as constrained by culture, and how human agency can influence culture in return. Moreover, by examining cultural changes in periods of social transformation, Swidler (1986) argued that in such unsettled times, the influences of culture would be particularly evident, because such unsettledness produces people's explicit consideration of their position and the appropriate cultural tools for different exigencies. She also considered whether a new cultural model emerging during social change would thrive or perish and concluded that this outcome is subject to the structural resources and the strategies of action that people choose to adopt. This echoes Sewell's (1992) argument that cultural schema must be validated by resources for its prolonged existence.

In children and childhood studies, it has been postulated that children's agency should be understood within their cultural contexts (James, 2010; Punch & Tisdall, 2012; Shanahan, 2007), because children, family and intergenerational relationships can be defined differently across cultures (James, 2007; Punch & Tisdall, 2012), and significantly, the children are also making their own culture through their own creative ways of participation and appropriation (Corsaro, 1985). Using a tool kit approach to understand culture can assist in capturing such complexities in children's cultural contexts. As this current study is conducted in contemporary China, a society experiencing great social transition, the tool kit approach would appear to be potentially very helpful for addressing on-going cultural traditions and any changes that have been occurring.

It has been argued that compared with western individualism, Chinese society is relation-oriented or situation-oriented and considerable weight is placed on social interdependence, social harmoniousness, relationship-centreness, and maintaining an interpersonal equilibrium (Hsu, 1948; Lam, 1997; Yang, 1981). This relationalism is a central value that shapes Chinese people's preferences, choices, actions and meaning

construction (Hwang, 2000; Tseng, 1973; Yang, 1981). Against this backdrop, children's development can be understood as the "self-in-relational network" referring to a process of connecting and relating, which is quite different from the western notion of developing the autonomous self (Lam, 1997). Such cultural understanding has shaped the notions of children, family and parent-child relationship in China and thus could influence children's views of life and choices as well as their actions (Shek, 2004; Tseng, 1973; Yip, 1998).

Filial piety (*xiao*) is the core value underpinning Chinese family life and stresses harmonious intergenerational relationships within families (Yeh, Yi, Tsao, & Wan, 2013). It provides a set of rules to guide parent-child interaction in terms of mutual obligation, methods for parenting and manners of communication and social interaction (Kim, 2006). That is, parents are obliged to nurture and instruct children, whilst the children are expected to respect their parents, show obedience to them, take care of them when they are old and make efforts to honour the family (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009; Ho, 1987; Wang & Dai, 2009). Such values enforce the image of authoritative parents along with that of the dutiful and obedient child (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009; Ho, 1981). Accordingly, *"guan"* is the central notion for traditional Chinese parenting practice, which literarily means to control or govern but also implies a degree of involvement, love, care and concern (Chao, 1983). It is assumed that this type of parental control is favourable rather than damaging to children's development and should be understood by the children as a natural extension of high parental expectations (Chao & Sue, 1996). If a Chinese parent were not to practise *guan* with the child, he or she would be regarded as uncaring, irresponsible and negligent (M. Y. Wu, 2013). Yet, the practice of *guan* also entails a traditional gender division of labour, for the father is expected to be a psychologically distant figure to children and behave in a more controlling and awe-inspiring way (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009; Ho, 1996), whilst mothers should assume the warm, tender and nurturing role to provide for the child's physical well-being, offer emotional support and attend to his/her everyday needs (Wu & Tseng, 1985).

Another prominent value in Chinese culture is a belief in the importance of education. This is deeply rooted in the Chinese historical tradition that started over 2,000 years ago in order to select candidates as government officials through academic examinations (Yan, 1991). Since that time, education has become gradually accepted as the best means to promote a family's social status, wealth, and reputation, with being educated

itself even gradually becoming viewed as an honour and a symbol of the improved status of the family (Kipnis, 2009; Lum & Char, 1985). Given this tradition, children's success in academic performance brings about joy and "*mian zi*" (face) to their parents and the whole family. Thus Chinese parents attach great significance to academic achievement, regarding children's schooling as their primary responsibility (Hwang, 2004). Parents' high expectations and the strict discipline they exert regarding children's educational achievement have become commonplace and culturally encouraged practices (M. Y. Wu, 2013).

China has undergone major changes concerning family structure, parenting ideologies and childrearing values during the course of the last three decades owing to drastic social transformation, western influences and the one-child family policy (Chen, 2000; Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989; Wang, Leichtman, & White, 1998). With respect to this, it has been reported that some contemporary Chinese parents exhibit modifications towards traditional culture that emphasize behavioural discipline and emotional restraint (Tobin et al., 1989), and have come to express more concerns about children's emotional needs, autonomy, personal efficacy and self-expression (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002; Wang, 2013). There are also scholars who contend that in today's China, children's economic value has been replaced by their emotional and psychological value, and that traditional ideas, which dictate that children should obey and not talk back, have gradually been replaced by a new tolerance of assertive children (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009; Ho, 1996; Jing, 2000; Zheng, Shi, & Tang, 2005). In general, these changes could bring about new family dynamics whereby children have increased power to influence their family life (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009). Nonetheless, Hong (2013) pointed out that it is important to bear in mind that although childrearing values are changing, families in different social classes adopt various paces towards this, and, in particular, lower class and rural families might be more likely to maintain their traditional values. Therefore, culture should not be examined as a fixed concept, but as a dynamic and fluid process of interaction with structure and agency.

3.4. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Based on the above discussions, an integrated framework is tailored to this research. James (2010, p. 492) described the nature of a framework in the field of childhood

studies by using the metaphor of weaving fabric:

> "I want to use the analogy of weaving in order to suggest a way in which the different threads that separately contribute to what we refer to as childhood studies can be woven together and integrated into a single piece of cloth, the basic dimensions of which are bounded by recognition of children…therefore enable us to focus on, analyse, and understand, both the commonalities and the diversities around which childhood proliferate."

To capture the cloth and its constituent threads, empirical studies need to be conducted that bridge the gap between different traditions and achieve theoretical integration (Shanahan, 2007). Thus, this research adopts this orientation so as to integrate agency, structure and culture.

The literature review has revealed that existing research on left behind children has perceived structure and culture as external structuring properties, rather than constituting elements in a dynamic process, and therefore researchers have failed to explain effectively the interrelationships among structure, culture and agency. To facilitate understanding of left-behind children's experiences in a dynamic, culturally and contextually specific way, the framework used for this study links structure, culture and agency together: on the one hand, structure and culture can shape children's agency through conditioning resources and constraints; on the other, children can reproduce and reconfigure structure and culture by exercising agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). Moreover, the relationship between structure and culture is also mutually sustaining (Sewell, 1992; Swidler, 1986).

Explicating the interaction among structure, culture, and agency contributes to explaining the dynamic process of living with parents' migration. As shown in figure 1, a framework is proposed to shed light on how left-behind children experience parents' migration and exercise agency to negotiate with structural and cultural contexts. Yet, it should be emphasized that the three concepts presented here are regarded as "sensitizing concepts", which "gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Therefore, although this framework orients the research process, it is open to revision and reconstruction.

Based on this framework, the following research questions are formulated:

1. How do left behind children experience their life with parents' migration?

2. How do children practice agency to interact with structure and culture when living with parents' migration?

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework
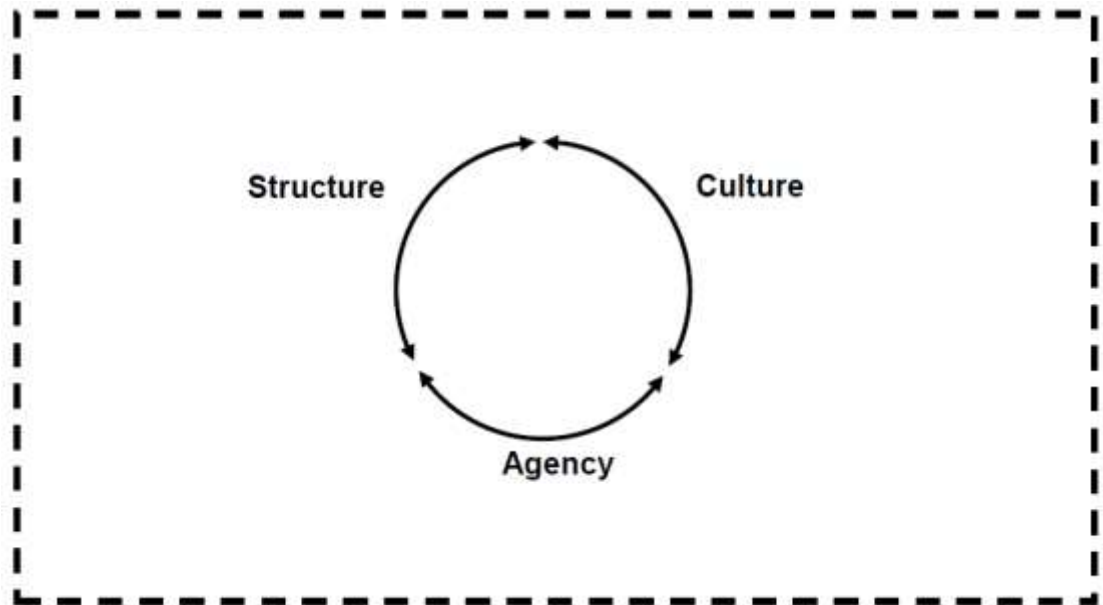
As indicated in these questions, the children's perspective is the focal concern of this study, and the intention is to collect research data primarily through in-depth interviews with children. Additional information from caregivers, teachers and peers will be collected so as to locate children's experiences in their local contexts.

Chapter IV Research Methodology

As elaborated on in the previous chapters, the aim in this study is to explore how left-behind children experience their life with their parents' migration and how they exercise agency to deal with this. Given these purposes, a qualitative approach is employed to address the research questions. In this chapter, details of the research process are provided in terms of the research site, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. In addition, ethical concerns are addressed in the last section, with an extra emphasis being placed on the special considerations that need to be taken into account when conducting research with children.

4.1. Research Design

This research follows the epistemological stance of interpretivism, which emphasizes the meaning people ascribe to their experiences and actions (Bryman, 2008). In contrast with positivism, whose proponents insist on the objective nature of research, interpretivism advocates that social scientists should attain empathetic understanding of the interpretations of research participants (Bryman, 2008), and this is in line with the focus on children's perspective in this study. Moreover, the researcher is aware that the presentation of data also involves interpretation of the children's narratives, which is inevitably influenced by some normative presumptions and the choice of conceptual framework (Bryman, 2008; Butler & Pugh 2003), even though efforts have been made to stay close to children's points of view as much as possible.

The choice of research methodology is shaped by the research questions and the contexts of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As the research questions raised for this study focus on the experience and agency of left-behind children, my stress is placed upon their subjective interpretation and the unfolding process, wherein they exercise agency to interact with their relational contexts and the broader political, social, and cultural environment. These constitute the reasons underpinning the justification for espousing a qualitative approach, which, it has been argued, offers the following: the highlighting of participants' experiences, perspectives and histories; a focus on dynamic social and cultural environments in which the participants live; and a clear emphasis on the processual as opposed to static conceptions of the world (Creswell,

2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Padgett, 2008).

To gather detailed adequate information, a multi-method approach is employed for data collection, including in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, participant observation, and documentary records. Although the focal research participants are left-behind children, other stakeholders, such as parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers are accessed as sources so as to provide contextual information. This research design is tailored to address the research questions raised in chapter three, that is, (1) how do left-behind children experience their life with their parents' migration; and (2) how do children practice their agency to interact with the structure and culture when living with their parents' migration?

The focal points of these two research questions rest on developing a holistic understanding of children's experiences of being left behind and an in-depth explanation of the dynamics of their experiences and exercise of agency. To assure breadth of understanding, a maximum variation principle is adopted for the participants' selection, so as to reveal the different perspectives of left-behind children who have between them a variety of features, whilst to pursue depth of explanation, multiple interviews are conducted with every participant to allow for further exploration of the themes emerging from previous interviews (Creswell, 2005; Fetterman, 1998).

4.2. The Research Process

4.2.1. Research site and contexts

The research questions shape the selection of the research site and the population for study (Fetterman, 1998). However, the researcher must note the limitations of her study from the outset and, in this instance it should be acknowledged that left-behind children in rural China are a heterogeneous group in terms of geographical, social, and cultural differences (Duan & Yang, 2008). Thus, this study can only touch upon a specific part of this huge target population. Furthermore, the selection of the research site largely depends on the possibility for access and subsequently, success in building a rapport with potential participants. A middle school in the rural Yiyang City of Hunan Province was chosen for this research and the justification for this selection is as follows. First, Hunan is one of the main provinces for sending out migrants, and thus, hosts large

numbers of children left behind by rural migrant workers. In 2010, there were over 10 million migrant workers out of the total population of 70 million in Hunan, among these 68.9% have their job outside Hunan province and 53.9% are based in Guangdong (Hunan Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The number of left-behind children was estimated to be approximately 4.35 million, making 7.13% of the national gross number of this population group (Duan et al., 2013). Second, Yiyang is my hometown and so my personal network facilitated entry to the field. Moreover, my knowledge of the local dialect meant there could be effective interaction with local residents, which is crucial for understanding the local contexts. Third, a school was deemed an ideal place for a researcher to get access to a wide range of children and learn about their daily routines and various situations. It could also serve as a base for outreach to the nearby communities. However, despite there being many advantages emerging from my position as a native to the region, there are the potential risks of insider bias that should be acknowledged. This issue was addressed through constant self-examination, reflection, and detachment as discussed later in this chapter (Van Heugten, 2004).

The community and the school

The school I was based in is located in *Fugui Zhen* (note: *Zhen* is a bureaucratic level in China that governs multiple villages), situated 20 miles from the city of Yiyang, and 40 miles from Changcha, the capital of Hunan Province. It is convenient for residents in *Fugui* to travel to neighbouring Guangdong Province, the most popular destination of migration by Hunan people, either by train (about five hours) or coach (about eight to 10 hours of travel).

Fugui has a geographical area of 96 square kilometres, and consists of 21 villages and a community centre. It is mainly an agricultural society, with only a small industrial sector that consists of 10 private factories. According to local governmental officials, in 2010 the factories had around 200 workers, and the annual value of production per unit ranged from one hundred thousand to three million RMB (1 RMB approximately equals 0.1 Pound). In the centre of *Fugui Zhen*, there is a shopping street with several shops, restaurants, mahjong rooms, and a *wangba* (the internet cafe equivalent in China). In addition, each village has one or two grocery shops with most of the outlets and restaurants being family owned and run. In general, the community itself can provide very few non-agricultural jobs, and so it is understandable that many villagers have to

migrate out for work in order to make money to support their families.

In 2010 *Fugui* had a total population of 52,000, and from this over 10,000 individuals migrated out for work, which is nearly one out of five people, indicating that a large number of residents depend on migration for their economic resources. According to the data provided by local governmental officials, in 2010 the annual net income per capita of *Fugui* was 5,945 RMB, which was slightly higher than the province average of 5,622 RMB and nearly the same as national average of 5,919 RMB. Furthermore, they estimated that migrant workers' earnings contributed more than 50% of the average income level in *Fugui*. There are no clear data regarding the salary of migrant workers in *Fugui*, but the Hunan Bureau of Statistics provides relevant information at the provincial level. These statistics show that, in 2010, the monthly salary of a migrant worker was 1,304 RMB, with 50% of migrant workers' salaries being higher than 1,200 RMB. Just 3.2% of them had a salary between 2,400 and 3,400 RMB, while only 2% had a salary that was in excess of 3,000 RMB per month (Hunan Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The migrant workers from *Fugui* were employed mainly in manufacturing, construction, and low status service sectors. This reflected a similar pattern found across the whole province, with 52.8% of migrants working in manufacturing, 13.7% in construction, and 11.9% in service sectors (Hunan Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

The fieldwork site, Yucai Middle School, is the only junior secondary school in *Fugui*. And two separate junior secondary schools were merged to form it in 2006. The main reasons for the merger were: first, the numbers of students were declining due to the falling birth rates and out migration of children. With regards to the latter point, some children migrated with their parents to study in their town of work, and others were being sent to schools in the city of Yiyang for a better education once their family's economic situation began to improve. Second, the Chinese central government proposed that the merger of schools could enhance the quality of education provided in rural areas by concentrating resources and qualified teaching staff within larger institutions.

The school has one four storey building for teaching, one newly built five storey building for student accommodation, one big assembly hall, two small sports grounds, and several old brick buildings used to accommodate the library, administrative office and staff residency. It had 81 teachers and six janitors, and 70% of the teachers had

received university or college education in 2010. There were in total 1,038 students, among them 420 were boarding in the school. The latter group included all the Grade 9 students, and a few left-behind children with both parents' migrating out as well as a few students whose homes are very distant from the school. The school hosts Grades 7, 8, and 9, with six classes in each grade and about 60 students in each class. There is a head teacher called "*ban zhuren*" in every class who is tasked with the discipline, care and supervision of the students besides his/her regular teaching duties.

The curriculum is designed by the Education Department of the province and includes Chinese, maths, English, chemistry, physics, politics, history, biology, geography, sports, and music. Students sit graduation examinations in Grades 8 (for biology and geography) and 9 (for the remaining subjects), and their scores determine whether they can be admitted to a key or an ordinary high school. According to the headmaster, more than 80% of the students enter high school, which is a very high proportion for rural communities. Regarding the rest, most of them attend a vocational high school and only a few return home for employment in agricultural work or migrate out to look for work.

To keep up their good reputation, the Yucai Middle School practices a very strict and intensive teaching style. The tight daily schedule (see figure 4) governs the school day, and even the after school hours for boarding students. In particular, all the Grade 9 students are required to board in the school so as to have concentrated time to prepare for their graduation examinations. This is the reason why I did not attempt to include Grade 9 students in my study cohort for the school staff would regard their participation as a significant distraction. Moreover, all courses except for sports and music are tested twice a term, in the mid and end of term examinations. The students' results are ranked and posted on a public noticeboard, with the best performing at the top and the worst at the bottom. As part of his/her duties the *ban zhuren* informs the parents of these examination results and asks them to give further encouragement as well as to put pressure on their children.

Figure 4. The daily schedule of Yucai Middle School

| Get up | 06:00 |
| Morning sports exercise | 06:20——06:30 |

Self-study session		06:40——07:30
Breakfast		07:30——07:55
Morning reading		08:00——08:30
First lesson		08:40——09:25
Second lesson		09:35——10:20
Sports exercise		10:25——10:35
Third lesson		10:45——11:30
Eye exercise		11:40——11:45
Fourth lesson		11:45——12:30
Lunch		12:30——13:10
Fifth lesson		13:15——14:00
Sixth lesson		14:10——14:55
Seventh lesson		15:05——15:50
Self-study session		16:00——16:40
End of school day		16:40
Super		17:00——18:05
Evening self-study session	First session	18:10——19:00
	Second session	19:10——20:00
	Third session	20:10——21:00
Wash time		21:00——21:25
Sleep		21:30

Regarding the left-behind children, the headmaster told me before my fieldwork commenced that they made up more than 30% of the students. However, according to a file I unearthed in the school administrative system, only 141 out of 1,038 were reported to the Municipal Bureau of Education in Yiyang as being left-behind children. To follow this up, I discussed with every *ban zhuren* in Grades 7 and 8 about the general situation of left-behind children, and they told me there were about 40% to 50% of their students had one or both parents migrating out. This confirmed for me that the official governmental statistics were not very accurate with respect to recording this phenomenon. Moreover, I read school documents that showed that in this particular school a system has been built up that assigns *ban zhuren* to act as substitute parents for left-behind children in the classes for which they are responsible. When I queried this matter, the school office administrator told me that this was just a paper exercise that had been carried out to deal with a task that had been sent down from above, that is, it was a directive from various government offices, including the Municipal Bureau of Education. In fact, it emerged that no extra resources were allocated to the school for the implementation of the initiative and the teachers who had already complained of

being overburdened with on average 60 students in one class had not taken up this additional duty seriously.

4.2.2. Access, entry and preparation

I began to search for a potential school from early June 2010. I mobilized my network in my hometown to find a suitable one that had a relatively high proportion of left-behind children, which was willing to host me and was likely to be cooperative and supportive regarding my research. At the end of August, I chose the Yucai Middle School as the best fit.

I was introduced to the school headmaster by one of my relatives. The school head offered me a separate office and allowed me to work as an independent researcher from the middle of September onwards. As a first step, I explained my research to all the school administrators and *ban zhuren* in their weekly meetings and asked for their support. Then, I made frequent visits to their offices and held a series of interviews with them. Through these initial contacts, I collected some background information about the school, the classes and students, and built up relationships with the teachers. During this time, I asked the headmaster for his approval to read many school documents and I obtained official files about the operation of the school and the situation of left-behind children. I also interviewed each of the 12 *ban zhuren* about the general characteristics of the students (esp. left-behind children) in the class and the general features of their families.

For the next step, I asked one *ban zhuren* of Grade 7 and one of Grade 8 to introduce me to two left-behind children: one child with both parents migrating and one with only the father migrating. I briefed my research to them separately during the class break, and gained their consent to further discuss it after school in my office. Then, in the meetings after school, I explained my research to them in detail and gained their signed informed consent. After that, I interviewed them in the time they suggested. However, it turned out that I was a little bit rushed in the way I went about this. Although I behaved in a very friendly manner, serving them candies and hot drinks, and the children told me they were willing to help, I sensed they still were quite reserved when talking with me. They only responded with a few words to my questions and acted as if I was an authoritative teacher.

To address this I adjusted my recruitment process and decided to start again using from the outset a warm up strategy to create a supportive environment that made the students feel more involved in my research. With the *ban zhurens'* permission, I went to every class to introduce myself to all the students, telling them who I was, what I was doing, how I was doing my research, what support I would need from them, and discussed with them what I could possibly do for them. I emphasized my role as a PhD student who needed to prepare for my exams for graduation by doing this research. In so doing, I especially highlighted my student status, pointing out that I was, in some ways equal to them, and asked them to call me Lina rather than *laoshi* (the respectful term for teacher). This proved to be very helpful in building an equal relationship between us and in further meetings, helped the children to express their ideas, concerns, and feelings in a much more relax way.

After this stage of introducing myself, I started to visit the classrooms during the class breaks, mingling with the students to find out some ideas about their life in the school. At the same time, I used every chance to provide further explanations to them what research is, and clarified that I was not a teacher. I also invited them to have a look at my office at lunch time. When some students did come, I chatted with them about the routines of school life, and offered them the opportunity to wash their lunch boxes using the tap water in my office (to avoid competing with the crowds in the canteen). When they left, I could feel they sensed I was not like their teacher, but still appeared curious about what a researcher would do in their school. Thereafter, I initiated some preliminary focus groups and invited a few children, who were chosen from those who had volunteered to participate through a "lucky draw" (as suggested by the children themselves), to come my office and talk together about their daily life and their feelings about it. The children felt more at ease, were more willing to talk when in a group and slowly began to understand what I meant by the term research. When they went back to their class, they would often tell their classmates how interesting the talk had been and how many novel things they had seen or tasted in my office. In addition, when a few days had passed after the focus group event, the children realized that I had not disclosed anything they had said to any of the teachers. An outcome of this was that they felt safe to share their thoughts and experiences with me. Through this process, I not only built up a trusting relationship with children, but also learned a lot about their lives and, for myself, became better prepared for the in-depth interviewing.

4.2.3. Sampling

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2005) is employed in this study to select left-behind children. That is, children with different characteristics were chosen to increase the possibility of disclosing diverse perspectives regarding the research questions. At the beginning of the fieldwork, age, gender, personal character, family's economic status, living arrangements, years spent being left behind, and academic/behavioural performance were the criteria for case selection, as informed by the reviewed literature. As the field work progressed, several other criteria were added in light of my growing knowledge about the children's situations, such as their parents' occupation, whether they had experience of a returned parent, and time spent in their parents' work town. Following the advice given to me by my internal examiners during the transfer viva for this study, one boy who had left school was also invited to participate in this research in order to capture the voices of this very small minority group of children. Regarding this, according to the school administrators, only five students quit school in last year. By the end of the fieldwork, in total, 16 children had been recruited as the focal research participants. They were aged 11 to 14 years, nine of them had both parents who were undertaking migration, six with only the father and one with the mother. A detailed profile of each of these participants is enclosed in Appendix 1.

4.2.4. Data collection

In this study, the in-depth interview was the main research method deployed to explore left-behind children's experiences. In addition, focus groups, participant observation, and documents were used to gather supplementary data about these children's living, study and local sociocultural contexts.

At least two in-depth interviews were conducted with every selected participant, with the first one focusing on their accounts of their current life and their feelings about parents' migration and the second, following up the topics that had emerged previously so as to explore their reflections, actions and aspirations regarding these. As illustrated in the question list (Appendix 2), the interview tool was designed as semi-structured in format, with every question being open-ended to leave space for the participants' free expression. Due to the tight schedule in the school, one complete interview was often divided into two or three short sessions (lasting 15 to 30 minutes each). Where the

children agreed with my suggestion for a home visit, I would try to arrange one interview in the home setting, in case the school environment made them nervous or resulted in them having a tendency to over emphasize the issues relating to school at the expense of what happened outside. With the consent of children, I also interviewed two temporarily returned migrant parents, three left-behind mothers and five substitute caregivers, on a convenience basis during the home visits, so as to obtain more information about the children's family circumstances.

As mentioned above, the focus group interviews were conducted as a warm up, serving as a preparatory strategy. Some were initiated by the researcher (27 in total), with five to seven children chosen from one class, attending on a voluntary basis, while others were formed by the children themselves (six interviews in total), for instance a group of friends would come to my office and ask me to "do research" with them. The round of focus groups helped me to gain a clear understand regarding the general life of the children living in that specific rural area, build rapport with them and screen for potential focal cases.

Scholars advise that through participant observation a researcher can "combine participation in the lives of people under study with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data" (Fetterman, 1998, pp. 34-35). With permission of the teachers, during every day that I spent in the school I would visit their classrooms during the break and join students' activities in sports classes. I also offered my office as a place for children to relax after school, chatting with them and providing books, magazines and music for their entertainment, depending on what they had raised was of interest to them during our introductory meeting. The home visits during weekends provided another opportunity for me to observe their living environment closely. In general, through these occasions of participant observation, I gained further knowledge about the social contexts of the children's lives, such as the care arrangements, material conditions, everyday activities, routine events and interpersonal interactions. As a record of my activities a brief field note was written down every day, either right after the observation, or when I returned home.

With the permission of the school administrators, pertinent school documents were reviewed and copied to provide basic information about the operation of the school and

the general situation of the students. These papers included, but were not limited to school policies and regulations, course arrangements for every class, the time schedule for students, records of major school events, name lists of students (with basic background information), records of students' examination results, awards and punishments for the past two years, and statistics regarding data on left-behind children in the school. Local government officials also provided relevant documents about the socioeconomic environment of *Fugui Zhen* and basic statistics on migration.

4.2.5. Data analysis

All in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed with these transcripts serving as the main source of data for analysis. The scripts used were kept in Chinese, because it was felt that translation to English would result in the loss of original subtle meanings, whereas the original Chinese texts would stay close to the focal contexts. The excerpts quoted in this thesis have been translated into English. Considerable effort has been made to retain the original meanings, but it has to be admitted that the genre of children's talk and the specific vocabularies they used in their local contexts are not easily transmitted in translation.

My data analysis is mainly guided by the research questions and the three core concepts in the theoretical framework, namely structure, culture and agency (Yin, 2009). The analysis process follows the three core elements of qualitative research analysis: coding the data, making categorical aggregation, and displaying and comparing (Madison, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994).

Coding is both conceptually and data driven (Gibbs, 2002). First, every participant's transcripts were read several times and coded. Initially, the coding was highly descriptive using their original words. It focused on the children's expressions of their experiences living with their parents' migration, their exercising of agency and their cultural and structural contexts. The emerging themes indicated that the children shared inconsistent feelings about parents' migration. Then I explored the relationships among these themes, and three pairs of interwoven aggregated themes / categories were identified, namely, money and love, lonely and free, here and there. Based on these emergent themes, eventually the meta-theme ambivalence was constructed to capture the children's experiences.

Further, relationships between the different themes under each category (including the conceptual categories of structure, culture and agency) were examined by going back to revisit each child's narratives. A summary card was created for every participating child, with the themes outlined under each category and linking arrows drawn between them to denote any connections. Then, commonalities and differences across the cases were examined as well as the links among the children's different experiences, strategies of action, and structural and cultural contexts were established for presentation in the three findings chapters. Finally, through a dialogical process between the research findings and the theoretical understanding of the concepts, an integrated framework was proposed and thus, a theoretical contribution was made to the study of left-behind children.

4.3. Ethical Issues

Informed by the literature that stresses the special ethical considerations of conducting research with children (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2003; Boyden & Ennew, 1997), this researcher was determined to design her study in a child friendly way that respected their choices, encouraged their participation and protected them from harm. Consequently, a series of strategies was employed to address ethical concerns pertaining to research with children, besides the general procedures applying to the adults, such as teachers and caregivers, who participated in the study. These general strategies included the verbal introduction of the nature of the research project and the identity of the researcher as a PhD student from the University of Bath as well as an informed consent letter (Appendix 3) in which the research purpose and method, the protection of privacy, and their rights to decline participation were detailed.

