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**The attachment and separation experiences of the left-
behind children in rural China**

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Dedication

I dedicate my work to my future child, Xinxiang.

May you be securely attached and explore the world confidently.

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Abstract

The left-behind children (LBC) refer to children living in rural China, who have been left behind by parents going to work in urban regions. The population of LBC is a social by-product of labour migration in society. LBC grow up experiencing prolonged parent-child separations. Research has shown that LBC suffered from emotional distress and were at risk of reduced psycho-social development. While assessing the existing literature on the impact of the parental migration on LBC's attachment, a meta-analysis was conducted and showed that LBC's parental attachment security was significantly lower than that of non-left-behind children (NLBC).

In the current literature, the children are often perceived as passive victims of adverse life experiences and whose own voices are neglected. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand the key processes of the LBC's personal experiences of parental migration from their own perspectives. The current research draws on the theoretical framework of attachment theory to explore the LBC's experiences of the parent-child attachment and the migratory separations from parents. This research used a mixed-method research design, with a quantitative study using an interview-based measure to investigate the distribution of attachment styles of the LBC, a qualitative study using the grounded theory to explore the children's experiences and a triangulation analysis integrating the findings from the quantitative study and the qualitative study.

Thirty-nine LBC participated in the study. All the children experienced lengthy separation from both their migrant parents. Findings revealed that the LBC had high rates of the dismissing attachment styles towards their fathers and mothers, similar to children experiencing other types of separation, such as children in foster care.

However, findings also showed that it was possible for some LBC to maintain secure attachment with their parents despite the prolonged separations.

The grounded theory focused on the LBC's agency in doing rural migrant families. During the pre-migration stage, children were placed in a position in their families that lacked agency. They were largely ignored during the decision-making of the migration. The rural migrant families as perceived by the LBC was conceptualised as 'doing rural migrant families' that foregrounds the active and ongoing essential family practices of 'building family collaboration', 'maintaining an intact family' and 'negotiating support and constraints'. Though starting with a passive position of little agency, the LBC managed to exercise both of their self-focused agency (i.e., making meaning and self-regulation) and other-focused agency (i.e., constructive compliance, resistance, support seeking and giving) in all these family practices. Self-agency was vital to the LBC's resilience when facing parental migration, and their resilience was part of their whole rural family's resilience. The processes in the grounded theory suggested key resilience processes in the successful adaptation to the migration for the LBC and their families.

The triangulation of the results from the quantitative and qualitative studies suggested that children's attachment styles might be associated with different parent-child communications, children's emotional responses and cognitive perceptions.

The finding of the current research had implications for the future practices and policies for the LBC and the rural migrant families. The support and care provided for the children should consider the children's personal agencies and be designed according to the children's own needs.

Lay summary

In rural China, millions of children are left behind by one parent or both parents who migrate to cities for better employment opportunities. These children are called “left-behind children (LBC)” and usually left in the care of grandparents. The LBC are not unique to China. In many developing countries around the world, LBC grow up experiencing prolonged parent-child separations.

Research has shown that LBC are likely to develop a range of psychological and behavioural problems. They often experience emotional distress caused by parental migration and have estranged relationships with their parents after years of separation. The research that has been done so far has mostly investigated the impacts on the LBC’s development. It is necessary for us to seek children’s own voices and understand more about the children’s own perspectives on parental migration. This study looks in detail at the children’s experiences of parental migration and the parent-child relationship in the context of migration. Thirty-nine LBC aged between eight and twelve years old were recruited from rural schools in Yunnan province in China. These children completed questionnaires and took part in semi-structured interviews called the Child Attachment Interviews to assess their perceptions of their migrant parents that were then conceptualised as attachment styles. Children also participated in open interviews, which were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a qualitative method called grounded theory.

This study found that over half of the LBC’s perceptions regarding migrant parents were characterised as ‘being unavailable’ in times of distress. This finding was consistent with studies of children who experienced other types of separation, such as foster children or institutionalised children. Children’s representations of

parents were related to their interactions with their parents as well as their emotional experiences.