As described in the above, a warm up strategy was adopted to help the children better understand the research, be more willing to participate, and feel more at ease when talking with me. By emphasizing our shared status of being students, the distance between the researcher and the children was, to some extent, bridged, and hence, an equal dialogue was made possible. Moreover, the preliminary focus group work and engagement with the children in their leisure time activities also enhanced our mutual understanding and level of trust. These all allowed me to learn about their language and preferences that proved to be helpful for our communication.

The children's informed consent letter (Appendix 4) was specifically designed, being written in a language they could easily understand, printed in a cartoon font they liked with the addition of different colours to highlight key words. It told the participants that involvement in this research project was confidential, voluntary and assured them that they could: decide the time and location of the interview; invite anyone they liked to join the interview; choose whether to have the interview recorded or not; give their approval (or not) to the researcher holding an interview with their parents, caregivers or significant others; contact the researcher after being interviewed by telephone, messenger or email; and, withdraw from the project at any time without this having any impact or implication for them in any aspect of their home or school life. Besides giving each individual the printed letter, the researcher read the whole of its contents to the children, answered any questions they raised, and then asked them to sign the paper if they agreed to participate. In carrying out all of these steps, the researcher aimed to make the children feel they were being respected and could gain a sense of control over the research process.

The researcher closely attended to the children's emotional state while interviewing them. When an individual appeared reluctant to answer a certain question, I did not push them but shifted to another topic. Moreover, on occasion the interviewing provoked some strong emotional reactions, such as when one girl cried heavily when telling me she was worried that mother and father would divorce. At this point, I terminated further questioning, gave time for her emotional expression, and asked if she wanted additional support, such as a telephone call, a talk to her teachers or friends, or needed to ask for a short absence from the school to have a period of rest in which to recover.

Moreover, the researcher made sure all information solicited from the participants was kept in strict confidence and treated anonymously with pseudonyms used in place of locations and names of the school, villages and the participants. The children and other research participants were informed of the strict confidential nature of this study and any exceptional circumstances under which this confidentiality could be broken, i.e. when the information provided implicates harm or a crime. The collected data was kept in secure locations, such as locked in the drawer or cabinet in my school office or stored at home with electronic formats being saved in files secured with an encryption key on my personal computer.

Chapter V Money and Love

Money and love have been focused upon as two core themes in the study of left-behind children. A large number of studies have identified the benefits of money on these children through researching remittance (Adams & Page, 2005; Antman, 2011; James, 1991; Koc & Onan, 2004; Liang, Li, & Ma, 2013; Lu, 2014; Russel, 1986; Stark & Lucas, 1988), while others have been more concerned about the emotional costs for them due to family separation and lack of parental love and care (Cortes, 2008; Jones et al., 2004; Pottinger, 2005; Ye et al., 2005; Yeoh & Lam, 2007). Yet, Olwig (1999) argued that money could act as a strong social presence of migrant parents for left-behind children and could be accepted by them as a currency of love and care. Parreñas (2005) also found that sending remittances could be an effective strategy to maintain the intimate relations between migrants and their left-behind families, even though it is commodified.

In this study, data analysis identifies that love and money are two intertwined themes emerging from left-behind children's narratives about their lives after their parents' migration. In the eyes of these children, money can be a currency to convey their parents' love and care for them, but it cannot be a substitute for their physical and emotional presence. That is, they enjoyed the benefits of economic improvement, but meanwhile longed for the warmth of their parents' care and company. Through investigating the interconnected themes of money and love, this chapter illustrates such mixed feelings towards parental migration among left-behind children, and explicates the process by which they exercise agency to negotiate their structural and cultural contexts to deal with their struggles.

5.1. Money Matters

According to my preliminary focus group and the interviews with left-behind children in the school, making money for their sake was commonly used by migrant parents as their explanation to their children for their working away from home. However, they did not just passively accept their parents' accounts. Through their own experiences and practices regarding various monetary issues like education, housing, or daily consumption, they came to understand how important money was, and hence, to

acknowledge the significance of their parents' migration as well as learn to appreciate the sacrifices they were making to provide for them.

5.1.1. Education

Education is one of the most important items of spending for a Chinese family (Brown, 2006), for it is not only regarded as the utmost means to achieve family future success, but being educated itself is an honour and a symbol of improved status of the family (Kipnis, 2009). This cultural value has deeply shaped Chinese people's living strategy in terms of how they distribute their resources and construct their choices (Chen & Uttal, 1988). It has been documented that making money for children's education is among the main reasons for Chinese villagers' choice of rural-urban migration (Li, 2001; Lu, 2012; Hu, 2012). In the school of my fieldwork, several left-behind children mentioned that their parents said they were migrating to earn money for their education and would never let them drop out of school just because of lack of money. Moreover, they asked the children to study hard to show that they deserved their sacrifice.

Rarely did any of the left-behind children in my study question their parents' using education as their justification for migration. For the resources that their parents put into their education had substantiated their claims, which led to their children accepting their accounts. In fact, all the left-behind children in my study seemed to have more or less experienced the improvement that their parents' migration brought to their education. When I asked the question "how does your parents' migration influence your life?", almost all would tell me stories about them being generous with purchasing educational resources after they had made money outside, such as bringing back tutorial and extra-curriculum books, *Fu Du Ji* (recorder with special functions designed for learning English), *Xue Xi Ji* (a handy micro-notebook pre-installed with tutorial books, videos and software), or sending them to crammer school or other talent training. The following narrative from Nini was a typical answer among the left-behind children I interviewed. She was a 13 year old girl in Grade 8 and her parents had been working away in Panyu, Guangdong Province, since she was only two or three years old. She was left with her paternal grandparents when they left and had stayed with them for almost seven years. Her mother came back with her new born brother when she was 10, but the father was still working outside in Zhejiang to provide for the family, with a monthly income of 4,000 to 5,000 *yuan* (or *kuai* in spoken language).

"When dad and mum just started their work in Guandong, our income was not very stable… We had not our own house… There was no telephone (at grandparents')… I had nothing more than the textbooks and pencils… Our situation got better after that… They began to give me spare money to buy extra-curriculum books and stationery… then we built up the new house… 3 or 4 years ago… Last year dad bought me an expensive *Xue Xi Ji* from Guangdong. It costs more than 1,000 *kuai*, nearly double the price of those sold in local stores, (those) that my classmates get from their parents… Now I am attending crammer school… (It costs) over 800 *kuai* a year."

Nini seemed to quite enjoy the increased educational spending and expressed how she was very proud of her parents' capability and generosity when she talked about the positive changes in her education. Moreover, her narrative shows that she had clearly identified the connection between these economic improvements and their migration, through recalling past experiences of poverty, and making comparison with present situation. Nini also knew the money that was earned from their migration embodied her parents' hardship and sacrifice, acting as a symbol for their concerns for her education and future.

"Dad said he will support me to study as much as I want, and he always bought me the best stationery… I know they (dad and mum) have very high expectation on me… They wish I could go to university and have a different life (from theirs)…I know dad and mum are sacrificing for me. It is hard for dad working outside alone…If it is not for me, dad and mum would not live separately."

In China, the culture of filial piety requires parents to try their best to educate and nurture their children, with the expectation that the children will make efforts to achieve success so as to honour the family and, in so doing, pay back the parents (Ho, 1996). By offering unconditional support for the daughter's education, Nini's parents were fulfilling their duty towards the younger generation and looking forward to her helping the family become upwardly mobile -- "go to university and have a different life", thus avoiding repetition of their hardship of working and living away from home. Nini very much identified with her parents and was trying hard to pursue their family goals. More than once in our interviews, she expressed her gratefulness towards them and her determination to achieve success through academic advancement; she studied very hard

and was often ranked 1st or 2nd in her class.

> "I am self-disciplined (with my study)… I will always finish my homework first, before I do other things… Now it's approaching the graduation exams of Biology and Geography, and I feel high pressure…I often study till over 10:00 pm… It's not just for the exam scores... (but) more for the future… to grow up to be a capable person, and pay back my parents."

Apparently, Nini did not like the status quo of her family with "dad working outside alone" and living separately from them. Nevertheless, she was still able to make the realistic judgment that her father's migration was a necessary sacrifice to secure her educational investment and enhance the family's prospects. As illustrated in the analysis above, this judgment involved a process in which Nini put a high level of consciousness to deliberating about the present dilemma between educational investment and father's presence, through reflecting on the past and projecting to future. This is in line with the practical evaluative element of agency in that it entails the capacity to make deliberate decisions in response to the problematic situation faced in the present (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Moreover, Nini's choice of studying hard demonstrated the projective element of her agency to transform the difficult situations of the family in the future. She knew that as a child she was not able to change fundamentally the status quo of her family at the present, but had to move beyond present contexts to negotiate a "hypothetical resolution" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 990), to "grow up to be a capable person", and thus, be able to help the whole family to step out of the current difficult situation in the future. The culture of educational importance together with parental expectation and generous investment had enabled Nini to choose education as her pathway to achieve success, yet it still required the exercise of agency for her to make efforts to fully engage in her studies and achieve high marks.

Among the left-behind children I interviewed, some of them were like Nini, oriented towards the future and dedicated to study hard to reciprocate their parents' sacrifice on their behalf, including Feifei, Qiqi and Ah Ke. Others, however, found it difficult to engage in academic issues, being more enthusiastic about pursuing present freedom and fun, such as Ah Shui, Ah Dong and Maomao. They rarely initiated the topic of parents' expectation and sacrifice, although none of them denied it when being asked. It could

have been that they felt embarrassed about their educational performance not meeting their parents' expectations. Yet, even among these children who were not performing well, I could see that they were anxious that there might not be enough money for their education, whilst they were being interviewed. They seemed to take for granted the necessity of education, thus showing they too were under the influence of the culture of educational importance. Nearly everyone of them told me they felt afraid there would be no money for education when I asked whether they wished their parents would come back or not. Consequently, it appeared to me that they were not so different from Nini in their practical evaluative orientation in that they also gave priority to education rather than family togetherness. The following discourse of Ah Shui well depicts how they came to such a decision after reflecting on the purpose of their parents' migration and considering the possible consequences of their returning home.

> "I miss them…but I don't want them back, not both of them. It would be better if one comes back, and one goes out and makes money… If both come back, there would be one more person in the household, but no one could make money and feed us, and pay my school fees."

Indeed, family separation is definitely not what these left-behind children wanted and yet, they did not want the family to stay together, being unable to afford their education, either. Living through the process of economic improvement, they had experienced and enjoyed the benefits that their parents' migration could bring to their education. Parental investment also made the cultural values of educational importance even more convincing to the children, while the culture of filial piety further enabled them to appreciate their parents' sacrifice for their education and hence, view educational money as a currency of their love. In sum, when responding to the dilemma concerning education and migration, these left-behind children generally assumed a practical evaluative orientation, whereby they chose to support its continuation. Some exercised their agency in a more projective way, which involved distancing themselves from current constraints with the desire to change the fate of their family in the future, and were consciously making efforts for this through studying hard.

5.1.2. Housing

Building a new house is a status symbol for a respectable household in rural China and hence, is a major life goal of adult villagers (Fan, 2008; Murphy, 2002). In the villages

of my fieldwork, a typical new house means a two to three-storey building covered by white ceramic tiles, which makes it stand out, even at a distance. When I visited the field, I could see nearly half of the houses are built in such a style and residents there told me that most of the new houses were built by migrant workers. When they have earned money outside and accumulated some savings, they will take the money back and start the construction. For them, building the new house is not just improving the living conditions of the family, but a way to demonstrate their success and establish their reputation in the community.

Growing up in the villages, the left-behind children had all witnessed the changes in housing, and understood the value of a new house in the neighbourhood. Every time I paid a first visit to a child's home, those with a new house would always invite me to see inside, room by room, and tell me the house-building story, while those without good housing would directly lead me to the best room in the house, and express their apologies for hosting me in such a shabby place.

Ah Zhao presented a typical story for children with good housing. He was a 13 year old boy of Grade 7, looked short and thin, and was not doing very well in his studies. He had lived with his maternal grandparents for six years during primary school before he came back for middle school in 2010. When I visited his home, he was living with his mother, older sister, and infant nephew, whilst his father was working and living in the (local) city centre, and would come back every two to three months. He was quite shy and quiet in my preliminary focus group, but became very talkative when I praised his house before going inside.

> "Yes, it (the house) is not bad (note: typical Chinese way to answer in a humble manner). It is newly built…Years ago, my family was very poor and had no decent house, but most of our neighbours had two-storey buildings… My parents did daily labour and earned very few at that time… Maybe four or five years ago, they went out to contract small construction projects and made enough money to build the new house. Now our house is among the best in the community. We have three storeys with a big garden, as you can see…Here is my bedroom, only for myself, not shared with others… Here is the third floor. Father said it will be used for my marriage… It is not decorated now, because we run out of budget. We need to make more money in the future to make the house better."

Apparently, Ah Zhao very much enjoyed the pleasure and honour of owning the best house in the community and having a separate room for himself. By presenting the dramatic change in housing status before and after his parents' migration, his narrative demonstrates he had a clear understanding of the relationship between migration, money and housing. Having experienced the poor old days without a decent house and living under neighbourhood pressure, he had developed a very supportive attitude towards his parents' working away to make money for the new house. Moreover, being embedded in the cultural context of filial piety, he learned from his father's instruction that the house was not only for their present comfort, but was an ongoing project which would benefit him in the future and thus, required contributions from both generations. The frequent usage of "we" and "our" indicated that he complied with his father's expectation to share the ownership of the house and was prepared to carry on the unfinished house project: "to make more money in the future to make the house better". This reflects that the child was making the effort to respond positively to the parents' contribution and expectation through projecting a future participation, which is much in line with the projective element of agency.

Not all rural households can achieve significant improvements through migration in terms of being able to afford to build a new house and Ah Ke's narrative illustrates this side of the housing story. Ah Ke was a 14 year old boy in Grade 8. His father was a construction worker in Changsha and his mother was working in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province. He was tall, thin and good looking with polite manners, being also ranked 1st in his class. According to the preliminary focus group with him and his classmates, he was regarded as one of the most excellent and promising students among his peers. He was not only the teachers' favourite student, but also an idol of his classmates. Yet, for such an outstanding student, when the topic of conversation touched on the housing issue, he just could not hide his feeling of inferiority and sadness.

> "I feel very worried about my family's development. We did not make it good economically. We still live in an adobe bungalow. My grandpa has three sons, my father and two younger uncles. None of them are married so far (note: in rural China, a single person belongs to the lowest class). They are all working outside (as migrant labour), not doing well (in money making)… Dad and mum were divorced last summer… Mum had found someone better (in terms of economic situation) in Shenzhen… My classmates all laughed at me when they saw my house last time

they came to ask me out. Although Miss Fan (*ban zhure*n of his class) scolded them, I still feel very shameful…Miss Fan is very nice. She told them not to judge someone by his house but by his academic performance. She also encouraged me to study hard and make a better future by myself… I wish I could become an architect, so I can build a new house for my family in the future."

In the local villages, the house actually acts as the most visible indicator of family fortune, which is open to scrutiny by the public and no one can escape this social judgment (Murphy, 2002). Even though Ah Ke had won high honours for his academic excellence and had a promising future ahead of him, he still could not avoid feeling humiliated by his peers given his poor housing status. He felt very embarrassed and ashamed for the poverty of his family, whilst also appearing very pessimistic about the possibility of his parents' generation making any significant change to it. However, on the other side, these difficulties and challenges were providing the impetus for him to search for alternative solutions. Being a 14 year old child, as yet, he would not be able to change the poor housing situation, therefore, he had tried to move beyond the current structural constraints by negotiating a path towards the future, that is, to study hard and "become an architect". This strategy was being primarily shaped by the projective element of agency, for it manifested the child's ability to distance himself from present structuring contexts to invent future trajectories of action according to his hopes and desires (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

In both Ah Zhao and Ah Ke's narratives, it is noted that the house was an important medium for left-behind children to learn the significance of money and migration. Living in a community with more and more new houses built by migrants, they felt the honour or disgrace this could bring to them and their family from neighbours and peers, and had thus come to understand it as a symbol and carrier of family happiness and success. Therefore, these children constructed migrating to make money for the house as their parents' commitment to the family and hence, chose to support this action. Moreover, with the cultural influence of filial piety, these children did not regard pursuing a decent house as merely an adult issue, but rather, a family project; a shared obligation of the parents and the child. Consequently, they more or less developed a projective orientation which entailed them making a contribution to the house project in the future. This future orientation was even evident among those children seeing little chance of building a new house in the short term, like Ah Ke, as it required them to be

inventive so as to distance themselves from perceived present difficulties, by working out a plausible long term solution.

5.1.3. Daily consumption

In China, large scale rural-urban migration has boosted the flow of money into villages, and has drawn the rural communities deeply into the commercial economy (Murphy, 2002). The out migrating villagers have not only brought back money and goods, but also consumerist values and lifestyle. From my interviews and observations in the school and villages, I could see the younger generation's lives had become very different from the old rural self-sufficient one that their grandparents were used to. They eat more meat, they go to *wang ba*, and they want snacks, toys, birthday cakes, brand shoes, clothes, and mobile phones. They are increasingly engaged in the commercial world, with growing needs for money to satisfy their daily expenses and consumption.

As far as the individual left-behind child was concerned, increasing income from migration could give them more money, more opportunities to spend and yet more reason to ask for more. All of those I interviewed mentioned that they were getting more pocket money as their parents' income rose during the migration period, ranging from 2 to 10 *yuan* a day. In addition, some of them told me they were in charge of their own living stipends, and some others said their migrant parents would occasionally give them extra gift money, with the amounts being up to several hundred *yuan*, which is quite a big sum for teenagers (100 *yuan* could buy 20 meals in the school canteen).

Every child seemed to enjoy owning and spending more money than before. In our interviews, all of them could clearly recall the old days when they had very little money for daily consumption, and agreed that they felt more satisfied as they were getting more purchasing power to buy stationery, accessories, clothes, and gifts, to play internet games, or to treat friends. Ah Shui, a 13 year old boy in Grade 7, gave a typical account among them. He was living with his maternal uncle at the time of our first interview, with father and mother working in Guangdong Province.

> "At the beginning years (of my parents' migration), Grade 1 or 2, my life was miserable. I had only 2 *kuai* for a whole week… for snacks… (with) 1 *kuai* I can only play in *wang ba* for 1 hour… Now I have 5 to 7 *kuai* a day. Much better! I can go to *wang ba* frequently, a lot of fun! … Last Saturday, I stayed there for the whole

day, and used up several tens (*kuai*)… (The money) was not only for the internet. You need to eat something. I was with the boy in my neighbourhood. We had fast noodles for lunch in *wang ba*."

By comparing the past and present, Ah Shui presented how significantly money could enhance his sense of happiness by enabling him to pay for more hours on the internet and have more fun in *wang ba*. Yet, this happiness did not simply result from the increased amount of pocket money he had, but was also mediated by the perception of money held by his peer group.

"When I was in primary school, I liked to play with those bros that did not like study, those 'good bros'… (with them) I grew up, and began to know funny things and how to use money…Once mum gave me 100 *kuai* via my uncle, and I treated my best friends to eat things and play in *wang ba*."

For Ah Shui and his "bros", spending money in their own way was regarded as a sign of maturity, a passport to being recognized and accepted by their peer group. Similarly, a girl called Yuyu told me the story of how she enjoyed the sense of control that money gave her. She was in her Grade 7, living alone in her own house but supervised by her grandparents nearby. Her father and mother were working in Guangdong Province and she received very generous allowances from them.

"They gave me a debit card, and put money in the account… about once a month… one thousand *kuai* a time… (Giggling), yes, I have some *si fang qian* (private fund), not much, only 500 *kuai*… I will save more and (use it) to buy a learning machine… Dad wanted to buy one for me, but I don't want him to pay. I told him I will buy by myself. He asked me where would the money come from, and I said I will find my own way. (Giggling), it would be more precious if I buy it myself."

By buying things that normally only adults could afford, Yuyu felt herself as powerful as a grown up. She and several other children, like Maomao and Linlin, often referred to their s*i fang qian* as "my own money". They all appeared very proud when talking about the fact that they could use money away from their parents' direct control. Taking Ah Shui, Yuyu, and other children's discourses together, it could be inferred that the increased money and reduced parental supervision that resulted from their parents' migration had provided very supportive structures for these left-behind children to

exercise agency with respect to making decisions on daily consumption to satisfy their own needs. As a result, the collectives of such practices of agency gradually formed a peer culture that valued money and autonomy in spending it, which intrinsically reproduced and extended the culture found in the adult world. In return, this peer culture deeply influenced how these children perceived the significance of money and how they dealt with their relations with parents, peers, and others.

Almost every child mentioned that they appreciated their parents' endeavours in giving money or buying things for them. A few of them even made a direct link between money and their parents' love. In the case of Maomao, when she claimed "good" or "not good" about her two parents, these thoughts were closely related to her father and mother's different attitudes towards money. Maomao was a 13 year old girl in Grade 7, whose parents were working in another city inside Hunan Province as the contractors for a construction team. Her father had been working outside since before she was born and her mother left her at Grade 3, after giving birth to her brother.

> "I am good with my dad. I respect him, and adore him… Because he will let me play out at weekends and give money to me… I am not good with my mum… She does not understand me… She will take my *si fang qian* away every time she finds out… and she will ask me for money when she plays mahjong."

In Maomao's discourse, money had become a central issue between parents and daughter. Though there were other issues that had influenced Maomao's relationship with her parents (as will be discussed later), money itself definitely acted as a simplified indicator of parental love from Maomao's point of view. Later in the same interview, she directly claimed money was a symbol of love when she jealously talked about her classmate Zizi.

> "In our class, Zizi is very rich. She has her own debit card, and there are 20,000 *kuai* on it. Her dad is selling trees, very rich. But she is self disciplined, never misuses her money. Her dad and mum love her very much. They always give her red and white notes (the colour of the biggest note 100 yuan is red and white)"

Using money to judge parents' love, matched with the way that parents used money to express their love for their child. This indicates the capacity of children to replicate and extend adult patterns of thought and action, which captures the routinized nature of the

iterational dimension of agency in Emerbayer and Mische's (1998) sense. This capacity could also be identified from the ways that some left-behind children chose to express their love for friends and relatives through money, as their migrant parents did with them. In a group interview with Yuyu and her friends Ah Tian and Sisi, Yuyu directly expressed the reciprocity between friends in terms of money and gifts.

> "If I do not give money to her, she will not give to me (pointing to Sisi, and giggling)… We are good friends. If she has no money, I will give mine to her. If I have no money, she will give hers to me…. I am good to friends. I will give money to them. (Sisi said: Last time she bought me a doll)."

Similarly, Ah Chen gave money to his stepmother and auntie to express his gratitude and concern. Ah Chen was an 11 year old boy in Grade 7, living with his grandma. His mother divorced his father at his age of four and had no contact with him after that. His father had remarried and was now working in Suzhou as a factory manager, living with the stepmother and a four year old half-brother. Ah Chen told me that his grandma was bad tempered and loved gambling, so he relied more on his auntie (living in the same village) for care and supervision. He would ask his auntie for daily expenses and for help with his homework. His stepmother was the other woman in the family who showed concern for him by sending back money and clothes occasionally. Although Ah Chen did not accept her as mother, and insisted on calling her *Ah Yi* (similar to auntie, a commonly used title for stepmother), he still kept in mind his stepmother's kindness and told me his relationship with *Ah Yi* was very good. Nevertheless, Ah Chen knew he could not take auntie and *Ah Yi*'s concern for granted, because "they are not my own parents". With such a judgment regarding his relational situation, he told me he would not make excessive demands on auntie or *Ah Yi*, like other kids did with their own parents. He also tried to solidify the relations with them through giving money.

> "That year, I received nearly 1000 *kuai Ya Sui Qian* (gift money for New Year). That time, both auntie and Ah Yi were pregnant. I gave each of them 100 *kuai*… to buy some fruits… when you are carrying a baby, the nutrition is not enough, if you just have the three ordinary meals a day."

Both Ah Chen and Yuyu, among others, were purposefully using money and gifts to sustain and strengthen their friendship or family bonds. This demonstrated the iterational element of their agency to apply previously acquired knowledge about

money to similar interpersonal circumstances, thus being able to negotiate a better living environment. It also echoes the argument of Zelizer (2002) that, for children, spending money could secure their social bonds with family members and improve their status in the household. Moreover, in a broader sense it is worth noting that these practices could have the effect of further highlighting the significance of money to these children, reinforce their reliance on money, and reproduce the culture of material importance. In our interviews, none of these children were willing to accept a return to the standard of living experienced in the past in exchange for their parents' return. They seemed clearly to understand the dilemma that they could not have enough money and their parents' at home, at the same time. Based on their comparison between the past and present, along with their realistic judgment about their material needs, they came to the decision to choose to endorse their parents' migration. In this sense, their agency exercised here was conditioned by the same practical evaluative orientation as those exhibited in the practices regarding education and housing.

5.2. Love but Not "*Qin*"

Indeed, money has played an important role in sustaining a loving relationship between migrant parents and left-behind children. Through their involvement in different monetary issues, these children had learned the importance of money and recognized the necessity of parents' migration. Enabled by the traditional culture of filial piety and the peer culture of material reciprocity, they further constructed money as being a currency of parental love and care, consequently endorsing their parents' making money to improve their living through migration.

However, for children, parents' excessive reliance on money to prove their love can lead to the opposite effect. Several left-behind children had sensitively captured the trade-off between money and the time parents spent with them, expressing their disappointment concerning parents' using money as compensation for a potential lack of care and concern. Yuyu was among one of them.

> "He (dad) always asks me whether I have money or not every time he calls me. (It) seems like that his father love is only expressed in terms of money, but not affection… In comparison, I feel my *Jiu Jiu* (maternal uncles) are much better…

> They call with concern for me. They do not talk about money. But dad does (by money)."

Yuyu felt very cross with her father because money was his primary concern in their communication. She disliked this commodified interaction between father and daughter, and wished he could put more emotional concerns into it, as her *Jiu Jiu* did. It should be noted that although the sentence "his father love is only expressed in terms of money" carried Yuyu's strong objection towards the commodified father love, Yuyu did not directly deny her father's love for her. As mentioned in the last section, Yuyu actually enjoyed having a lot of money and she herself also used money and gifts to show love and care for friends. There were also some small details in our interviews showing how she accepted money as a currency of love in certain circumstances. For example, she once told me that their house had two storeys and 10 rooms, and she would keep all the lights in the house turned on when she was sleeping during the night. When I suggested that it must cost a lot of money, she replied that her father knew she would feel scared living alone in such a big house, so he allowed her to do whatever she liked, no matter how much money it cost. From her smile and the way she spoke, I sensed that she quite enjoyed the feeling of being indulged, with there being no sign of her rejecting her father's generosity with money.

The contradictory attitudes toward money held by Yuyu can also be identified from other left-behind children whom I interviewed. For instance, Nini, the girl that had positively interpreted parents' money making as sacrifice and love, also told me that she still felt sorry that something had been lost in their parent-child relations, including parents' better care, stricter supervision and education.

> "My parents went out to work when I was 2 years old. I had been living with my grandparents (since then), so did not have a deep feeling of parental love. Comparing with those children whose parents were at home, my life was not that good. Grandma is not so good at cooking (as mum), and has no idea about nutritional food. Old people are not willing to spend money on food, so we always had vegetables (grown by ourselves) for meal, rarely with meat…I now still have a sore throat, and feel painful when the days are cold. It could be that, when living with grandpa and grandma, I did not go to see the doctor in time when I caught cold, and got this problem. Moreover, without the supervision of parents, I was very

wild, playing with my buddies, going everywhere. I did not discipline myself very well. If my parents had been around me, I would have had better manners and better personal hygiene…"

Unlike Yuyu, Nini did not have direct conflict with her parents and yet, her remarks appeared to be very structured, with the details listed one by one. It is obvious that she had put in a lot of reflection on the pros and cons of parents' migration, if we take into consideration her narratives quoted in the last section. She did not question her parents' love for her. Instead, she used the words "a deep feeling of parental love", which implied that on the one hand she did feel the love through the money sent back by migrant parents, but on the other, she did not think this was sufficient, as the feeling was not "deep" enough, being not so close as that experienced by non-left-behind children who could touch, taste and embrace their parents on a daily basis. Nini further introduced "*qin*" to describe this often missing part of parental love in her daily life. According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary (2008, p. 1104), "*qin*" has multi-layered meanings. It is a concept combining affinity, space, and emotion that could be used to describe closeness to each other in terms of physical or emotional distances, or moral and blood relationships. When applied to family relations, "*qin*" represents the ideal in Chinese cultural tradition that expects family members to stay together, love each other, and take responsibility for each other whilst the degree of "*qin*" with others depends on their relative position in one's psychological concentric circle and largely decides the extent of liability one should assume towards them (Hwang, 2000). In the following discourse, Nini used "*qin*" and "not *qin*" to describe the differences she felt with and without her parents being home.