This study also illustrates a picture of the LBC's experiences. Children were largely left out in the family's initial decision-making process about migration. Children experienced emotional distress after their parents' departure. When parents were away, the children perceived and participated in various family practices of 'building family collaboration' 'maintaining an intact family' and 'negotiating support and constraints' through which the rural migrant families achieved family connection and optimum levels of functioning. Children were not passive observers of these processes but played an active role in them. These family processes had important implications for the LBC and rural migrant families' successful adaptation to the migration. Future services and care provided for the children should consider their voices and be designed according to the children's own needs. Support services should also be provided for the rural migrant families to facilitate successful engagement in these family practices.

Chapter 1

Overview and literature review

The term left-behind children (LBC) (Chinese: ‘留守儿童’) refers to children living in rural China, who have been left behind by parents going to work in urban regions. The population of LBC is a social by-product of labour migration in society. It is not unique to China but rather it is a global phenomenon and has attracted much attention from researchers in areas of migration transnationalism, child development and family studies. Parental migration caused changes in family structure and parent-child relationships, and further impacted the children’s well-being (Kuczynski et al., 2009). In the existing literature, the LBC’s own voices have largely been overlooked. The current research focuses on exploring LBC’s attachment, and the subjective experiences of parental migration from the LBC’s own perspectives.

This chapter will start with an overview of the phenomenon of LBC in China regarding its social context of rural-urban labour migration and the hukou system, the population of LBC and their care arrangements. The chapter then presents a review of the existing literature on LBC in China and elsewhere in the world. The findings and the gaps in the existing literature will be discussed, as well as how they inform the current research.

1.1 Background to the research

The children investigated in the current research are left behind by their parents who moved from rural areas to work in urban regions. Their parents are part of the rural-urban labour migration population in China that has supported the urbanisation and modernisation of China in recent decades. According to the National Bureau of Statistics’ report in 2020 there were 285.6 million rural-urban migrants in China, equivalent to 20% of the total population (National Bureau of

Statistics, 2021). This rural-urban migration pattern is attributable to a variety of factors, including rural unemployment, rural poverty, urban economic development, rural-urban income gaps, etc. Migrant workers often come to cities to fill low-end service and labour-intensive jobs. In 2009, only 3% of migrant workers held professional or managerial jobs in the cities, compared to 31% of urban workers (who have household registration as urban residents in China). Furthermore, 91% of migrant workers were working as production or service workers, compared to 35% of urban workers (Frijters et al., 2011). Although the movement of population from rural to urban districts has been a crucial part of the economic development in industrialised countries globally (Herrendorf et al., 2014; Liao & Yip, 2018), the rural-urban labour movement in China has its own distinctive features, mainly due to the institutional rural-urban division and the household registration system of hukou (Wang, 2009).

Since the early 1950s, the Chinese economy has been divided into rural and urban economies. There have been substantial gaps in income, education, health care and housing between rural and urban areas (Li et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020), with rural districts being significantly less developed than urban districts. This rural-urban segregation has been sustained by the household registration system of hukou. The hukou is a residency permit that allows the holder to access social services in the registered resident area. Individuals born into rural households were registered as 'agriculture or rural hukou', while those born into urban households were registered as 'non-agriculture or urban hukou'. Migrant workers without urban hukou are not treated as locals of the city and cannot access the regular urban welfare services, such as public schools (free, state schools) for children, urban pension plans etc. The system partially contributed to the phenomenon of the LBC.

Migrant parents who brought their children to the cities with them would have difficulties enrolling their children in local free government-run public schools or accessing health care in the destination cities. Moreover, the high living costs and migrant parents' work and living conditions in the cities may not allow them to take care of their children properly. Migrant workers usually work long hours. They might change jobs, move cities frequently and live in places, such as factory dormitories, that are not suitable for children (Qiang, 2019). In addition, migrant parents lack support from extended families and communities to help them with childcare.

Consequently, the institutional rural-urban segregation and the economic and social constraints of the migrant workers led them to choose not to bring their children to the cities but leave their children behind in their rural hometown.

1.2 The population of left-behind children (LBC)

There are several estimates of the population of LBC in rural China. According to the survey conducted by the All-China Women's Federation, nationally, there were over 61 million LBC living apart from one or both migrant parents, accounting for nearly 37.7% of children in rural districts and 20% of all children in China (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). UNICEF reported an estimated 40.51 million rural children were living without one or both migrant parents (UNICEF CHINA, 2015). The difference in statistics was possibly due to the different approaches in sampling and estimation. Nonetheless, these surveys suggested that LBC constitute a large proportion of the population in rural China. The large scale of the group has attracted widespread social concern regarding their living conditions and well-being (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2015).

1.3 The living arrangements of LBC

There are several types of caregiving arrangements for the LBC. In the case of only one parent migrating to the city, the child is usually left in the care of the left-behind spouse. In the case of both parents migrating, the children could be left in the care of grandparents or other relatives, such as an uncle or aunt. Sometimes, the children are left in the care of adult elder siblings. In some cases, children live by themselves or with other young children.

In a survey conducted by Fan et al. (2009), the researchers found that of the 2,494,495 population of left-behind children they investigated, 74% were being cared for by grandparents, and 12.8% were left in the care of uncles or aunts and 13.2% by non-relatives. According to the sample in Ye and Pan's (2011) study, 24% of children were living with one left-behind parent during the other parent's migration, 69% were living with grandparents during both parents' migration, 4% were living with other relatives during both parents' migration, and 3% of children were living without caregivers. According to the survey by the All-China Women's Federation (2013), 46.74% of all LBC had both of their parents migrating to the city. Among these LBC, 32.67% were living with grandparents; 10.7% were being cared for by other relatives, and 3.37% were living by themselves. It could be seen that except for children living with one left-behind parent, living with grandparents was the most common care arrangement.

It should be noted that the migration of parents and the care arrangements of the LBC were not static but subject to change. In the provincial census by Fan et al. (2009), 8% of rural children were living with their parents at the time of survey but had past histories of being left behind. In Ye and Pan's (2011, p. 363) study, 80% of

LBC experienced a change of care arrangements due to 'illness, death, returning parent or parents, and attendance at a school in a new and distant location'.

LBC often experience years or decades of separation from parents. It has been observed that many rural labourers have devoted their entire working lives to working in the cities. Migrants usually reunite with their families temporarily at the Chinese New Year. Otherwise, migrants are away from their families for most of the year for almost a decade or even decades (Ye, 2011). According to a national survey published by the non-profit organisation Road to School in 2015, nearly 30% of LBC surveyed only met their migrant parents once or twice per year, about 15.1% of LBC met migrant parents less than once per year. Regarding contacts, the survey showed that 23.9% of LBC had daily phone contact with parents, 28.6% children had two to four calls with their parents per week, 19.3% children had three to four calls with their parents per month, 20.6% children had one to four calls per year and 4.3% had basically no contact with parents at all (Road to School, 2015). In addition to the low frequency of visits, left-behind children reported that their conversations with parents were very brief. More than half of the children reported that their phone calls with parents only lasted few minutes (Hu et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2006).

1.4 Literature on LBC

This literature review explores the current understanding of LBC in China and LBC elsewhere in the world. The researcher first reviews the Chinese literature on Chinese LBC, including the quantitative studies on the developmental outcomes of LBC and qualitative studies on the experiences of LBC. The researcher then reviews the international literature on the LBC in other countries. Most of these studies are qualitative studies exploring the LBC's experiences in the context of transnational families. The main findings and the gaps in the existing literature are discussed as

well as their implications for the current research. In the next chapter, the review on the studies of attachment of LBC continues by following the theoretical framework of the current research, the attachment theory.

1.4.1 Chinese literature on the developmental outcomes of LBC in China

The enduring separation from parents experienced by the LBC presents challenges to their well-being and development. A large body of research has investigated various aspects of LBC's developmental outcomes covering themes including physical health, mental health, personality development, behavioural problems, social competences, social support and education (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018).

The findings from individual research studies have not been consistent regarding the comparison of developmental outcomes between LBC and non-left-behind children (NLBC) and the relevant impacting factors. For example, Chen et al. (2011) compared mental health conditions between left-behind and non-left-behind children and found no significant differences, whereas Ji et al. (2017) reported LBC had poorer mental health than their non-left-behind peers. Despite the inconsistencies between individual studies, the meta-analysis of studies on mental health of LBC yields more consistent findings. Meta-analytic studies showed that LBC had significantly higher rates of depression (Ding et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2016), anxiety (Chen, et al., 2017), behavioural problems (Qu, et al., 2018) and other emotional difficulties (Chai et al., 2019) than NLBC. Meta-analytic studies have also found overall lower mental health in LBC compared to their peers (Chen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2019; Zhao & Yu, 2016;), more maladaptive personality traits (Hou et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019), higher levels of negative self-concept (Chen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2014), poorer social adaptation (Zhang et al., 2018;

Wang & Mesman, 2015), lower psychological resilience (Dong et al., 2018) and less perceived social support (Yu et al., 2017). All these studies pointed out that the LBC were at risk of poorer mental health outcomes and lower psycho-social functioning in the context of parental migration. Chen et al.'s (2017) review also found LBC were at greater risk for various safety issues, including accidental injuries, abuse and neglect.