"I felt the connection with them (parents) was not so *qin* when they were not around…I feel happier when they come back for spring festival. My life becomes fulfilled and I can feel they are *qin* to me… (After mum came back), my life is much better. She cares about my personal hygiene, and is stricter with my study. The nutrition has also been improved. She will encourage me when I get lower scores, and I will tell everything to mum, including those things I won't even tell my friends. We are very *qin*. "

In Nini's narrative, "*qin*" referred to the emotional closeness that she felt when living with parent(s) and having their care, concern, company and discipline. This feeling of

intimacy was closely related to her physical distance to parents, and she believed it would develop through long term face to face contact. It captured the lost part of love that Yuyu longed for. In Yuyu's discourse the boundary between money and love was blurred, yet by using "not *qin*", Nini actually initiated a new discourse to address this ambiguity, which allowed her to express her emotional loss associated with her parents' migration without denying their love and sacrifice. As discussed above, it involved an agentic process, as Nini reflected on her experiences with and without her parents being home, comparing these with others "whose parents were at home". She then problematized her situation with parents' migration and dealt with it by enacting the idea of love but "not *qin*". This process was mainly shaped by the present orientation of agency, as it showed Nini's capacity to deliberate and respond to the dilemma of money and love in a practical, creative way that was not settled in past patterns of thought and action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This creativeness was not only informed by traditional thinking about "*qin*", but also showed the ability to transform it in line with new contingencies.

Ah Ke was another child to use "not *qin*" to describe the diluted feeling of intimacy between parents and child brought about by long term geographical separation. His parents also left home at a very early stage, just after he was aged one. He complained that parents and child knew little about each other's lives and had very few topics in common to talk about.

> "They (parents) have been working outside for a long time. I just get used to it, and would not miss them a lot. I am used to live with grandparents… We will call every week, but have very few things to talk about. We do not live together after all… I talk more with my grandparents, all kinds of things in our life… I feel not so *qin* with my parents… But when they came back for spring festival and we lived together, I still felt *qin* with them. I can turn to them like a whining child. When we live apart, I have no such feeling."

Nini and Ah Ke both mentioned that reunion with parents could bring back the feeling of "*qin*". It seems for them the geographical distance was the only major barrier to maintaining a "*qin*" connection with migrant parents. Yet, for Ah Jin, the situation was quite different when he used love but "not *qin*" to describe his relationship with his mother. Ah Jin was 13 years old and was cared for by his maternal grandparents. He

had been left behind by both parents between the ages of one and five, subsequently migrating with them to Shenzhen for four years, only to be sent back to his hometown and left behind again. When I interviewed him, he was living in school accommodation during weekdays and at his maternal grandparents' home at weekends.

"My relationship with mum is just so so, not very *qin*. When I was only one year old, mum left me at home and went out working. I was brought up by (maternal) grandma. When I first went to Shenzhen at 4 or 5, I could not recognize mum. She wanted to hug me, but I cried out loudly… I know she feels quite guilty to me… She will buy anything I like. She does love me… I won't tell my inner thoughts to mum. We just cannot share the same point… Like buying clothes, we don't like the same style, so I will do shopping by myself all the time…We cannot get along with each other… (because) we have different points of view… about life, and study... Mum always push me to study hard, but I think I am already very hardworking, and have made some progress. Progress has to be made step by step, I think. But mum rarely gave me positive comments… She is always nagging me to focus on study, and does not allow me to play… She controls me so strictly, keeping me doing my homework day in and day out. Totally no freedom! ... I tried to communicate with them. I asked them to allow me to play, they didn't."

In Ah Jin's narrative, "not *qin*" was not a temporary feeling subject to distance, but a lasting emotional status between his mother and himself which was even felt when they were living together. Ah Jin was trying to give an explanation for his claim by presenting his unhappy memory about the scene of his first reunion with his mother, which indicates that the separation at an early age had had a chronic influence on the intimate feeling between the mother and son. His following narrative revealed that this emotional distance had made it difficult for mother and son to communicate and to "get along with each other", and the conflicts about academic issues had further aggravated this situation. Unlike Nini and Ah Ke, Ah Jin desired more freedom and fun besides academic achievements, and could not fully engage with his studies. Yet his mother was very demanding with regards to his study and kept pressing him to work hard. Therefore, Ah Jin's interactions with his mother were full of tension and conflict, and he felt it was not so easy to retrieve the feeling of "*qin*" in a reunion with his parents, as described by the top ranking students Nini and Ah Ke. Compared to them, Ah Jin's claim of "not *qin*" with respect to his mother seemed to carry a much stronger sense of complaining.

Nevertheless, Ah Jin still acknowledged his mother's love that entailed her making money to satisfy his needs and in this sense, he was not so different from Nini and Ah Ke. They were all trying to use "love but not *qin*" to construct their relationship with migrant parents in a way that could reflect their unpleasant feeling, yet without denying their migrant parents' love and commitment or causing destructive effects with regards to the bond between parent and child. This could be regarded as a very practical strategy adopted by these children to address the challenges that migration brought to their parent-child relationship, which is primarily guided by the present orientation of agency focused on tactically resolving a problematic experience with newly invented methods (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Maomao, as discussed in the last section, had also confirmed that giving money to provide for the child was an indicator of parental love. Yet, her use of the term "*qin*" carried even more intensive emotions than Ah Jin, for through using it she was trying to transmit an extremely disappointed feeling towards her mother. Her anger was triggered by her mother's distrust.

> "Mum asked my younger cousin sister to keep an eye on me. She does not trust me. (Sigh!) I really don't want to talk about this, just waste my saliva. Whenever I say I have not gone out to play, she just does not believe my words, and will say, 'how do I know what are you doing outside'. I will respond, 'you are just talking, but do not care me at all. I am just like an orphan, not like a child with *qin* parents.' When my classmates talk about how nicely their parents care about them, I really envy them. Then I followed, 'you give me a life, it's not a big deal. I can return it to you.' Then I slammed the phone down. Mum was crying."

Maomao was living in her auntie's home when she gave this narrative. After her mother left home when Maomao was in Grade 3, she had lived with her grandma for three to four years, and stayed in the school accommodation for a semester. She told me her grades kept falling after mother left, so her mother decided to send her to auntie's home for stricter supervision. Maomao was accustomed to a life free of control, in her words, "she went out, so I can fly up", so she was very reluctant to accept mother's new living arrangements and became furious when she knew her mother had even set a little "spy" to watch over her.

Maomao complained to me during each interview that it was the distance that caused

the misunderstanding between her and her mother, and she also blamed her worsening academic results on her absence. She thought that getting her mother back could resolve all these problems that she encountered, and she chose to ask her mother to come back during every telephone call they made. She told me she had done whatever a child could do to implore her parents, like whining and nagging, but her mother would always refuse and say, "dad cannot manage the whole construction team, so mum has to help there". Like other left-behind children, Maomao also understood the importance of money and migration, but she could not suppress her emotional loss.

> "Sometimes, I am thinking, they are working hard outside. I know it is not easy for them to make money and feed us. But sometimes, when I see some of my classmates' parents are nearby, I envy their happiness."

Obviously, Maomao had not been convinced by her mother, and could not but keep feeling disappointed with her. The strong language she used to blame her mother, for example, "I am just like an orphan, not like a child with *qin* parents" or "you give me a life, it's not a big deal. I can return it to you", reflected the nearly despairing emotion she held inside. More than that, these extreme words actually could be viewed as Maomao's ultimate weapon, used to deepen her mother's feelings of guilt and exert more pressure to get her to come back. In Chinese Confucianism, life is the biggest kindness that children receive from parents (Park & Chesla, 2007). Returning life to mother, or claiming parents as not "*qin*" (biological) parents, is possibly a Chinese child's most hurtful words for parents to hear. It could be that Maomao learned from her past failure that as a child she could hardly have any influence on her parents' decisions by normal pleading, so she felt it necessary to take some unconventional actions that were more challenging against her mother. Therefore, when she was confronted with the exigencies of mother's distrust and blame expressed in the phone calls, she chose to use "not *qin*" as her instant response to fight back. Even though she had not got mother back so far, she did successfully reinforce the pressure she felt for not staying at home with her — "mum was crying", and mother asked other relatives to comfort her after the telephone conflict, as Maomao told me later. This process reflected Maomao's capacity to deliberate on her past failures, evaluate the available tools and adjust her tactics to respond to the emerging conflicts with mother. This was primarily engaged with the present context of mother-daughter separation, and aimed to transform this structure by pressing mother to come back.

Generally speaking, the introduction of "not *qin*" could be viewed as a practical evaluative reaction of these left-behind children to deal with their struggles between money and love. By claiming "not *qin*" with parents, these children were trying to create a new space in the field of parent-child relationships that ran parallel to the generally accepted domain of love. Therefore, they could avoid denying their parents' love while at the same time conveying their dissatisfaction and pressing migrant parents to address their emotional needs. With regards to this, the degree of complaining varied according to the different patterns of parent-child interaction, with at one end of the continuum children like Nini or Ah Ke, who had few conflicts with their parents and who tended to convey their discontentment in a relatively reserved way, while at the other end were children like Maomao, who lived struggling with intergenerational interactions and deliberately resorting to the term "not *qin*" to hurt their parents and strengthen their guilt towards the child. The children's academic performance and attitudes largely influenced whether their parents would treat them in a peaceful or a confrontational way, and hence set the tone of the intergenerational interaction.

5.3. Discussion

Traditionally, money and love have been regarded as two clearly distinct categories. Money is linked with market and rationality, while love is related with family and emotions (Haugen, 2005; Millman, 1991; Zelizer, 1997). However, Zelizer argues that people can give money different meanings according to their social contexts and social relations, and money can act as "a sentimental currency" for love and care (Zelizer, 1993, p. 205). In China, rural villages have been gradually becoming involved in the highly commoditized economy since the opening-up reform and the large scale rural urban migration has made significant contribution to this process by boosting the flow of money and goods into rural areas (Li, 2004). Growing up in this period of time, left-behind children in this research learned through their experiences concerning various monetary issues that their tuition fees and nearly all everyday necessities were mediated by cash, and these largely relied on the income from their parents' migration. They enjoyed the benefits of increased material resources and appreciated parents' efforts in making money for their sake. They also learned the mode of parent child reciprocity through the transactions of money and things, and tended to extend this mode to their

personal network, making their own peer culture one of material consumption. In this sense, money was accepted by them a currency for love, commitment and sacrifice. This echoes the research findings of Parreñas (2005) and Dreby (2010), who in their studies in the Philipines and Mexico, found that children were aware that parents' migration was aimed at improving the household economy, and they could feel loved when they sent back money.

However, love cannot be forged for children simply through material transfer. Spending time with them, taking care of their daily life, and sharing emotional issues all constitute their expectation of an ideal parent-child relationship, while failing to engage in these will result in doubts about parents' love and their endeavouring to substitute this for money (Jamieson & Milne, 2012; Parreñas, 2005). Left-behind children in this research recognized that material transfer constituted an important element of love and care, yet, they could not accept that the parent-child relationship was reduced to a monetarised exchange or a kind of commodification. They missed the physical contact with their parents and the emotional security of their physical presence as well as longed for the warmth of their company, care and concern. Therefore, they enacted the idea of "not *qin*" to denote their emotional dissatisfaction towards the parents-child relationship disrupted by family separation.

Indeed, "love but not *qin*" (though not all these children used the exact words), effectively represents these left-behind children's mixed feelings toward parents' migration that they developed during the struggles between money and love in their intergenerational process, where migration enabled parents to improve their children's living situation, but meanwhile curtailed their capacity to provide care and company for their children on a daily basis. This dilemma largely resulted from the rural-urban bifurcation in contemporary China: the developed urban regions have provided individual migrant labour better economic opportunities than rural areas, but constrained them from undertaking family migration by setting various institutional barriers (Hare, 1999, 2002; Wong et al., 2007). It is these socioeconomic forces that have conditioned the family relationship and led to money and "*qin*" becoming incompatible demands on most of the migrant parents.

Living within such emotional tensions, these left-behind children were constantly exercising agency to deal with the challenges emerging from their evolving situations.

By shifting their temporal orientations, and resorting to different structural resources and cultural tools, they had developed their capacities to form inventive or tactical responses toward their structuring contexts. When the contingencies were more about the significance of money, they generally adopted a practical evaluative orientation to choose to support their parents' migration, even though they felt unhappy about family separation. Different from passive tolerance or consent, this choice usually involved an agentic process in that these children reflected on past experiences of poverty, considering the possible consequences of giving up or continuing migration, and then made a deliberate decision based on a practical judgment on their situation. This choice by itself tends to reproduce the status quo of the family and more broadly, the mode of rural urban migration with parents migrating and children being left behind. However, this was usually coupled with a future perspective of left-behind children to reciprocate parents and honour the family, as influenced by the culture of filial piety. There were efforts in terms of their searching for future change that could be identified from several children's narratives, including those of Nini and Ah Ke, among others. Guided by the projective element of agency, they were trying to move beyond current constraints to project a solution that could overcome the dilemma between money and family togetherness in the future. Informed by the culture of educational importance and enabled by parents' educational investment, they generally chose to study hard as their pathway, and aimed to become a competent person who could have the power to make changes. Their efforts and aspirations could foster chances to change the socioeconomic status of their family, promote the broad socioeconomic development in China society, and meanwhile, contribute to the reproduction of the culture of filial piety and educational importance.

When addressing the emotional distance with migrant parents, the strategy of claiming "not *qin*" adopted by several children was also directed by the practical evaluative element of agency, which reflected the capacity of these children creatively to reframe cultural tools out of the traditional conception of "*qin*" in response to the dilemma of money and love. By using "not *qin*" instead of "not love", these children intended to convey their discontentment without breaking the loving bond with their migrant parents. For the children, this strategy could have the effect of clarifying the ambiguity caused by the struggles with money and love that they felt in their parent-child relationship, and exert pressure on migrant parents to attend to their emotional needs. However, in Chinese relationalism, "*qin*" does not purely denote emotional intimacy,

but also carries a sense of responsibility, especially in the family context. Therefore, as far as the migrant parents were concerned, the use of "not *qin*" regarding the parent-child relationship may make them worry whether or not the children will fulfill the obligation to reciprocate to them in the future. This could result in the restructuring of the migration dynamics, which might bring change to the traditional patterns of parent-child relationships. It could be the unexpected consequences of these children's practical solutions that create new problems, thus requiring further action to be taken.

Chapter VI Lonely and Free

Loneliness has been documented in the existing literature as a common emotional outcome among left-behind children in China (Hu, Lu & Huang, 2014; Jia & Tan, 2010; Su, Li, Lin, Xu, & Zhu, 2013). Most of these studies adopted a quantitative methodology and have used the child self-evaluation of loneliness scale developed by Asher, Hymel, and Renshaw (1984) as their standard research instrument. These studies were able to identify the prevalence of loneliness, but could not capture how left-behind children themselves perceive and deal with it. Moreover, in China there are very few studies that are concerned with exploring the feeling of freedom that parents' absence may bring about in left-behind children owing to there being reduced parental control, as documented in the literature about transnational families (Asis, 2006; Dreby, 2010). The extant literature tends to focus on the lack of discipline from an adult's viewpoint, and attributes behaviours, such as going to *wang ba*, *zaolian* (dating at a premature age), and playing truancy as negative outcomes of parents' migration (Li, Luo and Tao, 2012). Yet, children might have different views regarding how and why they behave like this, and exploring their perspectives could help provide a balanced picture about their living at a distance from parental control.

In this study, "lonely" and "free" are repeatedly found in the left-behind children's accounts, and these can sometimes be interpreted in terms of the pain and gain that the children have experienced from parental migration. Such mixed feelings were evident in Ah Dong's narrative:

> "I feel I live a good life here, and I am free… I can go out for fun at any time I want, and I do my homework only when I feel like doing it. Just a little bit lonely… Bored, you know. Every day is the same, only me alone."

Ah Dong is not the only one to have such mixed feelings about living with his parents' migration. This chapter captures the "lonely" and "free" experiences that unfolded in different children's accounts, interprets them in terms of the children's perspective, and explores how these children exercised agency to deal with such "lonely" yet "free" circumstances.

6.1. Lonely

It has been argued that children's loneliness is associated with perceptions of unfulfilled relational needs, such as lack of companionship, care and affection, or having insufficient opportunities for receiving emotional and social support from the family. (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990; Chen, He, Oliveria, Coco, Zappulla, & Kaspar, 2004). In this sense, left-behind children might be considered to be a high risk group for loneliness, due to their family separation.

6.1.1. Lonely with parent(s) away

In this study, feeling lonely is a prominent theme identified in left-behind children's narratives concerning their experiences of parents' migration, especially for those with both parents away from home. Ah Dong was one such child, for, as mentioned above, he was a 13 year old boy, in Grade 7, living alone in his own house, with paternal grandparents living nearby who took care of his daily life. His father went to work in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, when he was three or four years old, while his mother had left him when he was eight or nine, and was working in nearby cities within Hunan Province. He told me that he began to feel lonely after mother's departure.

> "It (life) becomes different… I am alone now. You know, it is very boring, not easy to kill the time… I feel so lonely… If mother is at home, I can go out with her and play... We go shopping together, strolling on the street. When she played mahjong, I will stand by her side and watch it... She will prepare many delicious foods to celebrate my birthday."

His mother had been Ah Dong's only companion at home after his father's migration. Although the things they did together sound trivial, they could make him feel his time was fulfilled. His mother's leaving totally changed these routines in his daily life, and made him feel life was "very boring, not easy to kill the time". Thus, he regarded his mother's migration as the dividing line that marked the beginning of his feelings of loneliness. Father's leaving, in contrast, was described as rather obscure and insignificant.

> "I totally forget the scene of his leaving… I only remember he brought back a toy gun as my 5th birthday gift… He also took me out to play at that Lunar New Year, and we took a lot of pictures… I don't remember where I put them now…I don't

miss him… After all, I have not lived with him for long."

Father leaving at this early stage and not having lived with him for long are Ah Dong's explanations for his vague memory and emotional distance regarding him. Yet, his indifference towards the photographs taken with his father indicated that he was consciously estranged from him, which contrasts with the fact that several children mentioned that they sought solace in old family photos when they missed their absent parents. The following discourse goes on to reveal it is the conflict that occurred later between the parent and child that led to Ah Dong's rejection of his father.

> "He will come back every Lunar New Year… Whenever we are together, he only talks about study, and pushes me to do homework… I wish he would take me to play and have fun, but he wouldn't… I don't want to stay with him. When he is home, I go out."

As a typical traditional Chinese parent who highly values education, Ah Dong's father began to put high levels of academic pressure on his son after he entered primary school (at the age of six). However, the son's expectation with respect to his father remained the same as before, which was mainly concerned to "play and to have fun", as reflected in his selective memory about the toy gun and playing outside during the New Year. According to my interviews with Ah Dong, he was not interested in study and appeared reluctant to put effort into it, which seemingly resulted in his father feeling even more eager to push him to study hard and in not allowing him to play. During this conflictual intergenerational process, neither the father nor son was willing to give in or to make a compromise with the other, so the situation eventually deteriorated to the extent that the son tried to evade the once a year reunion with his father. This may indicate that the son had actually given up on his father as a source of companionship. Therefore, in Ah Dong's accounts, only his mother's caring companionship appeared to be protective against the feeling of loneliness, whilst his father's strict discipline had the opposite effect.

Few of the children's relationships with their father were as strained as that of Ah Dong, however, the configuration of strict father and caring mother roles demonstrated in his case appeared to be a very popular parenting strategy adopted by households in the focal villages, according to my interviews and observations. This is much in line with the traditional gender division of labour in the Chinese culture of the family, where the

father should assume the more controlling and awe-inspiring role, whilst the mother is expected to be warm, tender, and nurturing (Judd, 1994; Wu & Tseng, 1985; Young, 1972). As a consequence of this widely spread practice, nearly all the left-behind children I interviewed expressed the opinion that they treasured their mother's companionship more than that of their father. This point was evident in the narratives of those children who had first experienced the absence of both parents and then the return of the mother, such as Qiqi, Nini, and Ah Zhao, in that every one of them told me they felt much less lonely after their mother had returned home. While Ah Shui, even though his father had returned recently, still wished his mother could be the one to come back, because "mum is more caring... dad often blames me out of no reason, and is used to saying harsh words (to me)".

Therefore, based on the practical judgment that there must be someone to migrate in order to provide for the family (as discussed in the last chapter) and their mother was more suitable as the one to give care and companionship, several children with both parents migrating proposed a strategy whereby the father migrating out and the mother caring at home would be the best arrangement for their situation at their current stage. This represents the practical evaluative dimension of their agency in making deliberate choice within the present problematic circumstances so as to pursue a better settlement for themselves. Guided by this present orientation, these children were also deploying different methods to exert pressure on their parents to satisfy their needs. Normally, they would raise their demands in their phone calls with parents through whining or nagging. Some tried to send frequent mobile messages (Ah Bin), pretended to be ill (Ah Dong), made a wish on their birthday (Feifei), or even blamed parents with the term not "*qin*" (Maomao). To some extent, their efforts did have an effect in making parents feel pressurised into making some adjustment to address their needs, for instance, Ah Bin's mother promised to return home once her current contract ended, while Ah Dong's mother promised to come back to see him more frequently, and Maomao's mother asked her relatives to give more support to her daughter. However, by the end of my fieldwork, none of them reported that they had successfully achieved the goal of getting their mother back. According to my interviews with those mothers and fathers who had returned, the reasons for their coming back mainly pertained to concerns for their children's educational prospects (Qiqi), the child's misbehaviour (Ah Zhao), or changes to the extended family that had disrupted the previous care arrangements (Ah Shui); the children's emotional needs were not considered as a key determinant. In fact, some

children had sensed these critical factors that could change their parents' mind, and had tried to adjust their tactics accordingly. In my last interview with Ah Bin, he told me that the last time mother had come back was with regards to the trouble he had caused at school (fighting with a classmate), hence, he was thinking about getting into more fights in the future so that his mother would have to return to keep him under her control and enforce discipline.

However, it should be noted that this strategy of the father migrating out and the mother caring at home might instigate an undesirable consequence for left-behind children: the breaking up of the relationship between father and mother. As the teachers in the school informed me, there was a high percentage of left-behind children whose parents were divorced. Among the left-behind children I interviewed, five told me that separation had caused severe conflict between their two parents and ultimately, led to their divorce (Ah Chen and Ah Wan), or brought them to the brink of divorcing (Qiqi, Ah Wei and Yuyu). For instance, Ah Wan told me that when he was only seven, just one year after his father's migration to Guangdong Province, his mother divorced his father and left him in the care of his paternal auntie, because "father was not home, leaving mother alone at home, (as they) separated for so long, they parted". Another girl called Qiqi was witnessing her parents' conflict at the time of my fieldwork. In a trembling voice she told me her father might have heard some gossip about her mother having an affair. He had come back without notice the previous week and had had a terrible quarrel with her mother one night. She cried, saying that she felt very scared and worried that her mother would divorce her father and leave them all alone. The development of such problems could thwart the efforts of left-behind children to get their mother back, for, according to my observation, life in the local villages was dominated by patriarchal culture and usually the mother was the one to leave the family and her children after there was a divorce. Moreover, the fear of losing their marriage could have acted as an important reason for migrant mothers to leave their children in their hometown. For instance, Yuyu and Linlin's mothers both chose to reunite with their husbands after conflict broke out. Therefore, the execution of the strategy of the father migrating and the mother caring at home is not only subject to children's agency, but also conditioned by the evolving family relational structure.

Returning to Ah Dong's case, his conflicting relationship with his father also depicts the negative effects that over emphasis on education could bring to the intergenerational

interactions. In fact, almost every child I interviewed told me that academic issues were the dominant concern of their migrant parents, both in their distant communications or reunions. They more or less complained that migrant parents did not pay so much attention to their inner thoughts or emotional needs as to their education. In particular, those who did not do so well in their studies would become passive about the intergenerational communication when migrant parents repeatedly exerted academic pressure on them. Regarding this, Ah Wan, a 14 year old boy in Grade 8, once told me that his father would keep talking about study during their phone calls and that made him feel very nervous and stressed, so he would just answer the questions that his father asked, but did not initiate any topics himself. Maomao's account further illustrates the process through which she made efforts to communicate with her parents, but finally gave up any attempts due to parental indifference.

"When I was a little girl, I totally did not know what they did outside and where they lived. They did not tell me anything. I had tried to communicate (with them) and asked questions (about their situation). But they just responded as 'you just mind your study, don't concern yourself with adults' business'. You know, my father was a chef before. I did not know that until I happened to hear it once when I was listening to those adults talking… I wish I could know more (about them), so we can have better communication… But I never mentioned this. Even if I said it (to them), they would not agree with me, so I won't say a word."

Maomao seemed very frustrated with her communication with her migrant parents. According to her discourse, she genuinely wished to know more about their migrant life so as to realize their mutual understanding, but her mother and father showed little interest in responding to her needs. They thought study was the only important thing that a child should attend to, while parents should mind the "adults' business" and children should not intervene. In addition to the impact of the culture that stresses the importance of education, as discussed before, such thinking could also be rooted in traditional Chinese childrearing culture. From this perspective, parents' authority, children's obedience and both parties' responsibilities receive far more emphasis than mutual communication between parents and children (Stafford, 2006). In fact, this culture was expressed in some migrant parents' dictatorial attitude when they showed concern about the children's material living and health status in addition to their education, which in effect, left little space for the children to have their own say. As the

girl Linlin summarised, "they always asked the same three questions since I had memory: have you finished your homework? Read more books; do you have enough money? Tell me if you used it up; and do the days get cold? Put on more clothes. I just need to say 'en, en' (OK, OK)."

In fact, these traditional parenting patterns have been criticized for not addressing children's emotional needs sufficiently (Goh & Kuczynsky, 2009). This problem is even more exacerbated when applied to the contexts of family separation, for geographical distance has not only deprived left-behind children of their parents' physical presence and company, but also the emotional contact achieved through mundane daily interactions. Under such circumstances, strengthening distant communication to promote mutual understanding and to increase affective interactions could be an effective way for migrant parents to repair the disrupted inter-generation relational process and to alleviate children's sense of loneliness and to moderate their emotional reaction, as documented in the extant literature regarding international migration and left-behind children (Dreby, 2006; Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Schmalzbauer, 2004). With respect to this, in this study, except for one girl called Peipei, who told me that she thought her migrant mother had a modern, open mind and could give her emotional support even when relying on the telephone for communication, the others rarely reported that they had much effective communication with their migrant parents.

6.1.2. Lonely at substitute caregiver's home

In addition to the disrupted relational process inside the nuclear family, some left-behind children also mentioned their sense of loneliness resulted from the new relational environment that they needed to adapt to when living in their substitute caregiver's home. Ah Shui compared the days before and after his father's return, and felt that his life was much better with him at home than when living in his uncle's home (although he did not think this as good as his mother's companionship). This boy was 13 years old and in Grade 7. He had lived with his paternal grandma, and then moved to his maternal uncle's home due to some conflict in the extended family that occurred while both his parents were working away in Guangdong.

> "(After father came back) I can live in my own home… I can watch TV with him, and talk about nonsense… I can tell him what I want to eat, and then he will cook it for me… In uncle's home, I think it's not good to ask for anything from them.

Say, you live in their place, and still want to eat this, eat that."

Ah Shui's words "in their place" indicated he had a sense of distance and did not feel he belonged when living in his uncle's home. He knew he could not ask for the equivalent degree of care and concern from his uncle as from his parents. Several other children expressed similar feelings of isolation and uneasiness, and put it as "it's other people's home, not my own home". For example, Ah Jin, a 13 year old Grade 8 boy, described his experience when he lived in his uncle's home when he was in Grade 6.

"I felt not very accustomed. You know, it is uncle's home, not my own home… I can do whatever I want at my home. But there (uncle's home) I should obey their rules, and behave like a lovable boy (to please them)… Anyway, you are not their own son. You should be *tinghua* (listen to them), not naughty… (I feel) a bit isolated."

Ah Jin and Ah Shui's discourses are much in line with the schema of "differential order of association" (Fei, 1992) that guides Chinese people's social interaction, in which an individual experiences himself/herself as being the centre of a network, and the extent of distance and responsibility to others depends on their relative positions in the person's psychological concentric circle (Hwang, 2000). Evidently, these children had a very clear judgment of the characteristics of their different social ties, and could adjust their behaviour according to the changed relational contexts. This echoed Parreñas' findings in the Philippines, where children living in relatives' homes felt they placed an extra burden on their relatives and did not expect them to treat them as their own parents would (Parreñas, 2005). In this sense, living in a different home setting could add to left-behind children's experience of lack of control as well as reduced care and support, and therefore is more likely to trigger the feeling of loneliness and isolation.

However, living in the grandparents' home seems to be different in that it could provide a sense of home to left-behind children. Those children brought up by grandparents, like Nini, Ah Ke and Feifei, among others, never mentioned having the feeling of staying in other people's homes. This point is also illustrated in the boy Ah Jin's experiences after he moved to his maternal grandparents' home: "I got back (to grandma's home) in Grade 7...much better!...I think grandma's home is my home. I have lived with them (grandparents) before I was five". In fact, according to my interviews and observations, it was routine in the local villages for the grown up children's family

(mainly for the son and his family, as governed by the patriarchal rule) to stay with their parents before the adult offspring had earned enough money to build their own new house. Under such circumstances, grandparents were the real head of the extended family and obliged to support their children, including taking care of the left-behind grandchildren, according to the traditional Chinese culture of the family. Therefore, it is easy to understand why these left-behind children felt natural and at ease when living in the grandparents' home and rarely complained about being isolated as they often did when staying in other caregivers' homes. The following narrative from Feifei presents some typical experiences regarding left-behind children living under grandparents' care. Feifei was a 12 year old girl in Grade 7, with both parents working in Tibet as the contractors for a construction team.