Regarding the LBC's education, two meta-analyses on educational outcomes did not find significant differences between LBC and NLBC (Chen et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2015). However, the large-scale meta-analytic work by Zhou et al. (2015) showed that though rural LBC did not show disadvantages compared to the rural NLBC, both groups of children had poor educational performances, suggesting all rural children were vulnerable and needed special support.

Gender, care arrangements and age were identified as potential moderators of the effects of parental migration on the mental health of LBC. Some studies have reported that LBC girls had worse mental health conditions based on the scale of the Mental Health Test (Wu, et al., 2019; Zhao & Yu, 2016) than LBC boys, but some meta-analysis found LBC boys had higher incidents of behavioural problems (Qu et al., 2017) and loneliness (Chai, et al., 2019).

The moderator effect analysis of LBC'S care arrangements showed that children being cared for by one parent, while the other parent migrated, had better mental health conditions than children with other care arrangements; children who were living by themselves and did not have adult guardianship had the worst mental health conditions compared to children with other care arrangements (Chen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2014; Zhao & Yu, 2016). Regarding migration patterns, children with mother-only parental migration were found to have the lowest level of mental

health compared to children with both parents migrating and father-only migration (Chen et al., 2017). The absence of mothers affected children more profoundly than the absence of fathers.

Assessing the effects of age on LBC's mental health was complex as studies focused on different aspects of mental health (e.g., mood disorders, conduct disorders, personality traits). Most of the meta-analytic studies used the school grade or educational stage (primary school, or junior high school) instead of the actual ages of children. There was some evidence showing that younger children have a better level of mental health compared to older LBC. For instance, the meta-analysis by Wu et al. (2019) found that impulsive tendency scores were significantly lower in primary school LBC compared to LBC in junior high school. Similarly, Lin et al. (2019) found that LBC in junior high school had higher psychoticism and neuroticism than LBC in primary school.

Alternatively, other studies showed that older LBC had better psychological development. For example, the meta-analysis by Wang et al. (2014) found that primary school children had a lower self-concept than junior high school students in the domains of physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity and happiness, and satisfaction. The study by Chen et al. (2020) found that LBC at preschools or primary schools demonstrated more psychological adjustment issues (depression, anxiety, loneliness, poor mental health and low self-concept) and safety problems (accidental injury, child abuse and neglect, bullying, general victimisation, suicide ideation and sense of security). The review by Chai et al. (2019) showed that junior high school LBC experienced less loneliness than LBC in primary school. The study by Guang et al. (2017) produced more complex results, male LBC aged 12–18 years expressed more delinquent behaviour, hyperactivity and aggressive behaviour

than male LBC aged 6–11 years. These younger boys were more likely to be withdrawn and to be affected by somatic complaints, schizophreniform disorder, compulsive behaviour and depression. It should be noted that all the effect sizes in the study were significant but small.

The discrepancies in results regarding the effects of LBC's age or educational stage on their psychological development may also reflect the complex combination of biological, psychological and environmental developmental factors. On one hand, older children may be more mentally and physically developed and may be able to cope better with being left behind. On the other hand, children entering puberty were in a critical period of physical and mental development; their physiology and psychology would have changed more than when they were in primary school. Adolescents could be faced with various psychological crises and increasing study stress, they may have more difficulties adjusting by themselves without support and guidance from their migrant parents (Wu et al., 2019; Ling et al., 2019). As a result, it was hard to determine whether older children were adjusting to a greater or lesser extent than younger children. Furthermore, these meta-analytic studies all focused on different aspects of psychological development which possibly had different developmental routes. The finding that junior high school LBC reported less loneliness than primary school LBC may relate to children's growing social and cognitive competencies. At the same time, the finding that adolescents experienced less psychological development supported the disruption hypothesis in young personality development, which proposes that the biological, psychological and social transitions from childhood to adolescence are accompanied by temporary developmental dips in the maturity of the personality (Soto & Tackett, 2015).