> "They have been looking after me since I was born... They all love me, so much... Grandma will prepare breakfast for me every morning (note: normally at 5 or 6 am, as the school bus sets off very early)... She will get up at midnight to see if I am tucked up. Mum won't do that for me. She think I should be independent. She ask me to do these things by myself... Sometimes Grandma will scold me. She is very busy, so it is very easy for her to get impatient and blame me for being naughty, not listening to her... After that (she scolded me), I will not think about it anymore. Time passed, and I just forget it. Sometimes I will also say 'I won't talk to you any more', if I get irritated by her words."

As illustrated in Feifei's accounts, the left-behind children tended not feel like an outsider when living with grandparents: they enjoyed their grandparents' care and nurture, knowing that they need not to be so careful with their words and actions as when living in another carer's home. In fact, the local villagers generally held the view that grandparents were more lenient and indulging than parents, as the latter would put more stress on independence, which possibly was as a result of their exposure to western childrearing values during their migration to the city. As a result, there was a popular concern among the teachers and parents I interviewed that these children would be spoiled by their grandparents and become lazy, assertive or bad mannered. Consequently, some parents chose to send the children to an uncle or auntie's home for stricter supervision when they grew older or showed signs of misbehaviour, as was the case with Maomao and Ah Shui's parents. According to these children's accounts, their parents rarely consulted them when they made this decision, and would not change their

minds even when the children insisted that they preferred to stay with their grandparents. For example, Maomao had objected strongly to mother's decision to move her from grandparents' to the auntie's home, yet it turned out that, in the end, this made no difference to her mother's determination for this to happen.

Nevertheless, living with grandparents was not without drawbacks from the left-behind children's perspectives, as these children also frequently complained about grandparents not understanding their language and thinking, and for not being easy to communicate with, as represented in the following comments made by Feifei:

> "She (grandma) is nagging… You just cannot talk with them. They don't accept the new stuff… Like internet and pop stars… I am used to watching idol dramas every evening, but grandpa scolded me for wasting time on this nonsense. He thought I should put all my energy on study… Mum likes idol dramas too, she will watch together with me when at home. "

Overall, from the children's perspective, on the one hand, grandparents could maintain a sense of home and help them avoid the feeling of isolation, but on the other, they could not provide the same companionship as parents for their knowledge base and lifestyle were far removed from the times in which these children had grown up. Therefore, the impact of "grandparents as caregivers" on loneliness seems to be quite complicated and cannot be defined as a ubiquitous risk factor as some previous research has proposed (Jia & Tian, 2010; Su et al., 2013).

In addition, this researcher found that having a sibling or cousin living together with them meant that their companionship could compensate for left-behind children cared for by grandparents and even help them offset the feeling of boredom and loneliness. Ah Shui once mentioned his older sister.

> "She is studying in university now, in Changsha… We are very close. She will bring back snacks for me every time she comes back… We have lived together with grandma until she (sister) left in Grade 9 to live in the school… I missed her a lot, coz time with her home was much better. I can talk to her. We played together. She will take me out to play. We had a lot of fun...I have few to talk with grandma. She know little about my talking... When I had only grandma home, (I feel) kind of lack of *wei* (note: originally means the taste or flavour of food)."

Unlike grandma, sister was the one with whom Ah Shui could talk and play. With her beside him, he felt his life was not so boring but more fulfilled and fun. Nini also expressed similar feelings regarding the experience of moving to her maternal grandparents' home and enjoying her little cousin's company. As demonstrated by Ah Shui and Nini, living with a sibling or cousin was a common preference expressed by the left-behind children I interviewed. However, the children rarely had a say on such living arrangements according to my interviewees. Even though they had a sibling, it did not naturally mean they could live together. Some migrant parents would take one child away, as had those of Yuyu and Ah Jin, whilst some would put two children under the care of different households, as Maomao's parents had with her and her little brother. The living with cousins issue could be even more complicated, for it also relied on the uncle and auntie's decisions as well as the grandparents' capacity for child care.

6.1.3. Making alternate intimate connections

When the left-behind children used different words to express their feeling of loneliness, such as "boring", "isolated", "lack of *wei*", or "no one to talk and play with", they were referring to their unmet relational needs in disruptive complicated environments caused by their parents' migration. Although these children were exercising agency so as to tackle this problematic situation through negotiating with their family for better living environments, few of them could get the positive feedback they wanted from their parents. The parents seldom gave priority to their children's emotional needs or listened to their opinions when making care arrangements. Moreover, these children also learned from their experiences that, sometimes, the changes in their relational contexts, such as their parents' divorce, or unforeseen events in the extended family, were somewhat out of the control of them and/or their parents. Through reflecting on such experiences, these children, more or less, came to realise that as the less powerful members of their families, it would not be easy for them to reshape the relational structure inside the family according to their needs. Based on these judgments, therefore, they generally turned to explore supportive relational resources available outside the family to deal with their feeling of loneliness, which further demonstrated the practical evaluative element of their agency that was guiding them to search for alternative resolutions for these problematic situations that could not be solved through seeking family support (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Ah Jin chose to attend a tutorial class as his means to escape the weekends full of loneliness and boredom. As mentioned above, he was at the time in Grade 8 and cared for by his maternal grandparents. He told me he could not stand the boring weekends spent with only his old grandparents, and felt he had to find something to do. However, in the rural villages, there were no organized extra curriculum activities to participate in and few children of a similar age for him to play with. Therefore, he opted to join the tutorial class, because it provided a space for peers gathering together and having fun, and more importantly, compared to the other option of playing in the *wang ba*, it enabled him to use the excuse of its educational purpose to escape his parents' ban regarding his "playing out" as well as giving him grounds for asking for extra financial support. He had successfully achieved his goal.

> "It is during the weekend. We have tutorial courses for Chinese, English, and Physics… Our group has nearly 20 students, most are good at study… The teacher only want to recruit good students... For we would not make trouble... The class is from 8 am to 11:30 am, every Saturday and Sunday… (I attend this class) because I can have fun here. There are so many people, better than home…We can talk, play, and chase each other in the break and after the class, like we usually do in the school… Mum supports my decision. (She will support) anything if only it is about study."

By attending the tutorial class, Ah Jin also found an alternative arena in which to develop a close relationship with his teacher Miss Lin and get a sense of home, which was beyond his original expectations. Miss Lin was the *ban zhuren* of Ah Jin's class in his regular school and it was she and two other teachers of the same school that had set up the small crammer school in the centre of village community. Ah Jin told me that compared with the weekdays in school he had far more opportunities to talk with Miss Lin when attending the tutorial classes and had discovered she was very easy to get along with.

> "With her being there, I get a sense of home…She is a good teacher. I like to talk to her. We share many ideas and get along well with each other. You know, most of our teachers are at the age of thirty to forty, like our parents. She is young… She has a very strong impact on me. Before, I thought student and teacher are not at the same level, and it would be hard to communicate with each other. Now we can have

good communication and could play together…Sometimes, Miss Lin will organize some activities after the class, like taking us out to have picnics, and working as volunteers in elderly care home. She will even ask us to eat at her home."

In Chinese traditional culture, the teacher occupies a superior respected status that is similar to or even higher than that of parents, and ideally, he/she is expected to take parental-like responsibility for his/her students (Kipnis, 2009). However, with an average of 60 students in one class, the time that a teacher can afford to devote to caring about each individual was very limited, as Ah Jin had experienced. By comparing the past and present, he learned his tutorial class was critical for him to get close to Miss Lin, so he became even more enthusiastic about it. He told me he would behave actively in the class to please her or attract her attention. When mother questioned the academic effects of this tutorial class, he felt very anxious to defend his attendance, "I said it would take time to show its effects". He also tried to play less and put more energy into studying, so as "to get a better score in exams, then she will not ask me to enrol in another teacher's class".

Unlike Ah Jin, Ah Dong was the lowest ranking student in his class. He told me he had totally lost interest in study, and felt no need to pretend to work hard. The teachers in the school appeared to have given up all efforts to help him, as he told me he could leave the class anytime he wished and no teacher would stop him. Therefore, he chose to spend long periods in *wang ba* to deal with his boredom, even though it was regarded as misbehaviour by the school and community.

"I will play internet games, and chat with friends online… I got to know a lot of people through internet, in our group, (constitute of) students in our school… Playing games is good for killing time. Time passes by very quickly…I often stayed there for the whole night… At home, time is hard to endure."

However, *wang ba* only provided an escape for killing time and a virtual environment with some loose contacts for company. Ah Dong still complained to me that he felt he lacked a sense of intimacy and belonging. Then, not long after that, he came to me and announced he had made a girlfriend at school,

"She is my first love… we began at the week before last week… (With her) I feel my life is fulfilled, I will think about her every day…we have breakfast outside the

school together and we wait for the bus together after school… She is nice to me… She has never said harsh words to me. She cares about me, and she will help me on my homework."

Making a girlfriend entailed Ah Dong's effort to build a new intimate relationship to compensate for the emotional loss brought on by his mother's leaving. With his girlfriend, he was not alone any more, for he had a companion to care for him and share the trivial routines of his daily life again. Although *zaolian* (dating at a premature age) was regarded as deviant behaviour by the school, he appeared not to worry at all about such a judgement, declaring that "I am already a bad boy in their eyes".

Maomao's strategy to deal with her loneliness also focussed on making a new intimate relational structure, but not in such an obviously rebellious way as Ah Dong. According to my interviews with her, she still cared about how parents and teachers considered her, and was trying to maintain a middle ranking in the class, even though she was not very interested in study. This may reflect the Chinese tradition, whereby girls are expected to behave more obediently than boys (Chen & Liu, 2012), for there were rarely any in the school being reported for playing truant or confronting the teachers. Yet, the girls' compliance may just be at surface level, as illustrated in Maomao's story. She had created a family-like peer group through making fictive brothers and sisters in the school. This strategy of making fictive siblingship draws on the Chinese traditional culture of extending the kinship bonds based on marriage and consanguinity to other personal relationships by using a kinship metaphor, which is widely practiced in China for expanding social networks (Santos, 2008). In using such terms, Maomao thought she could strengthen her bonds with friends, and cover her ambiguous romantic relationship with boys. Thus, she might be able to escape being blamed by adults, or at least, she could have an excuse for arguing with them. Nevertheless, she felt her loneliness was relieved when embraced by her fictive kinship network.

"With so many (fictive) brothers and sisters, I will not feel lonely… Sometimes I have to make myself invisible on QQ (note: the most popular instant messenger in China like MSN), because too many guys want to talk with me… I feel especially close to '*gan gege*' (fictive older brother) and '*gan jiejie*' (fictive older sister)… They will help me top up my mobile, give money to me, and take me out for fun… If someone pisses me off, they will help me fix it… No matter what you talk about,

they can understand it. '*Gan didi*' (fictive younger brother) and '*gan meimei*' (fictive younger sister) don't understand, and they even eat my snacks, and take away my stuff (without notice)…I have to live with it. They are brothers and sisters after all."

Maomao's accounts indicate that a fictive "brothers and sisters" network entails stronger connections and more responsibilities beyond a normal friend relationship, where she enjoyed the benefits from older brothers and sisters, and meanwhile had to care and tolerate younger members, though reluctantly. It is just this family-like environment that offered her the emotional support and the sense of belonging that her remote parents or substitute caregivers failed to give.

Ah Jin, Ah Dong, and Maomao's stories demonstrate the typical strategies adopted by left-behind children to build up alternate intimate connections to deal with loneliness and compensate for their parents' absence. In such networking processes, agency was involved in several ways. First, they were able to evaluate and utilise their structural (e.g. limited resources in the rural community, parents and teacher's discipline and expectation, and their academic ranks in the school) and cultural (e.g. the culture of fictive kinship and educational importance) contexts practically when searching for the desirable pathway to tackle their problems. Second, they demonstrated the capacity to keep exploring new possibilities and adjusting their tactics (like Ah Jin's getting close to his teacher, or Ah Dong's shifting focus from *wang ba* to his girlfriend) according to the evolving situations.

6.2. Free

When migration deprived left-behind children of parents' physical company and curtailed their emotional contacts, it also distanced them from parents' supervision, discipline and control. Generally speaking, substitute caregivers could not assume the same authority over the children as their real parents, according to the culture of "differential order of association" (Fei, 1992). Consequently, almost every left-behind child in this study had found out that they could enjoy much more freedom due to parents' absence, and this constituted an important resource that they could exploit to gain more control in their own lives through exercising agency.

Ah Jin represented the typical kind of left-behind child in terms of attitude towards freedom and parents' company. He most enjoyed the freedom to "go out and play" that he gained after being sent back to his hometown, because he had lived with his parents in Shenzhen and been strictly controlled for four years.

> "The best thing about coming back is that I can go out and play as I like. I didn't play enough when I was there (Shenzhen)… Sometimes they came back, I just felt restricted, not so free."

He also got more money and more autonomy in handling his living allowances. This was another kind of freedom that he enjoyed whilst living away from his parents.

> "After I came back, I got more money… When I was in Shenzhen, they gave me money day by day, only three *kuai* a day. Here I can have about eight to ten *kuai* a day… But this time mum came back and cut it to six *kuai*… She doubted I misused money… They gave me a debit card and will put money in it every month. 150 *kuai* a month, for snacks… Money for stationery, clothing and shoes was given separately… also put in the card… Overspend will not be compensated; savings I can keep as my *si fang qian* (private fund)… I will use it to treat my friends… and buy clothes I like… I don't like the style mum bought for me, now I can choose everything by myself."

Even though Ah Jin's parents appeared to not fully trust him, he still enjoyed much more space to make decisions regarding monetary issues according to his own choice, because it was impossible for them to closely supervise him from afar. Moreover, his parents had to rely on the information he provided to make educational arrangements for him, therefore, he could also have a say on the tutorial class issue, as previously discussed. Ah Jin knew very well that all these freedoms came from his parents' inability to control him from a distance, while living with them would offer no such possibilities. Yet, he still was struggling between living with his mother's care and control, and enjoying his freedom away from parents. Such a mixed feeling appeared even more evident when, one time his mother came back for his grandpa's birthday.

> "This time, mum came back and then left. At the beginning days (of her leave), I will feel uneasy. After a while, I will feel it is not bad… When I was with my mum, I felt uneasy. I thought living with her was annoying. But when she left, there was

no one nagging me by my side, I felt uneasy too. Maybe I feel accustomed to her nagging on me… Anyway, it is not bad, because I can go out and play."

Ah Jin disliked his mother's presence when she was with him, but turned to missing her company when she left. Yet, when I interviewed him, which was only a couple of days after his mother's leaving, I sensed that he still preferred her presence even though he realized the dilemma between this and his freedom. However, since he had made a practical judgment acknowledging the low possibility of her return, he chose to accept the status quo and enjoy the bonus of having freedom. In the following accounts, he also tried to selectively activate and stress the unhappy memory of having no freedom when living with his parents.

> "Mum can help my study a lot (if she could come back). (But) she controls me so strictly, keeping me doing my homework day in and day out. Totally no freedom! ... When I was in Shenzhen, they did not allow me to go out and play by myself… They wish me to go to a key high school, so they don't allow me to play. They kept me studying, no play. I felt very uncomfortable. It was no freedom there… In fact, I was not studying even I stayed in my room. I will play behind them… Sometimes, I will sneak out when they were not home… I wish I could have a more flexible schedule, and have more time to rest. At least give me 2 to 3 hours for free every day, like at weekends, half day study and half day play… I tried to communicate with them. I said play is kids' nature, if you don't let me play, I will become stupid. But they would not listen to me. They said you have to study hard now, and you will have time to play when you grow up. Otherwise, you will have to do an exhausting job as we do, and never be able to be free."

It appears to me that such selective emphasis on the experiences of no freedom is mainly shaped by the practical evaluative dimension of agency in that it entails Ah Jin's efforts to remind himself that living with his parents was not that good, so that he could feel easier when having to adapt to mother's absence and be more satisfied with his present free life. In fact, this agentic strategy of highlighting present freedom by comparison with the previously endured strict parental discipline was very popular among the left-behind children I interviewed in this study. They not only used it to balance their emotional loss from their parents' migration, but in some circumstances, to show off their freedom as a privilege in front of those non-left-behind children, for instance, when

they were involved in peer talks regarding parents or family, as I heard in my preliminary focus groups with them.

Compared to Ah Jin, Linlin appeared a little more worried about her parents' return, in particular, she very much enjoyed her freedom to "talk back" in her grandparents' home. She was a 13 year old girl in Grade 8, living with her paternal grandparents. Her parents were both working in factories in Foshan, Guangdong Province. She told me with parents at home, she was only supposed to listen to them and not allowed to express different opinions, therefore, she valued their migration for the "free space to speak out". She actually showed some mixed feelings when I asked whether she wished her parents would come back.

> "Yes and no…If they come back, they will be much stricter, and I will not have so much freedom. Now in grandma's home I still have the free space to speak out. Whatever they (grandparents) say, I can talk back (show objection)… One day, I forgot to turn off the gas, and grandma scolded me, I respond, 'last time you have forgotten it (turn gas off), but nobody condemned you.' Then, my grandma said I had an evil tongue at so little age, I refuted her as, 'I am practicing my speech skills, so I can be a lawyer in the future.' … I do not really want to be a lawyer, but said it to irritate her, so she had nothing to say any more."

Linlin seems to know clearly that offending her seniors was a wrong to be corrected and punished according to her family education. However, she was aware that her grandparents would not discipline her as strictly as her parents and therefore, she felt assured in behaving in a less obedient manner and enjoyed the sense of freedom when challenging her grandma's authority through talking back.

Some left-behind children also exercised agency to further exploit their distance from the parents' discipline to escape or resist parents and caregivers' authority and to create and develop a free territory, subject to their own control. For example, Maomao had been complaining that her mother did not trust her throughout our interviews. When her mother scolded her over the telephone for not studying hard and for going out to play, she denied that she had gone out and blamed her mother for not believing this. However, at the beginning of our second interview, she told me:

> "There are a lot of guys asking me out to have fun. I don't know which group I

should go with…like karaoke, drinking, hiking… By no means (tell my parents)! They won't allow me to go out, for sure! But it's impossible not to join them (the guys). They will say I am not loyal to them… Anyway, it is better not letting them (parents) know, otherwise, I will be scolded again… I know they (parents) won't be happy (if they know it). At least I am happy!"

Maomao knew her parents would definitely feel angry about the things she did together with these other guys. However, as they were far away from home and could not see these things for themselves, she thought she was able to keep them from knowing about them, or at least to deny them in front of them and blame their distrust in return. She also took advantage of the ambiguous line of authority between her different caregivers to avoid their discipline and gain more freedom.

"When I go out for fun and don't want them know it, I will tell my auntie I am going to my own home… (Excuses) are like to see grandma and my little brother, or to pick up some clothes or other stuff… I will go back, stay for a while, and then sneak out, when grandma is busy… When I feel unhappy with my auntie and cousin, I will even go back to live (with grandma) for a few days… Mum will ask me to move back (to auntie's home)… Because grandma has to take care of my little brother, and cannot spare an eye on me."

Originally, Maomao's parents aimed to put her under auntie's stricter supervision by moving her away from the grandparents' home. However, this had actually created two homes and two authorities that she could play off against each other. By manipulating the gaps between these two caregivers, she successfully developed a new space where she could act with a high degree of freedom and flexibility.

Yuyu even utilized the gaps between her parents and grandparents to strive to live alone and to escape from the latter's control, which was not very common among the left-behind children I interviewed. She was 12 years old, in Grade 7 and her father had worked in different cities in Guangdong Province for more than six years. Her mother had left her with the paternal grandparents and joined her father in Shenzhen about three years previously. Yuyu had stayed in her grandparents' house for over one year, and then through her unremitting efforts, she finally got her parents' approval to move back and live alone in her own house, which was situated only one hundred steps away from that of her grandparents.

"I felt uneasy there (grandparents' home). They are very nagging. They say the same things every day, in the morning when I go out, and in the evening when I come back. Just repeating… Like you did not wash the clothes properly, or you did not sweep the floor cleanly… So when dad asked me about my life with grandparents, I said I was not so happy. Initially dad thought about sending me to the accommodation in my school, I refused, and said I would like to live alone, because living in the school you have no freedom. But dad felt it was not a good idea. So I begged my mum. Mum talked to dad, and dad agreed at last, though rather reluctantly… I kept calling mum and whining to her. I told her grandma was nagging, so she agreed…I told her there were hairs in the food grandma cooked… Mum wishes I could be independent, so she agreed… She once said I would be powerful in the future if I could get accustomed to independence."

It appears to me that Yuyu was very tactical when exercising agency to manipulate the politics inside the extended family to attain her goal. She had made a very practical judgment about different family relationships, and adjusted her tactics according to evolving situations. She knew it was not proper to criticise her grandparents in front of their own son, as the culture of filial piety instructs, and hence, used a relatively indirect way to express her dissatisfaction with them in response to her father's inquiry about her living situation. She seemed to understand the tension between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, which is an eternal conflict in Chinese family relationships, so she turned to her mother for support after the proposal was declined by her father and felt free to complain about her paternal grandma when talking with mother. With her mother by her side to negotiate with her father, she eventually achieved her father's consent and realized her goal. During this process, her mother's belief in independence also enabled and encouraged her to strive for freedom and gain more control over her own life. Several times in our interviews Yuyu talked about how she enjoyed the freedom of living alone away from parents and her grandparents' supervision, and how she felt proud of herself for being able to live independently. However, she also admitted there were still some occasions when she would miss her parents' care and support and consequently, felt in a bind about living with them or not.

"When confronted with difficulties, I will think about joining them in Shenzhen… Like, when I am carrying heavy things, or when I cannot work out the difficult questions in my homework… But when I think they will nag me and control me, I

just give up the idea (of living with them). Mum had asked me to move to Shenzhen after she settled down there. I said no. I am kind of a rebel."

This discourse clearly indicates that Yuyu's feelings toward her parents' absence were fluid and variable, being subject to the emergent situations she encountered. Nevertheless, from her choice of not moving to Shenzhen to reunite with her parents, it can be seen that she still preferred to live alone and enjoy her own freedom, because she had become used to living away from their control and could not even imagine how to bear it again (her fear of the unfamiliar city was also a concern, as will be discussed in the next chapter). In fact, even though other children like Maomao or Ah Jin expressed the wish for their parents' return, to give up the freedom they were enjoying could still be a big challenge for them to deal with after any reunion.

6.3. Discussion

Freedom and dependence is "a fundamental existential dilemma" in a parent-child relationship, because children are dependent on their parents, but they also have the intention to escape from their control (Smelser, 1998, p. 13). In particular, young children could be more aware of this contradiction, as they are dependent on parents economically, socially and emotionally and will feel highly restricted in their freedom to leave this relationship (Smelser, 1998). Moreover, for left-behind children, parents' migration could even amplify this contradiction by highlighting the significance of both dependence and freedom to them. In this study, these left-behind children more or less complained that they had developed a sense of loneliness after the migration, which mainly referred to their unfulfilled needs for emotional and social support brought about by their parents' absence. Meanwhile, they generally relished the freedom of living away from their parents' supervision, for they could thus gain unprecedented control over their own lives that would be impossible to imagine if their parents were at home. It appears that these left-behind children liked and hated parents' migration simultaneously, however, such mixed feelings were not in equilibrium with one another. Generally speaking, they were more likely to opt for their parents' return (especially the mother's return), rather than freedom without their parents' companionship, even though several children seemed to be struggling with this dilemma under some circumstances.

However, as discussed in last chapter, these left-behind children had accepted the necessity of migration for household development and realised it was not practical to change this family strategy. Therefore, in response to their lonely but free circumstances, they mainly adopted a present orientation in exercising agency to pursue a better living situation, one that did not require the termination of migration. First, they were making efforts to improve their parent-child communication and to pressurise their parents into making better care arrangements for them. Although their parents generally assumed a dictatorial attitude and appeared reluctant to listen to them, they did achieve some success through urging them to make some adjustment to address their needs. For example, when some of them proposed the compromise solution of "father migrating out and mother caring at home", the parents felt uneasy in rejecting this, because this was justified according to the gendered division of labour in traditional Chinese culture. Consequently, they would positively reassure them with gestures like promising to return home more frequently, or asking relatives at home to provide more support.

Second, they were able to explore alternative relational resources (e.g. a tutorial class or peer group) and cultural tools (e.g. fictive kinship or educational importance) to tackle their problematic situation when family support failed, such as searching for escape in attending a tutorial class, building up an intimate relationship with a teacher, or creating fictive kinship ties with peers. They also exhibited their capacity to adjust their goals or tactics according to the contingencies of changing situations, such as Ah Dong's shifting focus from *wang ba* to his girlfriend.

Third, they chose to circumvent the difficult side (parents' company and care) of the contradiction by selectively emphasising the other side (freedom), to improve their current life satisfaction, as illustrated in the popular strategy of drawing on the previously endured strict parental discipline to highlight the present freedom. A few of them even made efforts to maximise their freedom by exploiting their distance from parents' discipline to create a new territory subject to their own control, such as Maomao's utilizing the gaps between her two caregivers' supervision. To some extent, the freedom resulting from their parents' absence acted as a resource for these left-behind children to develop their counter-loneliness strategies, such as Ah Jin and Maomao having exploited their freedom to build up new intimate connections.

Indeed, these children's agency was shaped by structural and cultural contexts. There

were many restrictions on their choices and actions: the changing relationship between family members impeded them from negotiating better care arrangements; the limited public resources in local villages giving them few choices for leisure activities; and the traditional childrearing values held by the adults as well as the resultant practices meant communication between parents and their children was restricted, in particular, the children were prevented from participating in the family decision making process. Yet, on the other hand, they also knew how to act within such restrictions and to utilise the available structural resources and cultural tools to search for or create solutions to their problems, as illustrated in the above discussion about their agency.

Moreover, these children's agency also demonstrated the potential to bring some changes to their contexts, especially the intergenerational process between parents and child. After these left-behind children had lived away from their parents, found their own ways to deal with loneliness, and gained the chance to control their own money, time, space and activities, they greatly strengthened their capacity to manage their everyday life and had become used to the freedom of living independently. Consequently, it is very likely that they would be confronted with conflict and difficulties after their reunification with parents (Suárez-orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002), because they might not be able to bear their parents' discipline again. This habitus could even lead to their reduced reliance on parents for social and emotional support, weaken the affective bonds between parents and child, and probably result in the commodification of their relationship - where money has become the only important link between them. From a long term perspective, this would also make a contribution to the rise of a culture of independence.

Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that being away from parents' supervision and discipline could result in some children becoming at risk of deviant behaviours, like Maomao's involvement in drinking, or Ah Dong's playing truancy and over-engagement in *wang ba*. Although at this stage, these activities were to relieve their feeling of loneliness and the children enjoyed the freedom to do such things, it is quite possible that they would blame their parents for not disciplining them after they had grown older and realised the consequences of such wrongdoing. In fact, Maomao had already attributed her worsening academic results to her mother's absence when she faced her parents' criticism. In sum, these issues could become the source of long-term conflict between migrant parents and their left-behind children.

Chapter VII Here and There

The connections between "here" and "there" have been a central concern in research of transnational families or communities in the context of international migration (Waldinger, 2008). It is proposed that cross border migration has created a "transnational" or "diasporic" social field for geographically separated family members to have a family life by maintaining host-home interactions (Lie, 1995; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). Within this social field, left-behind children are connected with parents and their host societies mainly through remittances as well as modern information and communication technologies like mobile phones and the internet (Dreby, 2010; Hoang & Yeoh, 2014; Olwig, 1999; Parreñas, 2005). Children's direct experiences of parents' host communities are very limited, because it is not easy for them to travel back and forth due to long distances, costly travel expenses and complicated visa application processes (Dreby, 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005).

In this sense, the situation of Chinese left-behind children regarding internal rural-urban migration is different. Although policy barriers and economic considerations prevent these children from migrating with their parents (Duan et al., 2013; Ye et al., 2005), the latter do stay within national boundaries and therefore there are more opportunities for visits, either at home or where the work is located than would be the case if they were to go abroad (Wen & Lin, 2012). Children in this study have vividly presented their experiences of "there", i.e. their parents' work town, where they learned about the city's prosperity as well as exclusion, and how these experiences were constructing and constructed by their experiences of an underdeveloped, but familiar, "here", the rural hometown. This chapter captures such complicated feelings about "here" and "there" expressed in different left-behind children's narratives, and explores how these shaped their aspirations for the future and motivated them to take projective actions.

7.1. Experiencing Here and There

Migration is not unidirectional, but rather, involves frequent back-and-forth movements of people, money, things and information (Waldinger, 2008). In China, children left behind in the hometown could have various opportunities to experience life faraway in

their parents' work town, through the presents and stories brought back by migrant parents and by personally visiting or living with them in their work town for a period of time (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). Indeed, "left behind" merely captures the current status of being separated from parents, and does not reflect the circular movement of these children. In this study, among the 16 left-behind children I interviewed, all had regular connection with migrant parents, 13 had visited their work town during holidays, and four of them had lived with migrant parents and attended school over there for periods of time ranging from between one semester and four years. When talking about their living experiences of being left behind, these children would frequently make comparison between "here" and "there", with "here" referring to the hometown and "there" to their migrant parents' work town. Their lives at "here" and over "there" were intertwined and mutually constructed, and neither could be understood without referring to the other.

7.1.1. Superior city and inferior village

The notions of the urban as "civilized" and "superior" and the rural as "backward" and "inferior" have become popular and grounded in society since the rural/urban divide emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in China (Cohen, 1993; Jacka & Gaetano, 2004). Moreover, expanded exposure to urban life has enabled left-behind children truly to experience a sense of superiority for themselves. Among the left-behind children I interviewed in this study, convenience, prosperity and modernity of the city were common themes emerging repeatedly in their discourses about "there". Usually, they would first talk about how they had been impressed by the better material conditions in the city, for instance, Qiqi told me she was most impressed by the material abundance there. She was a 12 year old girl in Grade 7, who had never visited her father's work towns, because as a construction worker he was always moving from one place to another. However, she frequently received various things that he brought back from different provinces, like Guangdong, Xinjiang, Shandong and Zhejiang, through which she could touch, taste, or read about "there" and construct an image of developed cities.

> "There is more developed. You can find anything you want… Every Lunar New Year, dad would bring back a lot of novel things… Like brand clothes, snacks, and books… Most could not be found here. Just gorgeous! I loved them!"

Ah Shui had visited his mother in Foshan, Guangdong Province, twice for summer holidays. His instant response to the question of "how do you think about here and there" referred to the better facilities for amusement:

> "There (Foshan) I had more fun, a lot of places for playing… Auntie took me to play in the parks and swimming pool… Mum took me to see movies at night."

Ah Bin's comments addressed the better standard of living conditions and shopping conveniences, besides parks. He was a 13 years old boy in Grade 8, who frequently visited his mother, who was working in Changsha, the capital city of Hunan Province located only 40 miles from the village.

> "I think there is better, having air conditioner. It's convenient. If you want to buy something, just walk out a few steps and it's the street, very close… There are a lot of parks. I went to Martyr Memorial Park, Window of the World."

Linlin had lived with her parents in Guangdong and studied in a local primary school for one and a half years. Thus, in addition to the shops and parks, she also described the school's physical environment over there in a very positive way.

> "The material situation is very good there. The classroom is equipped with an air conditioner, computer, and a very big projector screen, and the floor is covered with tiles."

According to these children's discourses, physical things and the environment represented the most visible side of "there", when they first touched or entered into the domain of the city as an outsider. After they had had more involvement in the urban life, they came to know more aspects of it. For some of them, "*renao*" (boisterous, bustling with excitement) emerged frequently in their discourses to denote the prosperous and invigorating life in the city, as illustrated in Ah Ke's narrative. He was a 14 year old boy in Grade 8, who had been to his parents' work town only once, in the summer of his Grade 6, and had stayed there for about 30 to 40 days in total. At that time, his father and mother were both working in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, but living separately in their own workplaces, with his mother employed in a tailor's shop, whilst his father worked on a construction site. He stayed at the tailor's shop with his mother for the first few weeks, and then moved to his father's place, living with him inside an unfinished building on the construction site. When recalling his experience in Shenzhen, he looked

very excited, speaking in a high pitched voice with his eyes shining.

> "Very *renao*! A lot of fun! The outside world is marvelous! I even did some daily labour… in a factory near mum's place… My older cousin sister was working there for summer, so I went with her… There are so many people in the big city. We worked together, very happy... I am kind of talkative. I loved to communicate with them. I felt joyful there. Boss' daughter was my age, and we really got along with each other… I don't think that work is hard… It's fun, working together, talking, just gives me a sense of intimacy. I just enjoy it.… Nearby dad's construction site there was another building project, with many workers from Sichuan, and their children. I could play with them, very happy. There was a supermarket over there, and a playground, we could play basketball, and watch plays and shows… not by famous stars, just for sales promotion, in the open area outside of the supermarket, with bands singing and dancing… For the first time in my life I went to the amusement park, amazing…"

Ah Ke seemed to enjoy his urban experiences so much so that he even ignored the harshness of their living conditions in Shenzhen, for he did not have a single word of complaint about the inconvenience of the limited accommodation. According to his accounts, the charms of the city lay in the fact that it could provide employment and recreation for crowds of people gathering together, working, communicating and playing with each other. The physical facilities, like the supermarket and playground, were great for hosting various activities and events, yet, what really mattered for the sense of "*renao*" was the people, especially the crowds of young people of a similar age to him. In this sense, the city appeared in sharp contrast to the lonely rural hometown where he lived, which he had described as follows: "there are no playmates nearby. No children of my age. I used to play with kids older than me, but now they have all left the village, to work or study outside."

Ah Ke did not directly present this contrasting picture to me, as these two discourses were delivered in separate interviews in response to different questions. In fact, it is notable that not only him, but all of these children mentioned above, seemed more willing to talk about the better "there" than the inferior "here". Indeed, by using a comparative form to describe "there", saying "there" was more fun and more developed, with parks, swimming pools, cinemas, and short walking distances to the shopping

streets, as well as many novel things, they were implicitly stating that "here" were less fun and underdeveloped, with no such novelties and facilities. However, they were a little reserved when it came to being directly critical about "here". It could be that they identified with the rural hometown, in terms of it being "my own territory" (in Linlin's words), as will be discussed later in this section.

Peipei was the only exception. She presented the contrasts between "here" and "there" in a very direct way. She was a 13 year old girl in Grade 8, who had just come back after four years' living in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, when I interviewed her for the first time. Her father was working in factory management in Dongguan, and her mother was an insurance agent there, both of which are better off positions compared to other common migrant jobs, such as those in construction, or assembly-line work. This better off family background could have provided her better living conditions that approximated those of the urban middle class, and hence resulted in her different experiences and attitudes toward "here" and "there".

> "(Here) I feel not accustomed, the situation is so bad. The toilet is very dirty. The teachers are not good, their behaviour is not civilized… The English teacher's pronunciation is not so standard… Study is the only focus in this school. Here classmates will all listen to the lecture full heartedly. There we just play and have fun, and dating is very popular… The food is a disaster here. It's just not for human beings… From there to here, it is from heaven to earth. I can have fun there. I used to go out every week, to play with classmates and do clothes shopping. Here I have to stay at bed watching TV. It's too hard to go out. It's too far away from the town."

Unlike the other children who mainly praised "there", Peipei put more words into criticising "here", the rural hometown. In fact, she appeared to speak in such a way that she believed that she did not belong to "here" but to "there". Sometimes she would call the rural residents "*xiang xia ren*" (people living in rural areas), or even "*xiang ba lao*" (provincial bumpkins), a very humiliating name used about them by someone taking a superior urban perspective. She not only made harsh remarks on the material conditions of "here", like the dirty toilet, disastrous food, and the inconveniences faced when going out for shopping and amusement, but also despised the behaviours, values and life styles of the people "here". She disdained the teachers' incompetence and uncivilized behaviour, and challenged the study dominated life of her (rural) classmates, because

she thought life she experienced over "there" was more advanced and represented a modern world view as it involved, such as speaking authentic English or searching for fun and happiness in life. Although several months later, she told me she had made some friends in the school and gradually got used to the rural life, she still appeared to regard herself as a representative of urban civilisation, and felt her urban experiences had given her a superior status over other classmates. The following account was given by her in our last interview, nine months after the first one.

> "I feel I am smarter, because I have learned a lot in Dongguan… My English is much better. Everyone can see it when I recite English text in the class…When we hang out in the street (here), they (classmates) always made a fuss about things that I thought quite so so… I know how to make up myself and I wear much more beautiful clothes. A lot of girls envy me, especially those who are good looking and want to be fashionable."

To some extent, Peipei had been transformed to a "*cheng li ren*" (an envious name for people living in the city, the opposite to "*xiang xia ren*") after four years of living and receiving education in Dongguan. Her higher standard of English, wider exposure, broader knowledge, fashionable style, and even her rather superior attitude were all in accord with rural people's perception or imagination about the superior "*cheng li ren*" (Zhou, 1998). Nini had constructed a similar image of the advanced city in her mind, but this differed from Peipei's indulgent description of the past and present, for the way she expressed it was more to link it with her future development from an outsider's perspective.

> "In the city, your personal networks are expanded. If you could do well in the city, it is because that you excel in knowledge and intelligence. In the city, I could improve my knowledge and make progress. No matter how good you are in the villages, you will be just so so when going out."

As a rural girl who had only visited "there" for one summer, Nini appeared very confident when she talked about the city's advantages and higher standards for personal development. It could be that her academic excellence enabled her to feel assured about making her future in the city, as is discussed later in this chapter. Other children, who did not do as well in their study or did not feel they identified with "there" as much as Peipei, when talking about their impressions about "there", were less willing to address

such non-material matters. In fact, I could sense from their fears about joining parents and studying over "there" that they could have captured these superiorities of city, but just felt afraid of being dwarfed by them, as illustrated in Ah Wan's words, "the textbooks there are more difficult, and the teachers were more demanding. I fear I cannot adapt to it." For these children, their feelings toward the city were rather mixed: they longed for its prosperity and modernity, and meanwhile felt afraid they could not meet the high qualifications it demanded.

Nevertheless, through direct experiences of visiting or living "there", or indirect experiences of things and information from "there", these left-behind children had all built up their own impressions about the superior city and inferior village. These perceptions of the rural-urban gaps could provide a basic incentive for them to leave their rural hometown and search for a better future in the cities, though there was also trepidation among some of them about being looked down upon by "*cheng li ren*".

7.1.2. Exclusive city and familiar hometown

When further exploring these left-behind children's experiences of "there", the picture became more complicated and something not so pleasant emerged, especially for those children who had had more chances to have a prolonged stay over "there". Their attitudes toward "there" were presented in a rather contradictory way, for besides the wonders and attractiveness, they had also deeply felt the remoteness and exclusion of the city.

Linlin was a 13 year old girl in Grade 8 living with her grandparents, whose parents were working in factories in Foshan, Guangdong Province. She had lived with her parents and studied in a local primary school for one and a half years from the second semester of Grade 3. As mentioned above, she was impressed by the better material conditions over "there", including gardens, parks, and school facilities. Yet, she was not very happy in school as she felt marginalized in her class and did not get along with the local students.

> "Most of my classmates were local students, and they only speak Cantonese. They bullied us quite often… My name sounds like 'flying' in Cantonese, so they often laughed at my name, calling me 'flying'… One day, I punched them with a book, and they pushed me to the floor. I hate them… I had only two friends there. Both

of them are non-locals, like me, and their parents are also migrant workers. We are the poor in the class."

However, when answering the follow up question of "how do you do in the school here?", she obviously appeared to be happier, with a smile on her face and giggling all the time.

"I like (the school) here, because here is my own territory… My classmates here like to give nicknames as well. My name is very easy to be nicknamed… They call me "flying", or "fox", a lot of nicknames. My desk mate Xiao Rou is called "dog feet"… But I still like here more. In Guangdong I don't understand their dialect… I don't like the classmates there. They abused me… I feel happier here. We could have fun with each other… I don't like to play with boys, (as) they are always tricking us, and spreading gossip… Today, a boy stamped on my desk, and I used a notebook to beat him…Very joyful, playing pranks."

From the above two narratives it can be seen that in reality the routines in both schools were quite similar, with students playing tricks on each other, giving nicknames, gossiping and fighting. However, for Linlin, there were huge differences between "here" and "there" for she felt discriminated against in the context of the latter. This identification with her hometown can be seen in her use of othering words and phrases, such "local", "non-local", and "my own territory". According to her discourses, the different dialect of "there" and the low economic status of her family were two critical factors that gave her the feeling of marginalization and affected her integration with the local people over "there".

Thus, Linlin developed a quite contradictory attitude towards "there". On the one hand, she was attracted by the material richness and colourful life found over "there", on the other hand, she disliked the exclusion and marginalization she felt in the school experience over "there". Several other children also encountered such ambivalence like Linlin. They all enjoyed the convenience, colourfulness and prosperity of the city, but felt themselves to be strangers and did not want to stay there for long, like Ah Dong who mentioned his trouble with the local dialect in Guangdong, and Ah Bin who feared he would not be accepted by his classmates and teachers in Changsha. Yuyu's narrative captured some of such struggles. She was from a better off family, with her father running a decorating business in Shenzhen and her mother was a housewife staying

there looking after her little sister.

> "I don't want to live with my parents in Shenzhen. I can't adapt to there….... I envy my little sister. She has lived with my parents in Shenzhen since she was born…… I know Shenzhen is fun. When I was there for the summer, I can just sleep, eat, play and buy clothes everyday……But there is still a strange place to me. Once I almost got lost… Here is my home. I am familiar with here. I know the road, the people. I can go everywhere I like. "

Apparently, Yuyu was not really resisting living in Shenzhen. However, she wished to live there as a local born child, like her little sister, so that she would not feel like a stranger in the city. To some extent, this could be seen to be the common wish of all these children mentioned above. Yet, the real world was such that they had no escape from what they feared, either the language barrier, or the unfamiliar environment, or the economic constraints. After experiencing the strangeness and exclusion of "there", they could come to be even more fearful about the city and feel more distant from it. These feelings, in return, could strengthen their identification with "here", the familiar hometown, as illustrated in Linlin and Yuyu's discourses.

Nonetheless, there were also successful cases of integration. Peipei and Ah Jin had both blended into the local community when they were living in their parents' work town. As mentioned before, Peipei had just come back from Guangdong for Grade 8 when I first met her. Her parents had left their hometown to work in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, during her Grade 1 and she had frequently visited after that. In Grade 5, she was taken to Dongguan and had been studying there for the preceding four years. She described how she gradually became integrated into the new environment as follows:

> "At the beginning, I did not understand their dialect, but I learned it very quickly… I learned it from my classmates...It took like one semester… I made friends with the classmates. I went to play at their homes, and they come to play at my home… We would also do clothes shopping together, eating snacks or barbecue on the street … (I played with) local students. Most students in that school are locals, only several from outside"

Peipei had achieved two things that children like Linlin had not succeeded with: the overcoming of the language barrier, and the making of friends among local students. In

fact, it could be inferred from her discourse that the processes to attain these were interconnected with each other: learning the local dialect could help bridge her distance with classmates, while making friends with them could in return facilitate her language learning. This is in stark contrast to Linlin's conflicting interaction with the local students in her class. Such a distinction could be as a result of the different family economic backgrounds of the two children. As discussed before, Peipei's parents were in high status jobs and thus could give her solid financial support to join the local peer group and follow their lifestyle, such as by clothes shopping and eating out, while Linlin's parents were low paid factory workers and could hardly afford these treats for their daughter.

Ah Jin's situation was quite similar to that of Peipei. He was also from a better off family and had stayed with his parents over "there" for four years. His parents were running a small business in Shenzhen, and could provide him with a relatively high living standard. He told me he had his own separate room in their apartment, and he was attending a private bi-language school (more expensive than government funded schools) when in Shenzhen. He also made friends with local classmates in Shenzhen, and frequently joined their extra curriculum activities, like learning oil painting. More fortunately for him was that when living in Shenzhen he did not have a dialect problem. For, as Shenzhen is a special zone in Guangdong that was founded in the late 1970s, most of the citizens are not original Cantonese people but come from all over the country, and *putong hua* (standard mandarin) is the most popular language used.

Nevertheless, Peipei and Ah Jin still had to return to their hometown if they wanted to have a university education. Being the children of migrant workers, they were not allowed to take the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) in the parents' work town. As the NCEE takes different forms across provinces, they had to return and enter high school in their hometown to prepare for it. Ah Jin's parents had sent him back earlier in Grade 6 to get accustomed to the new educational environment in the hometown, whereas Peipei came back at a later stage so she had to repeat Grade 8 in order to fall into line with the local education system. Thus, Peipei and Ah Jin were in fact institutionally excluded from "there", the host city of their parents, although they seemed to integrate successfully into the local urban community. These educational restrictions were a key reason why many children did not follow their migrant parents to live and attend school in their work town (Liu, 2013). In fact, the fragmented

education policy in China can be the most difficult barrier for left-behind children and their parents to overcome if they want to stay together in the city (Xiang, 2007).

7.1.3. The hardship of being migrant labour

Among the 16 left-behind children I interviewed, the parents of 14 of them had low status jobs like construction, manufacturing work, or running a small business, When these left-behind children went to their parents' work town, or received things and information from the migrant parents, they not only experienced the prosperity of the city, but had more exposure to the hardships of their parents' work. The left-behind children I interviewed had disclosed various aspects of their parents' drudgery in being migrant labour. When living in Shenzhen, Ah Jin had witnessed his parents running their small business with day and night reversed. Thus, he learned that even though their family was better off among common rural migrants, their money did not come easily, for it entailed his parents' pain and sacrifice.

> "They (parents) were doing a fruit and vegetable wholesale business in the market. They had to go out in the middle of the night and come back to sleep during daytime… We had few times spent together actually, when I was living with them... I know it is not easy for them… They arrange everything for me… They do make sacrifices for me."

Nini spent her summer in Guangdong when she was 10 years old. She only saw her father at weekends because the factory required the workers to work overtime during weekdays. She noticed her father's tiredness every time he came back and learned how exhausting the manufacturing work could be.

> "At that time, mum just had my little brother. Dad only came back for the weekend… We rented an apartment in Panyu (suburban area)… Dad was working in Guangzhou, and it took one to two hours for commuting…When he came back, he would sleep very early. We wished he could play with us, but he was too tired."

Qiqi's father was a construction worker, one of the most popular and high risk jobs that rural migrants undertake (Liu & Cheng, 2008). She got to know her father's poor working and living conditions through their telephone calls as well as the VCR tapes and photos her father brought back. What impressed her most was his experience when working in Xinjiang, a northwest region that is thousands of miles away from their

hometown.

> "I called father asking how he was getting on, and he said it was very cold there. They lived in a very shabby place, and had to sleep on the floor… Father came back with VCR tapes and photos of his life over there. When I watched it, I really saw the scene that father slept on the floor, I wanted to cry at that time."

Feifei's discourse further illustrates the danger of being a construction worker. Her father had been severely injured once in an accident, when working on a construction site in Tibet, an even more remote place than Xinjiang. She told me she often worried about her father after that, but she knew her parents had no better option for making money other than continuing this high risk job.

> "Dad's leg had a comminuted fracture when I was in Grade 5. The treatment cost more than one hundred thousand *kuai*. He was hurt on the construction site… It was an accident on the construction site. He was hit by something even heavier than steel, and got a comminuted fracture. One of his friends even fell down from the mountain… Before that, mum had promised they would come back soon. But then dad had the accident… If they come back, we would have no economic resource. After dad broke his leg, we got into a heavy debt… I can only wish god blesses them safe."

Indeed, knowing the bitterness of being a migrant worker had invoked complicated emotions among these left-behind children. They felt sympathy and sorrow for their parents' hardship, worried about their health and safety, but meanwhile appreciated it with gratitude, because their parents' suffering further amplified their sacrifice in providing for them (Murphy, 2014). Moreover, under the culture of filial piety, they knew such suffering and sacrifice embodied their parents' expectation for them to achieve future success as payback (Ho, 1996). Therefore, when talking about parents' toils over "there", these children generally expressed the will to reciprocate in the future, commenting: "I wish I could get better achievement by studying hard, then I can reciprocate my dad and mum" (Qiqi), or "I wish I can enter university, then I can find a better job, and they need not to do hard work anymore." (Ah Jin)

On the other side, knowing the hardship of being a migrant labourer also made these children not want to follow their parents' path, which echoes the research findings of

Murphy (2014) in Jiangxi, China and Hoang and Yeoh (2014) in Vietnam. Besides those children who chose to study hard for upward mobility (like Nini, Qiqi and Ah Jin), the less interested in study students also assumed a negative attitude toward the livelihood choice of being migrant labour, as illustrated in Maomao's following narrative.

> "My father said, if you do not study hard, just go out to work, as a migrant labourer. I said nothing. I still want to study more. Being a migrant labourer is too hard. There's more fun in the school."

In fact, the austerity of migrant labourers' lives was frequently used by adults to motivate these children with little academic interest to study harder for better future opportunities, like Maomao's father did with her. Although this could hardly shift these children's interests from freedom and fun towards academic issues, according to my interviews with them, it did encourage some to receive more education by opting for prolonging their stay in school, including Maomao, Ah Bin, and Ah Zhao.

7.2. Making the Future in the City

The experiences of "here" and "there" profoundly influenced left-behind children's perception of their present lives and their aspirations for the future. On the one hand, they acknowledged the poverty and underdevelopment of the rural hometown and had become deeply attracted to the modernity and prosperity of the city. On the other hand, they experienced the exclusion of the city towards rural migrants and learned the hardship of being a migrant labourer. They had the desire to enjoy the better living in the city, but did not want to live there being marginalised. Having perceived the social, economic, or institutional barriers that rural migrants faced in the city, they knew that to realize this aspiration they could not rely on the old pathway adopted by their parents, but rather, needed to assume a projective orientation to figure out a different and more respectable way to overcome their current constraints.

Among the left-behind children I interviewed, the most popular plan was associated with studying hard to enter university and then getting a well-paid job in the city. This choice was not merely a habitual application of the culture of educational importance, but entailed these children's reflection on the meaning of education and their efforts in the formulation of projects to negotiate a pathway towards the future. Drawing on his

parents' experiences, Ah Jin came to understand that their low education levels had caused their powerless status quo. The words Ah Jin quoted from his parents in the following narrative demonstrate well how migrant parents blamed their low profile jobs on their own limited education.

> "Their education level is even lower than mine. Both only attended primary school… They wish I could enter a key high school, and then go to the university… They always complain their education is not enough... They are always saying things like 'You will be birds when you are well educated, you can fly as high as you like. You will be ants when you are not educated, and you will have to follow others, and let others step over you.'… They must have been humiliated outside (note: voice trembled here)… They never mentioned any details. They just keep saying it like this."

Being typically traditional Chinese, Ah Jin's parents on the one hand wished their son to know about their hardships so that he would understand the significance of education and be filial, yet on the other hand, they felt embarrassed about their humiliating experiences and tried to conceal these from the child in order to maintain his respect for them. Ah Jin had sensitively captured the unspoken part of their toils, and appeared deeply impressed by this, as his voice trembled and eyes turned red when talking about it. This could have further motivated him to pursue high education for a better job to save his parents from their present hard work, as mentioned previously.

Some other children, like Feifei, further convinced themselves of the link between education and success, from the stories of role models in the extended family or community. Feifei was only 12 years old when she reported the following to me. She was called the "little teacher" in her class for her "*dong shi*" (literally means knowing things; representing maturity or sensibility) beyond her years.

> "They said we migrate for work, and you should focus on study. There is no college student in my family. My father and my aunt did not go to college. If I make it, I will be the first college student in my family. You know, I feel big pressure, because my little sister is not good at study. The hope of the whole family now rests on me. I must study hard. When in Grade 6, a grand auntie died, I wrote the "*wan lian*" (elegiac couplet), in "*kai shu*" (the regular script of calligraphy). One grand grandma saw it, praised my handwriting, and said you were sure to have a bright

future. Our big family has an outstanding distant grand-uncle working in Beijing. He was graduated from Tsinghua University, and he could earn more than 500,000 *kuai* a year. Grandpa asked me to become outstanding like him. It will not only be good for myself in the future, but will also improve the situation of the whole family. The family will be honoured when talking with others. There is no boy in my generation in the family. Without (male) heirs, you will be taken advantage of when you have conflicts with others. You will be despised. He also said, 'if you fall behind, you will have to beg for other's mercy, and get exploited by others'... Last time, I ranked ninth in the class in the mid-term exam, and you (the researcher) said well done. I don't think so. That's less than what I should have achieved. I should be among the top five to deserve their hard work and care. When they play mahjong at home, grandma will introduce me to the guests as the girl who is excellent in study. When chatting with people whose kids have poor grades, father will proudly talk about me. I don't think I should rank eighth, ninth or tenth. My maths is not very good. It was better when in primary school. (A long sigh here). But I think I should look forward. Someone in our class, a girl, classifies our classmates by exams scores. I don't think that is right. I think it should be the goal (as the standard for classification)... She is looking at the end point, but I am looking at the future..."

Apparently, Feifei felt highly pressurised by the expectation of the whole family, yet, she also appeared to enjoy the feeling of being the promising one that they could count on. The story about the outstanding grand uncle ignited her hopes and confidence to achieve a bright future in the city through education, while the respect she gained with her present academic performance further confirmed to her the significance of education. Consequently, she felt assured that through academic excellence she would be able to change the difficult situations of her family, and hence, chose studying hard as her pathway to pursue a better future for herself and the family. By stressing "I should look forward" and "I am looking at the future", she made it very clear that her studying hard was mainly a future orientated action, which is very much in line with the projective element of agency as expressed in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) work.

Similar future orientation could also be identified from Nini's narrative, when she talked about her determination to leave the rural village and linked it with her positive speculation about the city (as quoted in the previous section). Compared with Feifei, she was performing even better in her studies, often being ranked first or second in her

class.

> "I always got very good scores in examinations. A lot of classmates view me as their competitor and their goal is to beat me. My goal is far beyond this… My goal is to get out of the village. That is also my parents' expectation. I will use scores to measure my current achievements. I fear to be disgraced among my classmates. But I do this mainly for the future…I am realistic, actually. I feel only in the city could I achieve my potential and strength, and overcome my weakness. In the city, your personal networks are expanded. If you could do well in the city, it is because that you excel in knowledge and intelligence. In the city, I could improve my knowledge and make progress. No matter how good you are in the villages, you will be just so so when going out... I get these ideas from TV and books, and father and mother often talk like this as well. They wish me to live a better life than they did, not only in terms of economic situation, but also improvements intellectually culturally and morally."

According to Nini's narrative, she was not only concerned about the prospect of economic improvement, preferring to put more stress on the overall development of personal competence in the city. Her understanding of doing well in the city was that it required higher qualifications than in rural villages. Thus, she constantly reminded herself that her goal was targeted at her future success in the city, rather than in competing with her peers, because even if they were good in the villages, they "will be just so so when going out" to the city.

Several other children I interviewed also expressed their will to pursue their future in the city through professions requiring higher education, like Ah Ke, who aspired to be an architect, Linlin wishing to become a translator, and Yuyu wanting to be a teacher. In fact, almost every child I interviewed acknowledged the importance of education for their future. Even some children doing not so well and showing little interest in study appeared to desire pursuing higher education, such as Ah Shui, Maomao and Ah Dong. However, when approaching the end of their nine years of compulsory education, these children, or boys to be exact, who felt their academic advancement was not very likely, had also begun to think about alternative ways to pursue their future in the city. In contrast, the girls seemed to have not prepared a second option other than pursuing higher education, even Maomao, who admitted she had little chance of getting into

university. It could be that in the rural communities the boys were being socialized to be more independent so that they would be able to provide for the family when grown up. Hence, they appeared to be more active and autonomous than girls in formulating new projects when feeling blocked by traditional trajectories. They tended to emphasize the significance of professional skills and working experiences for future career development, and proposed taking some vocational training first with the aim of finding a skilled job, like becoming a chef (Ah Dong), a tour guide (Ah Wan) or an excavator driver (Ah Shui). This was the preferred alternative to repeating the manual jobs their migrant parents did, like construction workers, miners, or factory workers. Ah Wei was the only one who had taken concrete actions toward his goal. He was a 13 year old boy in Grade 8 when I first met him. His father had been working away as a construction worker since before he was born, and his mother had died when he was six years old. He and his older sister were cared for by his paternal grandma after that. He quit school at the end of the first semester of Grade 8, which was in fact, about one and a half years before he could finish middle school as the nine year compulsory education regulations require.

"(I am living) in South City Road (now)… An auto repair shop, (run) by my neighbour… I am learning (car repairing) there, as an apprentice… (I've been there) for four months now… I like it… I don't like study… I have been thinking about it for a long time. I can't make a good student anyway… From Grade 6, I began to think about that. I can't focus on study… I like playing… I began to think about to become a car repairing worker or a chef when I grow up… I am not very sure why I had such ideas. Maybe from the TV, the advertisement… about those vocational schools… It says those jobs are hot in the city and you can get good wages… My older sister tried to persuade me not to quit school… She is in university now, the second year... She said you should get more education to find a better job in the future… I said I can't study well…Dad said nothing. He just let me go… He had been pushing me to study hard before. Too strictly! He wanted me to study all the time, even in the holidays. The more he pushed, the more I resisted in my mind… I know education is important, but every time I went to school, I just wanted to play, not to study… Here (the auto repair shop) when I learned something, I would have a sense of achievement. *Shifu* (note: master teacher, a respectful name for one teaching vocational skills) will praise me and say like, this boy is good, and can have a bright future… No, no sense of achievement (in the school)… No praise at

all... I can't work out the questions (in the exam) anyway."

Students with bad educational performance like Ah Wei could be the most frustrated group in the school, according to my interviews and observations. They would often be blamed by their parents, caregivers or teachers for their low grades, and gradually lose their trust and support if they failed to show any efforts to study harder, as illustrated in Ah Wei's narrative. Moreover, if they could not build a rapport with peers in similar situations, as Ah Shui and Ah Dong had managed to do, they would have little chance of feeling any sense of camaraderie, but rather be shunned by the majority of their classmates who regarded exams scores as the standard by which to classify good and bad students. This could be another reason for Ah Wei giving up his studies in that he did not mention having any close friends during our interviews.

Feeling totally frustrated with the school, Ah Wei chose to quit and yet, he was not merely escaping school. He had been actively thinking about the future and made his choice according to the information he could obtain, albeit limited in nature. In fact, like Ah Wei, several other children also told me they were influenced by the advertising explosion when envisaging future careers, and felt attracted by the professional skills, good wages, or joyfulness it promised. However, after experiencing the reality of work, Ah Wei soon found out that being a car repair apprentice was not easy for a 13 year old boy fond of playing like him, even though he had gained some sense of achievement from his job.

> "*Shifu* is very strict, and does not allow me to leave the shop without his permission ... I have snuck out for two days in *wang ba*, and got caught by *Shifu*… He called dad… Dad said if you do not want to learn that, just come with me… I don't want to follow him to the construction site… The (living) conditions there are very poor. Life is not good there… I've been there in Grade 7… The conditions are really bad."

Ah Wei told me he had thought about his father's words for a whole night. Having witnessed his father's harsh conditions, he felt it was too difficult to be a construction worker, and hence chose to continue his apprenticeship. Ah Wei's family background had largely restricted his choices. As his mother had died at an early age, his father had to provide for the whole family alone from his low paid job, and it was especially hard to afford the university fees for the older sister. Feeling disappointed with his son's

academic prospects, Ah Wei's father could be understandably reluctant to put more investment into him, as there was another child on whom he could count. Yet, according to my interviews and observations, for children from better off families, or for the only child in a family, even though they were not promising in terms of study, parents would still put financial resources towards their education or training to prepare them for future careers. For example, Ah Shui told me his mother required him to finish high school before going out to learn work related skills, and Ah Wan told me his father was prepared to send him to a formal vocational school if he could not gain entry to a good high school. However, according to my interviews with local government officials, they expressed concerns that the quality of vocational training could not meet the requirements of the labour market and guarantee good employment as promised in the advertisements. Thus, it would appear that these children's hypothetical resolution of obtaining the necessary vocational skills to guarantee employment might not be fulfilled, in which case it would need to be modified in the future.

Studying hard for university education and thinking about learning working skills can be viewed as the future oriented strategy that the left-behind children figured out so as to pursue a better living in the city. They all had a clear goal, that is, leaving the rural hometown for the developed city, and they all wished to avoid their parents' fate of being a migrant labourer, labelled with the name of "*nongmin gong*" (peasant worker) that would reinforce their rural background. Often, they bore not only their own dreams, but also the whole family's expectations. Their aspiration for the future was empowered by their parents' migration, as it gave them expanded exposure to urban life as well as the necessary financial resources for their education and training. Yet, parents' input and expectations could be stressful for these children, as they often appeared to fear that they would not be able to meet these and pay back their parents' sacrifice. Ah Ke's discourse reflects the combination of their ambition, determination, fear and anxiety.

> "I think I should be responsible for my own future and make a good plan... Anyway, I have to walk on the right track. The road of life is short. If you take one wrong step, then all will be ruined… I must grasp the opportunity to get better education, and study hard. And, the abilities in every aspect are also what I need to cultivate, as these will be good for my future."

7.3. Discussion

In the context of international migration, flows of information, money and things from "there" to "here" provide the sources for left-behind children to imagine and construct the 'notion' of developed countries as a rich and modern world (Dreby, 2010). This has resulted in children associating migration with wealth and social mobility, downplaying the value of education, and aspiring to follow in their parents' footsteps to "there", as disclosed by a plethora of studies carried out in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia (Artico, 2003; Coe, 2012; Dreby, 2010; Kandel, 2003; Langevang & Gough, 2009). By contrast, Hoang and Yeoh (2014) revealed that in Vietnam, although children imagined "there" as being a better world, they did not want to go overseas when they had grown up, because their construction of migrant life was grounded in hardship and loneliness due to the adults' deliberate emphasis on the sacrificial aspects of migration, which appeared to be driven by the intention to cultivate a feeling of gratitude in children.

In this study, in the context of China's internal rural-urban migration, the focal left-behind children demonstrated extensive direct experience of "there", and appeared to have developed complicated feelings about "here" and "there". They liked the modernity and prosperity of "there", but resented its exclusion and strangeness; they felt embarrassed about the underdevelopment of "here", but enjoyed the familiarity and sense of belonging it gave them. They also linked their parents' migration with a sense of bitterness and sacrifice and did not want to take this strategy for seeking a livelihood themselves, which is quite similar to the aforementioned Vietnamese children, whereby the narrative of parental sacrifice was used to promote a sense of the children's obligation. However, even though they had realized the marginalized situation of "*nongming gong*", they still held the strong desire to go to the developed urban area, because they could see the possibility of avoiding their parents' hardship and hence, live a better life in the city. Through parents, extended family, community members, and public media, they learned that high levels of education and professional skills could make it more likely that they could get rid of the label of "*nongming gong*" and be accepted as a real "*cheng li ren*". Therefore, they generally assumed a projective orientation in exercising agency to search for such viable pathways to negotiate a better future in the city and were aware that they needed to take action in this direction, if there was to be a solution to the unresolved tensions between "here" and "there" that they

were experiencing at the time.

Studying hard for university education was the most popular project reported among these left-behind children. This was enabled by the value placed on educational importance as well as the family expectations and generous investment, rather than a mechanical action predetermined by these cultural and structural conditions. It involved a process in which the children exercised agency to reflect on the importance of education for their present and future situations, thus making the effort to engage with their studies and achieve high grades in accordance with their aspiration to attend university so as to be able to live a better life in the city in the future. The good grades that they obtained through hard study could enable them to gain a higher status and more financial resources from their family, school and community. These, in return, could further strengthen their belief in the significance of education and motivate them to study even harder. Yet, at the same time, they could also feel higher degrees of academic pressure due to these increased resources and the correspondingly raised expectation. This could result in these children feeling anxiety about their performance and having a fear of failure.

Not all the children could perform well at study and satisfy the entrance qualifications needed for high education, even though the admission rate has been rising year on year (Xing, 2013). Under such constraining circumstances, consideration of learning work skills represented the future oriented agency of those children who felt frustrated by their academic prospects. When they felt blocked in their academic advancement, they began to search actively for alternative pathways towards the future, drawing on information from the media. They also chose to emphasize the value of professional skills to shift the focus of their family and themselves away from the significance of a university education, as this could help adjust the expectations of their family members and make them more willing to support their vocational training in the future. However, the prospects arising from such a strategy could be greatly influenced by the quality of the vocational training and the degree of its match to the requirements of the labour market.

In sum, both studying hard for university education and projecting about learning vocational skills were primarily driven by the projective element of agency, as characterized by the following argument of Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 984),

"immersed in a temporal flow, they move 'beyond themselves' into the future and construct changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present." Moreover, in the Chinese context, both strategies also represent the future orientation of the whole family, because children are regarded as the continuation of parents' lives and parents are to find their existential meaning in their children's successes (Ho, 1996; Kipnis, 2009). Therefore, parents are willing to make sacrifices for their children and invest in their future, whilst the children feel obligated to reciprocate in terms of their future success.

However, whether the focal children will attain their goal through these strategies is not only subject to their exercise of agency and family support, but also influenced by broader socioeconomic contexts. In addition to the constraints discussed above, like university admission rates and the quality of vocational training, it also depends on whether the labour market can provide sufficient high status employment vacancies for people with a university education or appropriate professional skills, which is largely related to China's industrial upgrading processes. Yet, speaking broadly, from the other side it can be argued that if there is a growing population possessing university education or professional skills and aspirations for urban life, China is more capable of speeding up its industrial upgrading and urbanization processes, which in return, could help each individual child to realize his/her goals.

Chapter VIII Conclusion, Discussion and Implications

This study has been aimed at finding out how left-behind children experience their life with parents' migration from their own perspective and exploring how they practise agency to negotiate with structural and cultural contexts when living under these circumstances. Through the analysis of the qualitative data I gathered from my fieldwork in the Yucai Middle School and nearby villages in Hunan Province, China, I have presented in detail the mixed feelings towards parental migration amongst the left-behind children and their various strategies of action to deal with their struggles in three empirical findings chapters, which pertained to three paired interwoven themes, that is, "money and love", "lonely and free", and "here and there", respectively. The analysis on specific experience and its relationship with agency, structure and culture has been summarised in the discussion section of each findings chapter and therefore, this concluding chapter mainly focuses on the synthesis of these analyses, with the general aim being to build a theoretical framework that incorporates the experiences of left-behind children living with their parents' migration. Based on the research findings, policy and practice implications are proposed with a central concern to include children's own perspective and thus, facilitate their exercising of agency. The final section presents the limitations of this research and the recommendations for future studies.

8.1. Conclusion and Discussion

In presenting how the focal left-behind children experienced their lives with their parents' migration and exercised their agency to deal with this, my aim has not been to make fixed claims about the situation of left-behind children, but rather, to stay true to these children's accounts and demonstrate their experiences from their own perspectives, even though these experiences are always full of complexities and contradictions. By disclosing these left-behind children's mixed feelings and their agentic strategies of action, this study has provided a diversified and nuanced picture of these children, which is different from the current passive and victim images often put forward to the public. Moreover, an integrative framework has been proposed that

facilitates gaining a dynamic and comprehensive understanding of this group, thereby contributing to the current theoretical debates on children and childhood studies.

8.1.1. Ambivalence

The left-behind children's experiences with their parents' migration explored in this study could be conceptualised as constituting "ambivalence", as demonstrated in the analysis of the three pairs of interwoven themes, namely "money and love", "lonely and free", and "here and there". Their accounts unfold their lived contradictions and dilemmas, for, they valued and enjoyed the money that their parents earned from migration and acknowledged it as a currency of love, but disliked the emotional distance from their migrant parents due to physical separation; they resented the feeling of being lonely as they were without their parents' company on the one hand, but enjoyed the freedom from parents' control on the other; they held mixed feelings about their home communities and the host cities to which their parents migrated, because neither could simultaneously give them a sense of belonging and satisfy their desire for modernity. Such ambivalence "is distinguished from indifference, uncertainty, ambiguity, dissonance and inconsistency" (Baek, 2010, p. 611), for it reflects that these children simultaneously held contradictory attitudes toward their parents' migration, which stem from ongoing interactions with their structural and cultural contexts.

The concept of ambivalence is well embedded in sociological tradition. Merton and Barber (1963, p. 99) define it as "opposing normative tendencies in the social definition of a role", that is, it refers to incompatible normative expectations which constitute fundamental structural sources of ambivalence in social relations (Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). In recent years, sociologists have conceptualized ambivalence within human relationships ranging from social roles to the characteristics of modernity (Bauman, 1991; Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1991; Smart, 1999; Smelser, 1998). Among them, Smelser (1998, p. 5) constructs ambivalence as the concurrent existence of "opposing affective orientations toward the same person, object, or symbol", and proposes that dependent situations tend to generate ambivalence. Bauman, Beck, Giddens and Smart conceptualise ambivalence as an unintended feature of modernity, which is associated with uncertainty, anxiety, and disorder (Bauman, 1991; Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1991; Smart, 1999). Empirically, ambivalence has been employed to explore adults' intergenerational relationships, referring to contradictions and tensions between adult

children and their parents (Connidis & Mcmullin, 2000; Lüscher, 2002; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). Such analysis has mainly been used to provide psycho-social explanations on mixed emotional and instrumental behaviours at the micro-level concerning individuals, dyads and networks, but has failed to provide broader social-structural explanations regarding these (Connidis & Mcmullin, 2002, Hillcoat-Nalletamby & Philips, 2011). There has been a call for research into the multidimensional, temporal, and transformative characteristics of ambivalence (Connidis & Mcmullin, 2002; Hillcoat-Nalletamby & Philips, 2011). Hillcoat-Nalletamby and Philips (2011, p. 206) contend:

> "Ambivalence is situated at the nexus of complex, dynamic figurations of relational experiences which are patterned by the temporality of relational histories and the socially structured dimensions of human existence."

The current study echoes this theoretical postulate by locating left-behind children's ambivalent experiences within the interactive processes involved when they exercise agency to negotiate with social and cultural contexts. First, left-behind children's experiences of ambivalence are grounded in the structural and cultural contexts associated with migration. They receive not only resources (e.g. money and expanded urban exposure) but also endure constraints (e.g. lack of parental company and exclusion in the city) brought about by their parents' migration and the broader context of China's rural-urban bifurcation. Such resources and constraints breed ambivalence by boosting the children's needs (e.g. for money, freedom, and modernity) or by raising their awareness of certain needs (e.g. "*qin*", companionship, and sense of belonging) on the one hand, yet on the other, make these different needs incompatible, such as when money is traded off against "*qin*", their parents' companionship against freedom, as well as the sense of belonging against urban modernity. Moreover, as analysed in my previous chapters, these incompatible needs are also shaped by diversified and often contradictory cultural schemas. For example, the notion of independence serves to endorse the desire for freedom, while the traditional Chinese culture of the family emphasizes interdependence and obligation.

Second, the contradictory feelings that constitute ambivalence are not in equilibrium with one another but rather, can be expressed in different ways, according to changing situations. For instance, when addressing the material benefits they received or the

economic pressure of their family, these children were likely to show appreciation regarding their parents' migration. However, when faced with other children's happiness with having their parents at their side, they were prone to making complaints about feeling not "*qin*" with their parents due to their migration. Therefore, these left-behind children were constantly moving between the two poles of ambivalence in accordance with the contingencies of particular situations.

Third, such volatile experiences of ambivalence are anxiety-provoking, and thus can drive left-behind children to exercise agency to deal with the challenges emerging from changing situations. By shifting their temporal orientations, and drawing on different structural resources and cultural tools, the children are able to form a variety of practical or projective strategies to impact upon their problematic situations, with potentialities to reconstruct or transform their parent-child relationship and the broader rural-urban connections, to a greater or lesser extent. In so doing, they will be reproducing or changing the ambivalence that they have been experiencing.

Given the evidence presented in the current study it is reasonable to argue that ambivalence can serve as a bridging concept between agency and structure/culture. That is, it stems from left-behind children's interactions with structure and culture on the one hand, and on the other, it provides the driving impetus for children to exercise agency to reproduce and/or transform their structural and cultural contexts.

8.1.2. Agency

Agency is central for understanding the process that left-behind children adopt to deal with their ambivalence towards their parents' migration. It is the exercising of agency that reproduces and transforms the structural and cultural contexts that cultivate ambivalence. In this study it has emerged that the strategies that left-behind children develop to deal with their ambivalent experiences are primarily shaped by the practical evaluative and projective dimensions of agency that Emirbayer and Mische (1998) propose, while the dimension of iteration only plays a subsidiary role. It could be that the conflict rooted in ambivalence cannot be tackled simply by resorting to largely unreflective patterns of action, but instead requires higher degrees of practical judgment and imaginative engagement.

The practical evaluative strategies refer to left-behind children's efforts to improve their

present states of life in response to the emergent challenges arising from evolving situations. Such instances include the choice of supporting parents' migration for economic considerations, the construction of the narrative of "not *qin*" to address their emotional loss, the proposal of "father migrating out and mother caring at home" and the exploration of alternative relational resources to tackle the problem of loneliness, as well as the utilization of their parents' absence to maximise their freedom. However, as discussed before, a particular situation tends to elicit one pole of ambivalence and this is the major challenge for left-behind children to confront in the present. As a consequence, when they choose practical evaluative strategies that are mainly engaged with addressing the present, they can often end up attending to one side of ambivalence and repressing the other. They may be able to improve, temporarily, their life satisfaction regarding the present, but cannot fundamentally resolve the dilemma they struggle with, because the other side of their ambivalence will reassert itself later, when the contingencies change. For example, by choosing to live alone in her hometown rather than moving to Shenzhen with her parents, Yuyu could enjoy more freedom to which she currently attached high importance, but she had to endure feeling a sense of loneliness at the same time, which could have turned out to be a major challenge when this was triggered under certain circumstances. As such, these practical evaluative actions could actually reproduce ambivalence, because they highlight alternately the significance of both contradictory poles (i.e. money and "*qin*", parents' companionship and freedom, and here and there), but do not fundamentally change rural-urban bifurcation and the embedded migrant and left-behind child relationship.

However, the ambivalence resulting from parents' migration is not unresolvable when seen from the long term view. By shifting to a future orientation, left-behind children are able to move beyond current structural constraints so as to project solutions that may foster chances to restructure the rural family's livelihood strategy, and more broadly, to reshape rural-urban connections and change the structure of Chinese society. These possibilities are illustrated in the discussions regarding left-behind children's projective strategies of studying hard for achieving a university education and learning vocational skills so as to be able to take up respectable jobs. These would break up the foundations of the ambivalence that these left-behind children experienced in the present, although subsequently, new forms of ambivalence would emerge from their reconfigured structural and cultural contexts.

8.1.3. Structure

Structure constrains and enables left-behind children's exercise of agency in dealing with their ambivalence towards their parents' migration. At the macro level, the rural-urban bifurcation in contemporary China is a defining structural force that shapes these children's ambivalence, as discussed above. It appears highly restricting for the children of migrants in that neither can they opt out of the livelihood strategy of migration nor can they strive to be recognized as real urban children in terms of their social, cultural and legal status. Yet, large scale rural to urban migration has boosted the exchange of people, money, things and information, all of which permeate the rural-urban divide and provide increased resources and opportunities that enable left-behind children to have more choices than their parents' generation, particularly regarding how to live their current lives and how to imagine and aspire for their futures. Moreover, China's booming economy, rapid urbanization, and expanding higher education and vocational training opportunities also cultivate people's optimism. In particular, these fuel left-behind children's desire to achieve upward mobility through studying hard or learning professional skills.

The relational contexts are the structures with which children directly negotiate resources and constraints that mainly involve their interactions with parents, peers, teachers, extended family members, and neighbours. Among these, the parent-child relational process plays a central role in conditioning the children's lives. From their interactions with their parents, left-behind children not only perceive the rigidity of the aforementioned macro socioeconomic forces, but also become aware of the restrictions inside the family that constrain their efforts to pursue better living situations. These include the economic situation of the family, parenting practices guided by traditional childrearing values, unforeseen events in the extended family, the ever evolving relationship between the father and mother as well as the conflicting interests of different family members. However, there are resources gained from parents' migration that are enabling these children's exercise of agency, including: money earned from migration that is supportive of children's study and networking; parents' absence giving children a space in which to bargain with their parents regarding making their own choices and resisting adults' authority; and expanded urban exposure helping them to construct images of urban life, which motivate them to study harder or to find professional jobs so as to have a better future in the city.

However, structure is also shaped by the left-behind children's exercise of agency. Although they do not have much influence on the decision to migrate, their choice to adopt a supportive attitude towards this as a venture founded in family cooperation, can have a stabilising effect on the status quo of the family and reproduce the mode of migration, whereby the parents migrate and the children are left behind. Moreover, the structure of the parent-child relationship is also influenced by the children's exercise of agency, such that the construction of "love but not *qin*" helps sustain the loving bond between parents and child, whilst exerting a potential challenge to their moral relationship regarding obligations. Moreover, the strategies to deal with loneliness and to exploit freedom further reduce children's reliance on parents and can sow the seeds of intergenerational conflict. Further, from the long term perspective, the projective strategies of studying hard and learning vocational skills, are going to change the socioeconomic status of the family as well as promote broader social and economic development in China, whilst also reshaping the rural-urban divided structure of society. These developments reflect the structuration process (Giddens, 1981) in that these children's agency is not only constituted by the social structure, but also serves to reproduce and/or reconfigure it.

8.1.4. Culture

Culture shapes the "tool kit" of world-views, habits and styles (Swidler, 1986, p. 273) and is both enabling and constraining for left-behind children when interpreting their situations and forming agentic strategies. The relation-oriented culture that stresses interdependence, harmoniousness, reciprocity and obligation provides the basic framework guiding Chinese people's living. It can be seen to express itself in various forms according to changing situations (Ho, 1996; Yang, 1981). It enabled the focal children to construct their parents' migration as a sacrifice, which led to them committing to reciprocate (when expressed as filial piety in family settings), it conditioned their preferences for care arrangements (when expressed as the schema of differential order of association), and it supported them in employing a familisation strategy to strengthen their relationships with peers and school teachers so as to ease their loneliness (when applied to non-family settings). Furthermore, the culture of educational importance plays a significant role in shaping children's understanding of migration as a necessity, underpinning their choice to study hard for future success, and supporting them to negotiate more resources from their family, school and community.

In return, this tends to impose high levels of academic pressure on children, and in particular, disadvantages those not doing well in their studies. Moreover, the traditional childrearing styles that stress adult authority and require children's obedience, when combined with an over emphasis on educational success as a key to the future, constitute a force that can constrain children's voices and agency. This can be noted in issues not related to study, such as intergenerational communication problems and when figuring out appropriate care arrangements.

There are newly emerging cultural notions in the children's accounts that appear to be different from or even conflicting with some of the aforementioned traditions, including ideas emphasizing material consumption, emotional needs, independence, and gaining professional vocational skills. These ideas provide alternative tools to draw on for those children feeling blocked in by traditional trajectories. In so doing, they can formulate unconventional strategies in response to their problematic situations, such as making the choice to live alone for a sense of freedom and taking up the pathway of learning vocational skills for future career success. The influences of such cultural notions are substantiated by structural opportunities stemming from their parents' migration, such as an intensive involvement in monetary issues, distance from parental control and expanded exposure to modern urban living. Yet, up until now the impact of such notions on left-behind children's lives still appears to be subsidiary to that of traditional culture, in that the latter plays a primary role in resource distribution by shaping the action of those adults in control, such as parents, caregivers, and teachers. In return, the resources can validate the enduring existence of the guiding schema, such as the culture of educational importance shaping parents' generous investment in education and the money involved consequently reinforcing children's belief in the extant culture. This reflects the duality of culture and structure in that culture is to be validated by structure for reproduction and structural resources need culture to inform their use (Sewell, 1992).

In shaping the structures that underpin different cultural schemas, left-behind children's exercise of agency can reproduce and transform the cultural contexts in which they are embedded. From the findings of this study, it can be seen that the various strategies of action these children adopt provide structural resources for the development of different or even conflicting cultural notions, although so far it is hard to predict how these tensions will be resolved in the long run. First, the use of money for networking in securing children's social bonds can reinforce their reliance on money and reproduce

the culture of material importance. Second, the choice of studying hard, when coupled with real achievements of upward mobility in the future, serves to underpin further the culture of educational importance. However, if vocational training achieves similar success in terms of individual career trajectories, people's enthusiasm for academic advancement could be diluted to a certain extent. Third, the commitment to pursue future success and pay back parents by sustaining a reciprocal intergeneration relationship, contributes to the reproduction of filial piety. By contrast, the construction of "not *qin*" along with the strategies for dealing with loneliness and exploiting opportunities for freedom, in creating gaps and conflict between parents and their children, can strengthen the notion of independence and thus, bringing into question the traditional intergenerational pattern of interdependence and sense of mutual obligation.

8.1.5. An integrated framework

An integrated theoretical framework has been developed in this study to capture left-behind children's experiences of living with their parents' migration and to explicate the process of their practising of agency. It is proposed that ambivalence acts as a bridging concept to capture the mixed feelings that the left-behind children generate in their interaction with structural and cultural contexts on the one hand, and on the other, it can explain the dynamics of children's exercise of agency in reproducing and transforming the contexts that constitute their experiences. In contrast to a univalent expression of people's feelings, attitudes and choice, ambivalence focuses on the simultaneous existence of contradictory affective orientations (Smelser, 1998) and is evolving in nature for it is subject to the interplay between structure, culture and agency (Hillcoat-Nalletamby & Philips, 2011).

The conceptualisation of agency deployed in this study challenges the notion of agency as rational choice or resistance in that given their univalent orientations neither approach addresses the concept of ambivalence (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Smelser, 1998). Moreover, a temporal approach that incorporates different orientations of agency and locates it within evolving structural and cultural contexts is adopted to analyse the dynamic process in which ambivalence unfolds. It is built on the theory advanced by Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 962), wherein they define agency as "a temporally embedded process of social engagement" and disaggregate it into temporal dimensions: either engaged with the past, or responsive to the present, or oriented towards the future.

This conceptualization can be used to address the complicated and transformative characteristics of ambivalence in that it provides for a multidimensional analysis of the different forms of interaction between agency and structure that constitute ambivalence.

Figure 5. An integrated framework for a dynamic understanding of left-behind children
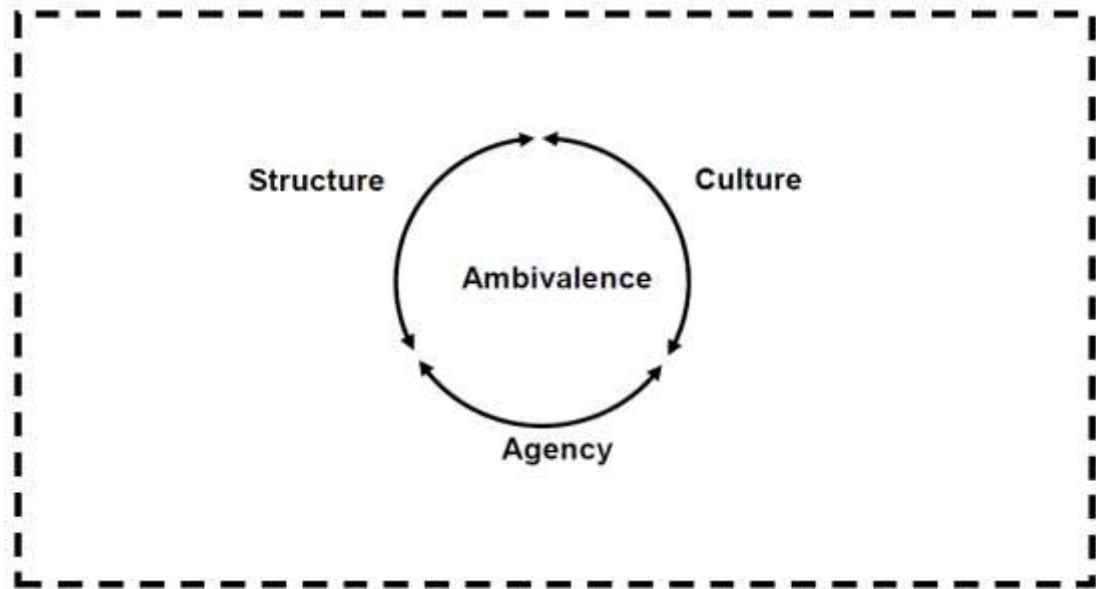
However, Emirbayer and Miche's (1998) theorising of agency does not adequately address the relationship between culture and agency, because culture is not separated from structure analytically in their framework. Drawing on the works of Sewell (1992) and Swidler (1986), this researcher makes a distinction between structure (actual resources) and culture (virtual schemas), by introducing their mutually constituting relation to their interactions with agency. This facilitates the capture of the cultural dimension present in the dynamics of ambivalence. Consequently, this integrated framework helps in the attainment of a more dynamic, comprehensive yet nuanced understanding of left behind children's diverse and often conflicting experiences. It builds upon a series of previous studies that have stressed left-behind children's perspectives and agency that have covered a wide range of these children's experiences (Asis, 2006; Dreby, 2010; Olwig, 1999; Orellana et al., 2001; Murphy, 2014). By incorporating the concept of ambivalence into the dynamic interplay between structure, culture and agency, it is contended that the proposed framework can systematically capture the complexity in such children's lived experiences.

Moreover, this framework could contribute to the debates in the sociology of childhood field by advancing theoretical integration to transcend the agency/structure dichotomy.

By drawing on different theoretical resources regarding agency, structure and culture (Emirbayer & Miche, 1998; Sewell, 1992; Swidler, 1986), this proposed integrated framework takes a step forward to locate children's agency and experiences within the dialectic processes with evolving structural and cultural contexts (Mayall, 2012), which are riddled with "intricacies, complexities, ambiguities, and ambivalence" (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 259).

8.2. Implications

By capturing a dynamic understanding of left-behind children's ambivalent experiences with their parents' migration from their own perspectives, this researcher contributes to the literature that challenges the image attributed to left-behind children by the Chinese government and the mass media (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; Y. Wu, 2013; Zhang, 2008) that contends they are passive victims. In particular, the children' own perception of their living circumstances provides rich information about how to address their real needs, which are largely ignored in current policy and services that are dominated by a prevailing top-down perspective. Therefore, it is urged that policy makers should incorporate left-behind children's perspectives when designing policies and services to promote their well-being. Moreover, drawing on the study findings, this researcher puts forward some specific implications for practice and policy.

From a practical stance, to address the current problems of left-behind children, a range of interventions targeted at enhancing their relational contexts and community environment could improve their situation in the short term. A training course for migrant parents and caregivers that helps the adults realize the importance of attending to the children's emotional needs, listening to their voices and improving intergeneration communication is required along with detailed parenting guidance that takes into account the best available contemporary knowledge in this field. The left-behind children should be involved in designing the course and its delivery to make sure that it addresses their real needs. In addition, school-based support programmes could assist left-behind children, given the central role of study and school in these children's lives and the traditional Chinese cultural expectations with regards to teacher responsibilities. In order to facilitate such initiatives, specific institutional arrangements have to be established, with extra financial backing to secure their actual

implementation. Finances are needed so as to reduce the number of students in a class which may allow the school teachers to pay adequate attention to children when they are in particular need of support. Further to this, community capacity building programmes can increase the resources that left-behind children could draw on to negotiate a better way of living, such as the development of public facilities and worthwhile extra curriculum activities.

In fact, to provide comprehensive services for left-behind children whilst avoiding disadvantaging other children who may also be in need, a general service system for rural children needs to be established that includes some of the aforementioned interventions for left-behind children. In contemporary China, the public services that rural children can access are very limited and often cannot stretch to basic protection measures that prevent them from becoming victims of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation (Cheng, 2012). Therefore, central government should make efforts to develop basic services for children in all rural areas, from which left-behind children can benefit.

Turning to policy measures to be taken on a broader level, a future oriented policy scheme to expand the opportunities for upward mobility of aspirational people would also benefit left-behind children. Such a policy demands that more resources are allocated to promote the quality of education and vocational training in rural areas, as well as to speed up the pace of industrial upgrading and urbanization. This policy could allow the left-behind children to realise their projective strategies, which revolve around resolving the dilemma of their family and paying back the sacrifices made by their migrant parents. However, the most important policy initiative that could substantially improve the situation of left-behind children is one that breaks down the institutional barriers regarding rural to urban migration. This requires that the government abolishes the *hukou* registration system, or at least reforms the *hukou* based public service provision system so that migrant workers can access benefits in terms of housing, employment, education, and medical services, which would facilitate the permanent residence of all family members in the cities.

8.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this research contributes to developing an integrative dynamic framework that can shed light on left-behind children's experiences, it has several limitations. First, this study was conducted in a specific rural town in an inland province of Hunan in China. The town is located at a convenient distance from several cities, including the capital city of the province. Its economic situation is near to the national average level of all rural areas and Guangdong Province is the main destination for migration due to its geographic proximity. Therefore, the findings emerging from this study cannot be seen as representative of all left-behind children's experiences in rural China, which comprises vast territories with huge regional variations. Future research in settings with different social, cultural, economic and geographical characteristics would help attain a more comprehensive understanding of left-behind children across some of these different geographical regions, and comparative research between different communities could further highlight the impact of structural and cultural contexts.

Second, this study was based in the focal children's rural hometown and mainly captured their status of being left behind. Yet, as discussed in the previous chapters, it is quite common for the children to visit or stay in the parents' work town for a period of time. Such experiences of "there" have deep influences on their lives in the present as well as in the future, and are inseparable from their living "here", in the rural hometown. The term "left behind" can only refer to their current status of being separated from their parents, and cannot capture the circular movement of these children. Therefore, future research concerning the influences of rural-urban migration on children should transcend the static division of left-behind and migrant children so as to study their whole experience over time. A longitudinal research design is a recommended approach which would involve following a group of children through their life trajectories across multiple sites, so as to establish a more dynamic picture of their experiences and the effects of migration.

Lastly, this study has mainly focused on children's perspectives and experiences to inform the design of policy and services for left-behind children, which to date have been dominated by adults' points of view. To address, in full, a specific policy or service issue, further studies should include perspectives gathered from a range of different stakeholders, including the children themselves, parents, caregivers, school teachers, community residents and leaders, local governmental officials, and social service providers. By bringing together all these perspectives to a study, it is hoped that all those

involved will become engaged in a dialogue that could result in improvements in the implementation of policy and services for left-behind children.

Appendix 1. Profile of Participants

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Grade	Care arrangement	Parent in migration	Host province	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation	Time in "there"
1	Nini	F	13	8	mother	father	Zhejiang	factory worker	housewife	1 month in one visit
2	Linlin	F	13	8	grandparents	both	Guangdong	factory worker	factory worker	1.5 years & summer visits
3	Feifei	F	12	7	grandparents	both	Tibet	construction contractor	construction contractor	never
4	Maomao	F	13	7	auntie	both	Hunan	construction contractor	construction contractor	summer visits
5	Yuyu	F	12	7	live alone/cared by grandparents	both	Guangdong	small business	housewife	summer visits
6	Qiqi	F	12	7	mother	father	Xinjiang	construction worker	housewife	never
7	Peipei	F	13	8	grandparents	both	Guangdong	factory management	insurance agent	4 years & summer visits
8	Ah Jin	M	13	8	boarding/ grandparents	both	Guangdong	small business	small business	4 years & summer visits

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Grade	Care arrangement	Parent in migration	Host province	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation	Time in "there"
9	Ah Bin	M	13	8	boarding/ auntie	both	Hunan(M) Sichuan(F)	miner	waitress	monthly visits
10	Ah Ke	M	14	8	grandparents	both	Guangdong(M) Hunan(F)	construction worker	tailor	30-40 days in one visit
11	Ah Wei	M	13	8	car repairing shop	father	Hunan	construction worker	N.A.	several days in one visit
12	Ah Wan	M	14	8	grandma	father	Guangdong	small business	housewife	summer visits
13	Ah Shui	M	13	7	father	mother	Guangdong	temporary or agriculture work	factory worker	summer visits
14	Ah Dong	M	13	7	live alone/cared for by grandparents	both	Hunan(M) Guangdong(F)	factory worker	factory worker	0.5 year & summer visits
15	Ah Zhao	M	13	7	mother	father	Hunan	construction contractor	housewife	summer visits
16	Ah Chen	M	11	7	grandma	father	Jiangsu	factory management	N.A.	never

Appendix 2. Question List for Interviews

For left-behind children

The first interview

- How do you lead your daily life?

  Follow up with specific questions on basic living arrangements (including but not limited to meals, clothing, housing, transportation, and living expenses), school life, homework, leisure time, house chores and holidays.

- What do you think about your current life?

  Followed by questions exploring the differences in life with and without parent(s) home, such as, "was there any difference before he or /and she left", "if he or /and she was/were at home, would there be any difference", or "is there any difference between your life and your peer's life"?

- How are you connected with your migrant parent(s)?

  Follow up with questions on the method of distance communication, the return of migrant parent(s), and the reunion in the city, and then move on to feelings about these experiences.

The second interview

- How do you feel/think about the conditions/circumstances you mentioned before? How have these conditions/circumstances influence you?

- What did you do under these conditions/circumstances? Why and how did you do this, what was the consequence?

- Do you have any plans or hopes for the future (near and far off)? Why do you have such ideas?

For focus groups

- How do you lead your daily life?

- What do you think about yourself and your current life?

For caregivers/ parents

1. Basic information about the family

   Family members, routines, income and living expenses

2. Migration

   Decision making process

   Time, destination, job and income

   Connection with the family

   The impact on the family (especially the child)

3. Children

   Living arrangements of the child

   The way of parenting

   Expectation with regards to the child

   Feelings over the experience of looking after the child

For *ban zhuren*

1. The whole class

- Characteristics of students in general

- General features of students' family

- The way of doing teaching and management work

- Challenges in dealing with the students in this class

2. Left-behind children

- Characteristics of left-behind children in general

- General features of left-behind students' family

For School Administrators

1. General information about the school

- Facilities and staff

- Students' general characteristics

- Major events in the recent years

2. Left-behind children

- Estimate scale of left-behind children

- General characteristics of left-behind children

- (if any) Specific policies or strategies about left-behind children

For government officials

1. The socioeconomic environment of *Fugui*

2. The situation of out migration

3. The influence of migration on left-behind children

4. (if any) Specific policies or strategies about left-behind children

Appendix 3. Informed Consent Form (for adults)

A Brief Introduction of Research

In recent years, the children of rural to urban migrants have aroused widespread concern in society and attracted the attention of central and local governments. Yet, the extant research has not sufficiently addressed this issue. Therefore, I am based in Yucai School to conduct a study to capture these children's experiences of parental migration.

My name is Lina Xiao, a PhD student from the University of Bath, UK, and this study is carried out to collect the data for my thesis. Therefore, the information you give in the interview will be used as a source of information for my thesis, and other publications pertaining to this research in the future.

My fieldwork for this research will last for about two semesters, and I hope to interview you regarding the general situation of *Fugui* and the influence of out migration (for **government officials**) / the general situation of the school and students, especially those with a migrant parent(s) (for **school administrator**) / the general situation of the students in your class, especially those with a migrant parent(s) (for *ban zhuren*) / the situation of your family and children (for **parents or caregivers**)[1]

The interview will last for about 30-60 minutes and I will record our conservation if you agree with this arrangement. **All data will be only used for research and your information will be kept strictly confidential as well as being used anonymously**-- unless the risk of harm or a crime come to light. Whenever I present my data, pseudonyms will be used to replace the name of yourself, anyone you mention, and the villages and school.

You have the right to decline my request or quit the interview at any time. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to. If you would like to be interviewed, please fill in the following consent slip and please feel free to contact me

---

[1] These different contents for different types of participant are used separately in a specific consent letter for each kind of role. Here they are combined together to avoid repetition.

directly if you have any questions. My cell phone number is 139-7373-****, and E-mail is lx***@bath.ac.uk.

Thanks for your participation!

The researcher: Lina Xiao

Ph.D. Student, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, UK

~~~~~~~~~

Consent Form

I have read the introduction above, and agree to participate in this research project.

Prior to providing your signature, please read the following and ring your response:

- I know I have the right to quit this research at any time.   YES   NO

- I agree to the interview being recorded.   YES   NO

Signature _____Date _____

Appendix 4. Informed Consent Form (for children)

Hi！My dear fellow!

I am Lina Xiao, a Ph.D. student from the University of Bath in the UK now. I came here to do a research concerning children's experiences with parental migration. I would like to explore with you: how do you lead your life, how do you view your life, how do you deal with the challenges in your life, and what are your aspirations for the future. I genuinely want to learn about your own perspectives (It's not about how the adults judge you!)

Yes! The aim of my research is to have you speak out using your own voices. So remember, this is not my own research; this is our joint research!

Thus, as a matter of fact, I want to invite you to join in this research as a partner (Yes, we are equal partners!). The research will take the form of an interview, that is, the two of us or a few people together will exchange ideas and discuss the topics mentioned above. The interview will take about 30-60 minutes each time, and you can decide the specific time and place to do it. If you agree, I want to record our conservation. In addition, I would be very glad if you want to contact with me via QQ [the most popular instant messenger in China like MSN], cell phone or e-mail, or share ideas with me anything you write down. Besides, in order to know more about you, I hope to have a chance to interview your parents, caregivers, or anyone you think is important to you.

Lastly, I want to assure you that anything you tell me will only be used for research and absolutely be kept as confidential. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in all my research records and dissertations. I will never disclose any information about you to any other people, including teachers, parents, and classmates, unless the information you give me involves harm or a crime.

You have the right to say no to my request or quit the interview at any time. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to. If you would like to participate in this research, please fill in the following consent form. If you feel depressed or sad in the interview process, or you need others' comfort, please tell me at the time. I can help you make contact with teachers, parents or other people you want to find. In any case, please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions. My

cell phone number is 139-7373-****, QQ: 1615441***, and my E-mail is lx***@bath.ac.uk

Thanks for your participation!

The researcher: Lina Xiao

Ph.D. Student, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, UK

～～～～～～～～～

Consent Form

I have read the introduction above, and agree to participate in this children's research project.

Prior to providing your signature, please read the following and ring your response:

- I know I can say no to this research at any time.   YES   NO

- If I feel depressed or sad, I will let the researcher know   YES   NO

- I agree to the interview being recorded.   YES   NO

- I approve of Lina interviewing my_____ (parents or YES   NO
caregivers).

- I also want Lina to interview_____(significant others)

Signature _____Date _____

References

Abu-Lughod, L. (1990). The romance of resistance: Tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women. *American Ethnologist, 17*(1), 41-55.

Adams, R. J., & Page, J. (2005). Do international migration and remittances reduce poverty in developing countries? *World Development, 33*(10), 1645-1669.

Ahearn, L. M. (2001). Language and agency. *Annual review of anthropology, 30*, 109-137.

Ai, H., & Hu, J. (2014). Psychological resilience moderates the impact of social support on loneliness of "left-behind" children. *Journal of health psychology*, doi: 10.1177/1359105314544992.

Alanen, L. (1994). Gender and generation: feminism and the 'child question'. In J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta & Wintersberger.H. (Eds.), *Childhood matters: Social theory, practice and politics* (pp. 27-42). Aldershot: Avebury.

Alanen, L. (2001). Explorations in generational analysis. In L. Alanen & B. Mayall (Eds.), *Conceptualizing child-adult relation* (pp. 11-22). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

All-China Women's Federation (2013). *A research report on Chinese rural left behind children and rural-urban migrant children.* Retrieved from http://acwf.people.com.cn/n/2013/0510/c99013-21437965.html (in Chinese).

Amato, P. R., & Cheadle, J. (2005). The long reach of divorce: Divorce and child well‐being across three generations. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*(1), 191-206.

Antman, F. M. (2011). The intergenerational effects of paternal migration on schooling and work: What can we learn from children's time allocations? *Journal of Development Economics, 96*(2), 200-208.

Antman, F. M. (2012). Gender, educational attainment, and the impact of parental migration on children left behind. *Journal of Population Economics, 25*(4), 1187-1214.

Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (1996). *Culture and agency: The place of culture in social theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2000). For structure: its reality, properties and powers: A reply to Anthony King1. *The Sociological Review, 48*(3), 464-472.

Archer, M. S. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arguillas, M., & Williams, L. (2010). The impact of parents' overseas employment on educational outcomes of filipino children. *International Migration Review, 44*(2), 300-319.

Artico, C. (2003). *Latino families broken by immigration: The adolescents' perception*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, LLC.

Asad, T. (2000). Agency and pain: an exploration. *Culture and religion, 1*(1), 29-60.

Asher, S. R., Hymel, S., & Renshaw, P. D. (1984). Loneliness in children. *Child Development, 55*(4), 1456-1464.

Asher, S. R., & Paquette, J. A. (2003). Loneliness and peer relations in childhood. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 12*(3), 75-78.

Asher, S. R., Parkhurst, J. T., Hymel, S., & Williams, G. A. (1990). Peer rejection and loneliness in childhood. In S. R. Asher & J. D. Coie (Eds.), *Peer rejection in childhood* (pp. 253-273): New York: Cambridge University Press.

Asis, M. (2006). Living with migration: Experiences of left-behind children in the Philippines. *Asian Population Studies, 2*(1), 45.

Baek, Y. M. (2010). An integrative model of ambivalence. *The Social Science Journal, 47*(3), 609-629.

Battistella, G., & Conaco, M. (1998). The impact of labour migration on the children left behind: a study of elementary school children in the Philippines. *SOJOURN:*

Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 13(2), 220-221.

Bauman, Z. (1991). *Modernity and ambivalence*. Oxford: Polity.

Beck, U. (1994). *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bennett, R., Hosegood, V., Newell, M. L., & McGrath, N. (2014). An approach to measuring dispersed families with a particular focus on children 'left behind' by migrant parents: findings from rural South Africa. *Population, Space and Place*. DOI: 10.1002/psp.1843

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Blumer, H. (1954). What is wrong with social theory? *American Sociological Review, 19*(1), 3-10.

Bordonaro, L. I., & Payne, R. (2012). Ambiguous agency: critical perspectives on social interventions with children and youth in Africa. *Children's geographies, 10*(4), 365-372.

Botezat, A., & Pfeiffer, F. (2014). The impact of parents' migration on the well-being of children left behind: Initial evidence from Romania. Retrieved from http://ftp.iza.org/dp8225.pdf

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Oxon: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Boyden, J., & Ennew, J. (1997). *Children in focus: a manual for participatory research with children*: Rädda Barnen.

Boy's death highlights tragedy of China's left-behind children. (2014). Retrieved from http://www.shanghaidaily.com/national/Boys-death-highlights-tragedy-of-

Chinas-leftbehind-children/shdaily.shtml

Brannen, J., & O'Brien, M. (1995). Childhood and the sociological gaze: paradigms and paradoxes. *Sociology, 29*(4), 729-737.

Brown, P. H. (2006). Parental education and investment in children's human capital in rural China. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 54*(4), 759-789.

Bryant, C. G., & Jary, D. (1991). *Giddens' theory of structuration: A critical appreciation*. London: Routledge.

Bryant, J. (2005). *Children of International Migrants in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines: A review of evidence and policies*. Retrieved from http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp2005_05.pdf

Bryman, A. (2008). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Butler, I., Scanlan, L., Robinson, M., Douglas, G., and Murch, M. (2003). *Divorcing children: Children's experience of their parents' divorce*. London and New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Butler, I., & Pugh, R. (2003). The politics of social work research. In R. Lovelock, Lyons, K., and Powell, J. (Ed.), *Reflecting on Social Work* (pp. 55-71). Aldershot: Ashgate.

Cao, S. (2006). The empirical study on the school adaptation of the left behind children. *Youth Studies, 3*, 16-19.

Chan, K. (2009). The Chinese hukou system at 50. *Eurasian Geography and Economics, 50*(2), 197-221.

Chan, K., & Buckingham, W. (2008). Is China abolishing the hukou system? *The China Quarterly, 195*(01), 582-606.

Chan, K., & Zhang, L. (1999). The hukou system and rural-urban migration in China: Processes and changes. *The China Quarterly, 160*, 818-855.

Chao, P. (1983). *Chinese kinship*. London: Kegan Paul International.

Chao, R. K., & Sue, S. (1996). Chinese parental influence and their children's school

success: A paradox in the literature on parenting styles. In S. Lau (Ed.), *Growing up the Chinese way* (pp. 93 - 120). Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.

Chen, C., & Uttal, D. H. (1988). Cultural values, parents' beliefs, and children's achievement in the United States and China. *Human Development, 31*(6), 351-358.

Chen, J. J.-L., & Liu, X. (2012). The mediating role of perceived parental warmth and parental punishment in the psychological well-being of children in rural china. *Social Indicators Research, 107*(3), 483-508.

Chen, X. (2000). Growing up in a collectivist culture: Socialization and socioemotional development in Chinese children. In A. L. Comunian & U. P. Gielen (Eds.), *International perspectives on human developmen* (pp. 331-353). Lengerich, Germany: Pabst Science Publishers.

Chen, X., He, Y., Oliveira, A. M. D., Coco, A. L., Zappulla, C., Kaspar, V., et al. (2004). Loneliness and social adaptation in Brazilian, Canadian, Chinese and Italian children: a multi‐national comparative study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 45*(8), 1373-1384.

Chen, X., Huang, Q., Rozelle, S., Shi, Y., & Zhang, L. (2009). Effect of migration on children's educational performance in rural China. *Comparative Economic Studies, 51*(3), 323-343.

Chen, X., & Xie, Y. (2007). An investigation of rural left-behind children's problematic behaviors and the family factors. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University, 36*(1), 29-33 (in Chinese).

Cheng, F. (2012). Family, state, and child welfare provision. *Youth Studies* (1), 50-56 (in Chinese).

Chi, J., Hu, X. Y., & Shen, J. L. (2008). Family background and life satisfaction of left-behind children in rural China. *Psychological Research, 1*(2), 57-63 (in Chinese).

Chiquiar, D., & Hanson, G. (2005). International migration, self-selection, and the distribution of wages: Evidence from Mexico and the U.S. *Journal of Political*

Economy, 113 (2), 239-281.

Choe, M., Hatmadji, H., Podhisita, C., Raymundo, C., & Thapa, S. (2004). Substance use and premarital sex among adolescents in Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines and Thailand. *Asia Pacific Population Journal, 19*, 5-26.

Coe, C. (2012). Growing up and going abroad: How Ghanaian children imagine transnational migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 38*(6), 913-931.

Cohen, M. L. (1993). Cultural and political inventions in modern China: the case of the Chinese" peasant". *Daedalus, 122*(2), 151-170.

Coleman, J. S. (1994). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Connidis, I. A., & McMullin, J. A. (2002). Sociological ambivalence and family ties: A critical perspective. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64*(3), 558-567.

Corsaro, W. A. (1985). *Friendship and peer culture in the early years*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Corsaro, W. A. (1997). *The sociology of childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Corsaro, W. A. (2005). Collective action and agency in young children's peer cultures. In J. Qvortrup (Ed.), *Studies in modern childhood: Society, agency, culture* (pp. 231-247). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cortes, R. (2008). *Children and Women Left Behind in Labour Sending Countries: an Appraisal of Social Risks*. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/index_46205.html.

Cortes, P. (2013). The feminization of international migration and its effects on the children left behind: Evidence from the Philippines. *World Development*. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.10.021

Crawford-Brown, C. (1993). *A study of the factors associated with the development of conduct disorder in Jamaican male adolescents*. (Unpublished doctoral

dissertation). Rutgers University.

Creswell, J. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

D'Emilio, A. L., Cordero, B., Bainvel, B., Skoog, C., Comini, D., Gough, J., et al. (2007). *The Impact of International Migration: Children Left Behind in Selected Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean*. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/The_Impact_of_International_Migrati on_LAC.pdf.

de la Garza, R. (2010). *Migration, development and children left behind: A multidimensional perspective*. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Postscript_Formatted__Migration_De velopment_and_Children_Left_Behind.pdf.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 1-29). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Dépelteau, F. (2008). Relational thinking: A critique of co‒deterministic theories of structure and agency. *Sociological theory, 26*(1), 51-73.

Devine, D. (2002). Children's citizenship and the structuring of adult-child relations in the primary school. *Childhood, 9*(3), 303-320.

Dobres, M. A., & Robb, J. E. (2000). *Agency in archaeology*. Oxon: Routledge.

Dobson, M. E. (2009). Unpacking children in migration research. *Children's geographies, 7*(3), 355-360.

Dreby, J. (2006). Honor and virtue Mexican parenting in the transnational context. *Gender & Society, 20*(1), 32-59.

Dreby, J. (2007). Children and power in Mexican transnational families. *Journal of*

Marriage and Family, 69(4), 1050-1064.

Dreby, J. (2010). *Divided by borders: Mexican migrants and their children*. London: University of California Press.

Duan, C., Lu, L., Guo, J., & Wang, Z. (2013). Survival and development of left-behind children in rural China: Based on the analysis of sixth census data. *Population Journal, 28*(4), 37-49 (in Chinese).

Duan, C. R., & Yang, K. (2008). A study on rural children left behind. *Population Studies, 32*(3), 15-25 (in Chinese).

Duan, C. R., Yang, K., & Wang, Y. (2005). A Survey on left behind children. *Xuehai, 4*, 11-16 (in Chinese).

Duan, C. R., & Zhou, F. L. (2005). A Study of current status of left behind children in China. *Population Studies, 29*(1), 10-18 (in Chinese).

Durham, D. (2008). Apathy and agency: The romance of agency and youth in Botswana. In J. Cole & D. Durham (Eds.), *Figuring the future: Globalization and the temporalities of children and youth* (pp. 151-178). Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press.

Edillon, R. (2008). *The effects of parent's migration on the rights of children left behind*. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Philippines_The_Effects_of_Parent_Migration.pdf.

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What Is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology, 103*(4), 962 -1023.

Engelbert, A. (1994). Worlds of childhood: differentiated but different. Implications for social policy. In J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta & H. Wintersberger (Eds.), *Childhood matters: Social theory, practice and politics* (pp. 285-298). Aldershot: Avebury.

Falicov, C. J. (2007). Working with transnational immigrants: Expanding meanings of family, community, and culture. *Family process, 46*(2), 157-171.

Fan, C. C. (2008). *China on the Move: Migration, the state, and the household*. Oxon: Routledge.

Fan, F. (2004). *The Lack of Parental Education and its Relation with the Personality, School Achievement and Behavioral Problems of the Left-behind Children*. Shanghai: East China Normal University (in Chinese).

Fan, F., & Sang, B. (2005). Absence of Parental Upbringing and Liushou Children's Personality, Academic Achievements as well as Behavior Problems. *Psychological Science, 28*(4), 855–858 (in Chinese).

Fan, F., Su, L., Gill, M., & Birmaher, B. (2010). Emotional and behavioral problems of Chinese left-behind children: a preliminary study. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology, 45*(6), 655-664.

Fei, X. (1992). *From the soil, the foundations of Chinese society: a translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo, with an introduction and epilogue*. London: University of California Press.

Ferguson, H. (2003). Welfare, social exclusion and reflexivity: the case of child and woman protection. *Journal of social policy, 32*(02), 199-216.

Fetterman, D. (1998). *Ethnography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Frank, R., & Hummer, R. A. (2002). The other side of the paradox: The risk of low birth weight among infants of migrant and nonmigrant households within Mexico. *International Migration Review, 36*(3), 746-765.

Gao, W., Wang, Y., Wang, W., & Liu, Z. (2007). Social support and interpersonal relationship in school of the left-behind children in rural areas. *Chinese Mental Health Journal, 21*(11), 791-794 (in Chinese).

Gao, Y. B. (2008). A comparative study of mental health on left-behind children with different types of guardian and non-left-behind children. *Chinese Journal of Special Education, 7*, 11-18 (in Chinese).

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Giannelli, G. C., & Mangiavacchi, L. (2010). Children's schooling and parental

migration: Empirical evidence on the 'left‑behind' generation in Albania. *Labour, 24*(s1), 76-92.

Gibbs, G. (2002). *Qualitative Data Analysis: Explorations with NVivo*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis*. London: University of California Press.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structure*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Goh, E. C. L., & Kuczynski, L. (2009). Agency and power of single children in multi-generational families in urban Xiamen, China. *Culture Psychology, 15*(4), 506-532.

Graham, E., & Jordan, L. P. (2011). Migrant parents and the psychological well-being of left-behind children in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 73*(4), 763-787.

Hadi, A. (1999). Overseas migration and the well-being of those left behind in rural communities of Bangladesh. *Asia Pacific Population Journal, 14*, 43-58.

Hao, Z., & Cui, L. J. (2007). The definition of Left-behind Children. *Chinese Youth Studies, 10*, 40-43 (in Chinese).

Hare, D. (1999). 'Push' versus 'pull' factors in migration outflows and returns: Determinants of migration status and spell duration among China's rural population. *Journal of Development Studies, 35*(3), 45-72.

Hare, D. (2002). The determinants of job location and its effect on migrants' wages: Evidence from rural China. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 50*(3), 557-579.

Haugen, G. M. D. (2005). Relations between money and love in postdivorce families children's perspectives. *Childhood, 12*(4), 507-526.

Haugen, G. M. D. (2010). Children's perspectives on everyday experiences of shared residence: Time, emotions and agency dilemmas. *Children & Society, 24*(2), 112-122.

Heartbreaking partings for 'left-behind children'. (2014). Retrieved from http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-08/24/content_18476947.html

He, X. (2007) *Social problem: a social transition perspective*. East China University of Science and Technology Press.

He, Z., Cao, Z., Liu, Y., Li, Z., & Xie, X. (2006). A survey on mental health of the left-behind children in rural areas of Hunan Province. *Chinese Journal of Health Education, 22*(6), 421-423 (in Chinese).

Held, D., & Thompson, J. B. (1989). *Social theory of modern societies: Anthony Giddens and his critics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hengst, H. (2005). Complex interconnections: The global and the local in children's minds and everyday worlds. In J. Qvortrup (Ed.), *Studies in modern childhood. Society, agency, culture* (pp. 21-38). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hildebrandt, N., McKenzie, D. J., Esquivel, G., & Schargrodsky, E. (2005). The effects of migration on child health in Mexico [with comments]. *Economia*, 257-289.

Hillcoat-Nallétamby, S., & Phillips, J. E. (2011). Sociological ambivalence revisited. *Sociology, 45*(2), 202-217.

Ho, D. F. Y. (1981). Traditional patterns of socialization in Chinese society. *Acta Psychologica Taiwanica, 23*, 81 - 95.

Ho, D. F. Y. (1987). Fatherhood in Chinese culture. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The father's role: Cross cultural perspectives* (pp. 227 - 245). Hillsdale NJ: Erlbau.

Ho, D. F. Y. (1996). Chinese childhood socialization In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 143 - 154). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Hoang, L. A., Lam, T., Yeoh, B. S., & Graham, E. (2014). Transnational migration, changing care arrangements and left-behind children's responses in South-east

Asia. *Children's geographies*. doi:10.1080/14733285.2015.972653

Hoang, L. A., & Yeoh, B. S. (2014). Children's agency and its contradictions in the context of transnational labour migration from Vietnam. *Global Networks*. doi:10.1111/glob.12057

Hoggett, P. (2001). Agency, rationality and social policy. *Journal of social policy, 30*(01), 37-56.

Holloway, S. L., & Valentine, G. (2000). Spatiality and the new social studies of childhood. *Sociology, 34*(4), 763-783.

Homans, G. C. (1958). Social behavior as exchange. *American journal of sociology, 63*(6), 597-606.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, P., & Avila, E. (1997). "I'm Here, but I'm There" The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood. *Gender & Society, 11*(5), 548-571.

Hong, X. (2013). Social stratification and childrearing values in contemporary China. In C. Kwok-bun (Ed.), *International Handbook of Chinese Families* (pp. 277-287). New York: Springer.

Honwana, A. (2005). The pain of agency In F. De Boeck & A. Honwana (Eds.), *Makers and breakers children and youth in postcolonial Africa* (pp. 31-52). Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.

Hsu, F. L. (1948). *Under the ancestor's shadow*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hu, F. (2012). Migration, remittances, and children's high school attendance: The case of rural China. *International Journal of Educational Development, 32*(3), 401-411.

Hu, H., Lu, S., & Huang, C.-C. (2014). The psychological and behavioral outcomes of migrant and left-behind children in China. *Children and Youth Services Review, 46*(1), 1-10.

Hu, X. Y., Liu, X., Shen, J. L., & Fan, X. Y. (2007). The influence of life events and coping styles on left children's mental health. *Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology, 15*(5), 11-16 (in Chinese).

Huang, A. (2004). The mental health of the left-behind children. *Chinese Mental Health Journal, 18*(5), 351-356 (in Chinese).

Huang, Y. (2006). *The Influence of Family Raising Pattern on the Left-behind Children in Rural Areas*. Nanchang: Jiangxi Normal University Press (in Chinese).

Hunan Bureau of Statistics. (2011). *2010 Anual report of Hunan Province statistics*. Retrieved from //old.hndc.gov.cn/Article/ArticleShow.asp?ArticleID=1093.

Hwang, K. K. (2000). Chinese relationalism: Theoretical construction and methodological considerations. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 30*(2), 155-178.

Hwang, K. K. (2004). *Power game of Chinese people*. Beijing: China Renmin University.

Jacka, T., & Gaetano, A. M. (2004). Introduction: Focussing on Migrant Women. In A. M. aetano & T. Jacka (Eds.), *Women in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China* (pp. 1-40). New York: Columbia University.

James, A. (2007). Giving voice to children's voices: practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American anthropologist, 109*(2), 261-272.

James, A. (2012). *Key concepts in childhood studies*. Sage.

James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

James, A., & Prout, A. (1997). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. Oxon: RoutledgeFalmer.

James, A. L. (2010). Competition or integration? The next step in childhood studies? *Childhood, 17*(4), 485-499.

James, K. (1991). Migration and remittances: a Tongan village perspective. *Pacific Viewpoint, 32*(1), 1-23.

Jamieson, L., & Milne, S. (2012). Children and young people's relationships, relational

processes and social change: reading across worlds. *Children's geographies, 10*(3), 265-278.

Jampaklay, A. (2006). Parental absence and children's school enrolment: evidence from a longitudinal study in kanchanaburi, thailand. *Asian Population Studies, 2*(1), 93-110.

Jenks, C. (2005). *Childhood: Critical concepts in sociology*. Oxon: Routledge.

Jia, Y. H. (2008). Research on problem behavior of left-behind children. *Youth Studies,* (4), 1-6 (in Chinese).

Jia, Z., & Tian, W. (2010). Loneliness of left‐behind children: a cross‐sectional survey in a sample of rural China. *Child: care, health and development, 36*(6), 812-817.

Jing, J. (2000). *Feeding China's little emperors: Food, children, and social change*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jones, H., & Kittisuksathit, S. (2003). International labour migration and quality of life: findings from rural Thailand. *Population, Space and Place, 9*(6), 517-530.

Jones, A., Sharpe, J., & Sogren, M. (2004). Children's experiences of separation from parents as a consequence of migration. *Caribbean Journal of Social Work, 3*, 89-109.

Judd, E. R. (1994). *Gender and power in rural north China*. Standford,CA: Stanford University Press.

Kandel, K. (2003). The impact of U.S. migration on mexican children's educational attainment. In M.Cosio, R.Marcouz, M.Pilon & A. Quesnel (Eds.), *Education, Family, and Population Dynamics* (pp. 305-328). Paris: CICRED.

Kandel, W., & Kao, G. (2001). The impact of temporary labor migration on Mexican children's educational aspirations and performance. *International Migration Review, 35*(4), 1205-1231.

Karp, I. (1986). Agency and social theory: A review of Anthony Giddens. *American ethnologist, 13*(1), 131-137.

Kim, K. W. (2006). Hyo and parenting in Korea. In K. H. Rubin & O. B. Chung (Eds.), *Parenting beliefs, behaviors, and parent–child relations: A cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 207-223). New York: Psychology Press.

Kipnis, A. (2009). Education and the governing of child-centered relatedness. In S. Brandtstädter & G. D. Santos (Eds.), *Chinese Kinship* (pp. 204-222). Oxon: Routledge.

Klocker, N. (2007). An example of 'thin' agency: Child domestic workers in Tanzania. In R. Panelli, S. Punch & E. Robson (Eds.), *Global perspectives on rural childhood and youth: young rural lives* (pp. 83-94). New York: Routledge.

Koc, I., & Onan, I. (2004). International Migrants' Remittances and Welfare Status of the Left‑Behind Families in Turkey. *International Migration Review, 38*(1), 78-112.

Kong, X. Z., & Gu, H. M. (2004). On Providing Education to Children of Rural Migrants. *Journal of Shanxi Finance and Economics University, 26*(6), 12-17 (in Chinese).

Kyratzis, A. (2004). Talk and interaction among children and the co-construction of peer groups and peer culture. *Annual review of anthropology, 33*, 625-649.

Lahaie, C., Hayes, J., Piper, T., & Heymann, J. (2009). Work and family divided across borders: the impact of parental migration on Mexican children in transnational families. *Community, Work & Family, 12*(3), 299-312.

Lalu, P. (2000). The grammar of domination and the subjection of agency: colonial texts and modes of evidence. *History and Theory, 39*(4), 45-68.

Lam, C. M. (1997). A cultural perspective on the study of Chinese adolescent development. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 14*(2), 95-113.

Langevang, T., & Gough, K. V. (2009). Surviving through movement: the mobility of urban youth in Ghana. *Social & Cultural Geography, 10*(7), 741-756.

Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Race, class and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Latapi, A. E. (2009). Can migration foster development in Mexico? The case of poverty and inequality. *International migration, 47*(5), 75-113.

Lee, J. A. (1982). Three paradigms of childhood. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie, 19*(4), 591-608.

Lee, M. (2010). Migration and children's welfare in China: the schooling and health of children left behind. *The Journal of Developing Areas, 44*(2), 165-182.

"Left-behind" children pains China. (2014). Retrieved from http://en.people.cn/90882/8522984.html

Levitt, P., & Jaworsky, B. N. (2007). Transnational migration studies: Past developments and future trends. *Annu. Rev. Sociol., 33*, 129-156.

Lewis, A., & Lindsay, G. (2000). *Researching children's perspectives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Lewis, O. (1966). The culture of poverty. *Scientific American, 215*(4), 19-25.

Li, B. (2005). The mental health problems of the left-behind children in rural areas and its interventions. *Education Exploration, 5*, 82-83 (in Chinese).

Li, G., Luo, T., & Tao, F. (2012). Effects of parental working out-of-home on health risk behavior and psychological status among left-behind children *Chinese Journal of Public Health, 7*, 16-21 (in Chinese).

Li, Q. (2001). Analysis of the remittance of the out-migrant workers in China *Sociological Research, 4*, 64-76 (in Chinese).

Li, Q. (2004). *Migrant workers and Chinese social stratification*. Beijing: Social Science Academic Press (in Chinese).

Liang, Z., & Chen, Y. P. (2007). The educational consequences of migration for children in China. *Social Science Research, 36*(1), 28-47.

Liang, Z., Li, J., & Ma, Z. (2013). Migration and remittance: Evidence from a poor province in China*. *Asian Population Studies, 9*(2), 124-141.

Lie, J. (1995). From international migration to transnational diaspora. *Contemporary

Sociology: A Journal of Reviews, 24(4), 303-306.

Lin, H. (2003). A survey on the current situation of the left behind students' education. *Journal of Fujian Normal University, 3*, 132-135 (in Chinese).

Liu, C. B. (2013). The migration style of nongmingong and differentiation of their children. *Chinese Demography,* (4), 108-116 (in Chinese).

Liu, C. J., & Cheng, J. (2008). The road toward urban citizenship for the second generation of migrant workers *Population Studies, 5*(32), 48-57.

Liu, L., Qu, C., & Qiu, Y. F. (2007). A survey and research on the relationship between psychological health and the way of attribution of left-home children. *China Journal of Health Psychology, 15* (11), 1017-1019 (in Chinese).

Liu, L., Sun, X., Zhang, C., Wang, Y., & Guo, Q. (2010). A survey in rural China of parent-absence through migrant working: the impact on their children's self-concept and loneliness. *BMC Public Health, 10*(1), 32.

Liu, Y., Li, X., Chen, L., & Qu, Z. (2014). Perceived positive teacher–student relationship as a protective factor for Chinese left‐behind children's emotional and behavioural adjustment. *International Journal of Psychology*.

Long, J., & Shen, Y. (2008). An analysis of the mental health of the leftbehind middle school students in south of Jiangxi Province. *Chinese Journal of School Health, 3*(29), 264-265 (in Chinese).

Lu, Y. (2012). Education of children left behind in rural China. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 74*(2), 328-341.

Lu, Y. (2014). Parental Migration and Education of Left‐Behind Children: A Comparison of Two Settings. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 76*(5), 1082-1098.

Lu, Y., & Zhou, H. (2013). Academic Achievement and Loneliness of Migrant Children in China: School Segregation and Segmented Assimilation. *Comparative Education Review, 57*(1), 85-116.

Lum, K., & Char, W. F. (1985). Chinese adaptation in Hawaii: Some examples. In W.

Tsent & D. Y. H. Wu (Eds.), *Chinese culture and mental health* (pp. 215 - 226). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Lüscher, K. (2002). Intergenerational ambivalence: Further steps in theory and research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64*(3), 585-593.

Lüscher, K., & Pillemer, K. (1998). Intergenerational ambivalence: A new approach to the study of parent-child relations in later life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 413-425.

Macdonald, A. (2008). Protection Responses to Unaccompanied and Separated Refugee Children in Mixed Migration Situations. *Refugee Survey Quarterly, 27*(4), 48-62.

MacLeod, A. E. (1992). Hegemonic relations and gender resistance: The new veiling as accommodating protest in Cairo. *Signs*, 533-557.

Madison, D. (2005). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Makrinioti, D. (1994). Conceptualization of Childhood in a Welfare State: a critical reappraisal. In J. Qvortrup (Ed.), *Childhood Matters. Aldershot, Avebury* (pp. 267-284). Aldershot: Avebury.

Mann, P. S. (1994). *Micro-politics: Agency in a postfeminist era*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Mansuri, G. (2006). *Migration, school attainment, and child labor: Evidence from rural Pakistan*. Retrieved from http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/1813-9450-3945.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological review, 98*(2), 224.

Mayall, B. (1996). *Children, health and the social order*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Mayall, B. (2012). An afterword: some reflections on a seminar series. *Children's geographies, 10*(3), 347-355.

Mazzucato, V., Cebotari, V., Veale, A., White, A., Grassi, M., & Vivet, J. (2014). International Parental Migration and the Psychological Well-being of Children in Ghana, Nigeria, and Angola. *Social Science & Medicine*. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.10.058

McKenzie, D., & Rapoport, H. (2011). Can migration reduce educational attainment? Evidence from Mexico. *Journal of Population Economics, 24*(4), 1331-1358.

McLanahan, S., & Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Merton, R., & Barber, E. (1963). Sociological ambivalence. In T. EA (Ed.), *Sociological Theory, Values and Sociocultural Change: Essays in Honor of Pitirim A. Sorokin* (pp. 91-120). London: Free Press.

Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications, Inc.

Millman, M. (1991). *Warm hearts and cold cash*. New York: Free Press.

Modern Chinese Dictionary. (2008). (5th ed.). Beijing: Commercial Press (in Chinese).

Montgomery, H. (2009). Are child prostitutes child workers? A case study. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 29*(3/4), 130-140.

Murphy, R. (2002). *How migrant labor is changing rural China*. Cambrige: Cambridge University Press.

Murphy, R. (2014). Study and school in the lives of children in migrant families: A view from rural Jiangxi, China. *Development and Change, 45*(1), 29-51.

Nasman, E. (1994). Individualisation and institutionalisation of children in today's Europe. In J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta & H. Wintersberger (Eds.), *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics* (pp. 165-188). Aldershot Avebury.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *China Migrant Worker Monitoring Report 2013*. Retrieved from
http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201405/t20140512_551585.html(in Chinese).

National College Entrance Examination Reform. (2014). Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2013-01/04/content_2275996.html (in Chinese).

Naw, P. (2007). *Impacts of Parents' Cross-Border Migration on Children in Hlaing Bwe Township, Kayin State, Myanmar*. Paper presented at the International Development Studies Conference on Mainstreaming Human Security: the Asian Contribution.

Nobles, J. (2013). Migration and father absence: Shifting family structure in Mexico. *Demography, 50*(4), 1303-1314.

Oldman, D. (1994). Childhood as a Mode of Production. In B. Mayall (Ed.), *Children's childhoods: observed and experienced* (pp. 153-166). London: Falmer Press.

Olwig, K. (1993). *Global culture, island identity: continuity and change in the Afro-Caribbean community of Nevis*. Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Olwig, K. (1999). Narratives of the Children Left Behind: Home and Identity in Globalised Caribbean Families. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 25*(2), 267-284.

Orellana, M., Thorne, B., Chee, A., & Lam, W. (2001). Transnational childhoods: The participation of children in processes of family migration. *Social Problems, 48*(4), 572-591.

Ortner, S. B. (1984). Theory in anthropology since the sixties. *Comparative studies in society and history, 26*(1), 126-166.

Ortner, S. B. (1995). Resistance and the problem of ethnographic refusal. *Comparative studies in society and history, 37*(01), 173-193.

Padgett, D. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research: Challenges and rewards* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Park, M., & Chesla, C. (2007). Revisiting Confucianism as a conceptual framework for Asian family study. *Journal of Family Nursing, 13*(3), 293-311.

Parreñas, R. S. (2001). Mothering from a distance: Emotions, gender, and intergenerational relations in Filipino transnational families. *Feminist Studies*,

27(2), 361–390.

Parreñas, R. S. (2005). *Children of global migration: Transnational families and gendered woes*. Standford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Parsons, T. (1951). *The Social System*. New York: Routledge & Kagan Paul.

Philpott, S. (1973). *West Indian migration: the Monserrat case*. London: University of London, Athlone Press.

Potter, D. (2010). Psychosocial Well‐Being and the Relationship Between Divorce and Children's Academic Achievement. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*(4), 933-946.

Pottinger, A. (2005). Children's experience of loss by parental migration in inner-city Jamaica. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 75*(4), 485-496.

Punch, S. (2002). Youth transitions and interdependent adult–child relations in rural Bolivia. *Journal of rural studies, 18*(2), 123-133.

Punch, S. (2007). Negotiating migrant identities: young people in Bolivia and Argentina. *Children's geographies, 5*(1-2), 95-112.

Punch, S., & Tisdall, E. K. M. (2012). Exploring children and young people's relationships across Majority and Minority Worlds. *Children's geographies, 10*(3), 241-248.

Qin, J., & Albin, B. (2010). The mental health of children left behind in rural China by migrating parents: a literature review. *Journal of Public Mental Health, 9*(3), 4-16.

Qvortrup, J. (2005). *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Qvortrup, J. (2006). Editorial: Are children subjects or a liability? *Childhood, 13*(4), 435-439.

Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G., & Wintersberger, H. (1994). *Childhood matters: Social theory, practice and politics*. Vienna: Avebury.

Qvortrup, J., Corsaro, W. A., & Honig, M.-S. (2009). Why social studies of childhood? An introduction to the handbook. In J. Qvortrup, W. A. Corsaro & M.-S. Honig (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of childhood studies* (pp. 1-18). London: Palgrave, Macmillan

Reyes, M. (2007). Migration and Filipino Children Left-Behind: A Literature Review. Retrieved from//www.unicef.org/philippines/Synthesis_StudyJuly12008.pdf.

Robson, E., Bell, S., & Klocker, N. (2007). Conceptualising agency in the lives and actions of rural young people. In R. Panelli, S. Punch & E. Robson (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Rural Childhood and Youth: Young Rural Lives* (pp. 135 - 148). New York: Routledge.

Roche, J. (1999). Children: Rights, participation and citizenship. *Childhood, 6*(4), 475-493.

Rosen, D. M. (2007). Child soldiers, international humanitarian law, and the globalization of childhood. *American anthropologist, 109*(2), 296-306.

Russell, S. S. (1986). Remittances from international migration: a review in perspective. *World Development, 14*(6), 677-696.

Santos, G. D. (2008). On 'same‑year siblings' in rural South China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 14*(3), 535-553.

Save the Children. (2006). *Left Behind, Left Out: The Impact on Children and Families of Mothers Migrating for Work Abroad*. Retrieved from http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/left_behind_left_out_-_the_impact_of_children_and_families_of_mothers_migrating_for_work_abroad.pdf.

Scalabrini Migration Center (2004). *Hearts Apart: Migration in the Eyes of Filipino Children*. Manila: Scalabrini Migration Center.

Schiller, N. G., Basch, L., & Blanc‑Szanton, C. (1992). Transnationalism: A new analytic framework for understanding migration. *Annals of the New York*

Academy of Sciences, 645(1), 1-24.

Schmalzbauer, L. (2004). Searching for wages and mothering from afar: The case of Honduran transnational families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*(5), 1317-1331.

Sewell, J., WH. (1992). A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology, 98*(1), 1-29.

Seymour, C. (2012). Ambiguous agencies: coping and survival in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. *Children's geographies, 10*(4), 373-384.

Shanahan, S. (2007). Lost and found: The sociological ambivalence toward childhood. *Annual Review of Sociology, 33*, 407-428.

Shek, D. T. L. (2004). Chinese Cultural Beliefs about Adversity: Its Relationship to Psychological Well-Being, School Adjustment and Problem Behaviour in Hong Kong Adolescents with and without Economic Disadvantage. *Childhood, 11*(1), 63-80.

Simmons, A. (2005). Globalization and Migration *International Migration and the Millennium Development Goals* (pp. 169-178): United Nations Population Fund.

Smart, B. (1999). *Facing modernity: Ambivalence, reflexivity and morality*. London: Sage.

Smelser, N. J. (1998). The rational and the ambivalent in the social sciences. *American sociological review, 63*(1), 1-16.

Smith, A., Lalonde, R., & Johnson, S. (2004). Serial migration and its implications for the parent-child relationship: A retrospective analysis of the experiences of the children of Caribbean immigrants. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*(2), 107-122.

Smith, M. P., & Guarnizo, L. E. (1998). *Transnationalism from below*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Smith-Estelle, A., & Gruskin, S. (2003). Vulnerability to HIV/STIs among rural women from migrant communities in Nepal: A health and human rights framework.

Reproductive Health Matters, 11(22), 142-151.

Solinger, D. (1999). *Contesting citizenship in urban China: Peasant migrants, the state, and the logic of the market*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Stafford, C. (2006). *The roads of Chinese childhood: Learning and identification in Angang*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stark, O., & Bloom, D. (1985). The new economics of labor migration. *The American Economic Review, 75*(2), 173-178.

Stark, O., & Lucas, R. E. (1988). Migration, remittances, and the family. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 36*(3), 465-481.

State Council. (2006). *The opinions on solutions for migrant worker issue*. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2006-03/27/content_237644.htm

Stearns, P. N. (2006). *Childhood in world history*. Oxon: Routledge.

Su, S., Li, X., Lin, D., Xu, X., & Zhu, M. (2013). Psychological adjustment among left‐behind children in rural China: the role of parental migration and parent–child communication. *Child: care, health and development, 39*(2), 162-170.

Suårez‐Orozco, C., Todorova, I. L., & Louie, J. (2002). Making up for lost time: The experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families. *Family process, 41*(4), 625-643.

Swidler, A. (1986). Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American sociological review, 51*(2), 273-286.

Tan, S. (2011). A Literature review on rural left behinc children in China. *Social Sciences in China, 1*, 138-150 (in Chinese).

Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. New Brunswick,NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Tisdall, E. K. M., & Punch, S. (2012). Not so 'new'? Looking critically at childhood studies. *Children's geographies, 10*(3), 249-264.

Tobin, J. J., Wu, D. Y., & Davidson, D. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven,CT: Yale University Press.

Toyota, M., Yeoh, B., & Nguyen, L. (2007). Bringing the 'left behind' back into view in Asia: a framework for understanding the 'migration-left behind nexus'. *Population, Space and Place, 13*(3), 157-161.

Tseng, W. (1973). The concept of personality in Confucian thought. *Psychiatry, 36*(2), 191 - 202.

United Nation, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). (2013). *International Migration 2013: Migrants by origin and destination*. Retrieved from

http://www.un.org/en/ga/68/meetings/migration/pdf/International%20Migratio n%202013_Migrants%20by%20origin%20and%20destination.pdf

Vacchiano, F., & Jiménez, M. (2012). Between agency and repression: Moroccan children on the edge. *Children's geographies, 10*(4), 457-471.

Valentine, K. (2011). Accounting for Agency. *Children & Society, 25*(5), 347-358.

van Heugten, K. (2004). Managing insider research learning from experience. *Qualitative Social Work, 3*(2), 203-219.

Vanore, M., Mazzucato, V., & Siegel, M. (2014). 'Left behind'but not left alone: Parental migration & the psychosocial health of children in Moldova. *Social Science & Medicine*. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.08.040

Waldinger, R. (2008). Between "Here" and "There": Immigrant Cross‐Border Activities and Loyalties. *International Migration Review, 42*(1), 3-29.

Wang, D. (2002). On the characteristics of the left-behind children in primary school and the educational measures. *Health Psychology Journal, 10*(5), 354-355 (in Chinese).

Wang, D. (2008). Rural-urban migration and policy responses in China: challenges and options. Retrieved from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--- asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_160569.pdf

Wang, M., & Dai, J. (2009). Cultural norms informing other-conscious selfhood in Chinese relational worlds. *Culture & psychology, 15*(1), 41 - 72.

Wang, Q. (2013). Chinese socialization and emotion talk between mothers and children in native and immigrant Chinese families. *Asian American Journal of Psychology, 4*(3), 185.

Wang, Q., & Brockmeier, J. (2002). Autobiographical remembering as cultural practice: Understanding the interplay between memory, self and culture. *Culture & Psychology, 8*(1), 45-64.

Wang, Q., Leichtman, M. D., & White, S. H. (1998). Childhood memory and self-description in young Chinese adults: The impact of growing up an only child. *Cognition, 69*(1), 73-103.

Wang, S. X. (2012). The effect of parental migration on the educational attainment of their left-behind children in rural China. China Center for Human Capital and Labor Market Research, Central University of Finance and Economics.

Wang, X., Ling, L., Su, H., Cheng, J., Jin, L., & Sun, Y. H. (2014). Self-concept of left-behind children in China: a systematic review of the literature. *Child: care, health and development*. doi:10.1111/cch.12172

Wei, J., & Zheng, H. (2007). Negative influence of the absence of parental rearing among middle school students left in rural areas. *Chinese Mental Health Journal, 21*(2), 83-85.

Wen, M., & Lin, D. (2012). Child development in rural China: Children left behind by their migrant parents and children of nonmigrant families. *Child development, 83*(1), 120-136.

Wolcott, H. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Wong, F. K. D., Chang, Y. L., & He, X. S. (2007). Rural migrant workers in urban China: living a marginalised life. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 16*(1), 32-40.

Wu, D. Y., & Tseng, W. S. (1985). Child training in Chinese culture. In W. S. Tseng & D. Y. Wu (Eds.), *Chinese culture and mental health* (pp. 113-134). New York: Academic Press.

Wu, M. Y. (2013). The Concept of Guan in the Chinese Parent-Child Relationship. In C. C. Yi (Ed.), *The Psychological Well-being of East Asian Youth* (pp. 29-49). Springer.

Wu, Y. (2013). The abuse of China's 'left-behind' children. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-23628090

Xiang, B. (2007). How Far are the Left-Behind Left Behind? A Preliminary Study in Rural China. *Population, Space and Place, 13*, 79 - 191.

Xiao, L. (2014). Children of great transformation: Revisiting child welfare policy. *Journal of East China University of Science & Technology, 29*(1), 15-19 (in Chinese).

Xie, Y. (2007). *Research on Rural Left-behind Children's Emotional Problems, Behavior and Influential Factors*. Yinchuan, Gansu: Northwest Normal University (in Chinese).

Xing, C. (2013). Education expansion, migration and rural-urban education gap: A case study on the effect of university expansion. *China Economy Quarterly 13*(1), 207-232 (in Chinese).

Yan, B. (1991). *Chaju Zhidu Bianqian Shigao (The evolution of chaju system)*. Shenyang: Liaoning University Press (in Chinese).

Yan, Z. (2014). Measures to manage growing population of large cities. Retrieved fromhttp://www.chinadailyasia.com/chinafocus/2014-08/21/content_15158244.html (in Chinese).

Yang, K. S. (1981). The Formation and Change of Chinese Personality: A Cultural-Ecological Perspective. *Acta Psychologica Taiwanica, 23*, 39-55 (in Chinese).

Yang, X. (1993). Household registration, economic reform and migration. *International Migration Review, 27*(4), 796-818.

Yao, J., & Mao, Y. (2008). Rural left-behind children's academic psychology in Western China and the school management countermeasures. *Frontiers of Education in China, 3*(4), 535-546.

Ye, J. (2011). Left-behind children: the social price of China's economic boom. *Journal of Peasant Studies, 38*(3), 613-650.

Ye, J., Murray, J., & Wang, Y. (2005). *Left-behind children in rural China.* Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (in Chinese).

Ye, J., & Pan, L. (2011). Differentiated childhoods: impacts of rural labor migration on left-behind children in China. *The Journal of peasant studies, 38*(2), 355-377.

Ye, J., Wang, C., Wu, H., He, C., & Liu, J. (2013). Internal migration and left-behind populations in China. *Journal of Peasant Studies, 40*(6), 1119-1146.

Ye, J. Z., & Wang, Y. H. (2006). Current Status and Characteristics of Care Taking for Left - behind Children. *Population Journal, 157*, 55-59 (in Chinese).

Yeh, K. H., Yi, C. C., Tsao, W. C., & Wan, P. S. (2013). Filial piety in contemporary Chinese societies: A comparative study of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. *International sociology, 28*(3), 277-296.

Yeoh, B., & Lam, T. (2007). The costs of (im) mobility: Children left behind and children who migrate with a parent *Perspectives on Gender and Migration* (pp. 120-154). United Nations publication.

Ye, M., & Zhang, J. (2008). Influential factors on mental health of rural left-behind junior middle school students: coping style, personality and self-esteem. *Chinese Journal of Behavioral Medical Science, 17*(11), 1041–1043.

Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Yip, K. S. (1998). Mental Health Concepts in Confucian Thoughts. *Hong Kong Journal of Social Work in Health Care, 32*, 151–165.

Young, N. F. (1972). Independence Training from a Cross-Cultural Perspective. *American anthropologist, 74*(3), 629-638.

Zelizer, V. A. (1985). *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children*. Princetion, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zelizer, V. A. (1993). Making multiple monies. In R. Swedberg (Ed.), *Explorations in economic sociology* (pp. 193-212). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Zelizer, V. A. (1997). *The social meaning of money: Pin money, paychecks, poor relief and other currencies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Zelizer, V. A. (2002). Kids and commerce. *Childhood, 9*(4), 375-396.

Zelizer, V. A. (2005). The priceless child revisited. In J. Qvortrup (Ed.), *Studies in Modern Childhood* (pp. 184-200). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zhang, J. Y., & He, X. H. (2008). Study on relationship between mental health and personality of parents - absent children. *Chinese Journal of Public Health, 24*(8), 932-933 (in Chinese).

Zhang, K. H., & Song, S. (2003). Rural-urban migration and urbanization in China: evidence from time-series and cross-section analyses. *China Economic Review, 14* (4), 386-400 (in Chinese).

Zhang, L. (2008). Death of the Left-behind child Zhangyangyu. Retrieved from http://www.cpd.com.cn/gb/jcwz/2008-05/06/content_951175.htm (in Chinese).

Zhang, N. (2013). Home divided, home reconstructed: children in rural–urban migration in contemporary China. *Children's geographies*. doi:10.1080/14733285.2013.848600

Zhao, X., Chen, J., Chen, M. C., Lv, X. L., Jiang, Y. H., & Sun, Y. H. (2014). Left‑behind children in rural China experience higher levels of anxiety and poorer living conditions. *Acta Paediatrica, 103*(6), 665-670.

Zhao, Y. (1999). Leaving the countryside: rural-to-urban migration decisions in China. *American Economic Review, 89*(2), 281-286.

Zhao, Y. (2002). Causes and Consequences of Return Migration: Recent Evidence from China. *Journal of Comparative Economics, 30*(2), 376-394.

Zhao, Y., & Liu, Q. (1997). Historical Study of Rural-urban Migration in China: 1949-1985. *China Population Science, 2*, 14-22 (in Chinese).

Zheng, G., Shi, S., & Tang, H. (2005). Population development and the value of children in the People's Republic of China. In G. Trommsdorff & B. Nauck (Eds.), *The Value of Children in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Case Studies from Seven Societies* (pp. 239 - 282). Lengerich, Germany: Pabst Science Publishers.

Zhou, F. L., & Duan, C. R. (2006). A review of literature on left behind children. *Population Journal, 30*(3), 60-65 (in Chinese).

Zhou, M., Murphy, R., & Tao, R. (2014). Effects of parents' migration on the education of children left behind in rural China. *Population and Development Review, 40*(2), 273-292.

Zhou, X. (1998). The effect of migration and urban experiences on Chinese peasants' modernity. *Sociological Research,* (5), 60-73 (in Chinese).

Zhu, K. R., Li, C. J., & Zhou, S. Q. (2002). Academic Issues of Rural Left-behind Children. *Education Science,* (4), 21-24 (in Chinese).