Moreover, it should be noted that most of the results of the moderator effects

of ages reported above had very high heterogeneities ($I^2 > 50\%$) except for the study by Chai et al. (2019) ($I^2 = 0$). The high heterogeneities showed that there were substantial differences between the studies included in the meta-analytic works, while the 0% itself was also likely to be a methodological artifact that could have biasing effects on the results of meta-analysis (Wiernik & Dahlke, 2020). The extreme heterogeneities might compromise the robustness of the results.

The literature demonstrated that despite relative economic improvements, children who are left behind are at higher risk of various developmental problems. The inconsistencies between some studies suggested that the effects of parental migration on the children's development could be moderated by certain factors, either by protective factors mitigating the negative effects of the migration or by risk factors elevating the influences of the migration.

1.4.2 Chinese literature on the experiences of LBC in China

Another body of studies investigated the lived experiences of the LBC, mainly using qualitative approaches. The number of these studies has been much smaller than that of the quantitative studies on the LBC's psychosocial development. Children's emotional experiences emerge as major themes from their narratives. Studies showed that the LBC experienced yearning for parents and intense feelings of loneliness, sadness, boredom, emptiness, anxiety and insecurity (Fan et al., 2012; Qiu & Chen, 2009; Xiong, 2011). The feeling of loneliness was one of the most mentioned emotional states by LBC in interviews and was also assessed in many quantitative studies (Chai et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2021).

Children reported mixed and ambivalent feelings about their migrant parents. On the one hand, they felt thankful for their parents' hard work in the cities and wanted to pay them back in the future (Zhao & Zhang, 2008). On the other hand,

many children reported feeling resentful and emotionally distant towards their parents (Qiu & Chen, 2009; Xiong, 2011; Zhang, 2018). Some older children reported feeling lonely without their parents' companionship, while also enjoying the freedom and autonomy without parental supervision (Zhao & Zhang, 2008).

When parents were working away, they remained in contact with their children through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), such as phone calls, texting and video chats (Liu & Le, 2021; Road to School, 2015). There was some evidence of children claiming that their parent-child relationship had not been affected by parental migration, with frequent phone call contact (Zhao & Zhang, 2008). However, many children expressed their unmet needs for parental affection (Liu et al., 2020; Qiu & Chen, 2009). Migrant parents were mostly concerned with study, safety and whether children were obedient to their surrogate carers or teachers. Children usually asked parents about their physical health (Ye et al., 2006). It has been argued by some researchers that these communications may not be enough for migrant parents and children to maintain an emotional connection, as they lacked direct emotional expressions and were devoid of the closeness infused in the mundane details of daily life interactions (Qiu & Chen, 2009; Ye & Pan, 2011). The lack of sufficient emotional communication with migrant parents was not compensated by the children's interaction with their surrogate carers. It was not uncommon for LBC to have problems in communicating with their surrogate caregivers. Surveys have shown that nearly half of the LBC reported that they rarely chatted with their carers or disclosed their personal issues or private feelings to them (Hu et al., 2021; Qiu & Chen, 2009; Ye et al., 2006). However, some children stated that surrogate carers, usually their grandparents, were more important to them than their migrant parents (Zhao & Zhang, 2008).

In addition to emotional distress, many studies explored children's experiences of their care arrangements. The absence of migrant parents changed the structure of the rural families, especially with the decreased labour supply in the left-behind families. Many LBC reported that they spent longer hours doing housework and even agricultural work after parental migration (Liu et al., 2007; Zhao & Zhang, 2008). In some cases, children needed to become young carers and took care of their elderly grandparents. This could further cause the decline in the care quality for the LBC (Lv, 2006). The reversed caretaking could be temporary or long-term, impacting their study and well-being, and causing detrimental effects for their development (Lv, 2006). Many children reported that they were not satisfied with the care they received from surrogate carers. Grandparents were usually not able to pay attention to the children's emotional needs, discipline them and supervise children's studies properly (Yan, 2020; Zhang, 2018). Old age, poor health conditions and low education levels were regarded as the main factors preventing grandparents from providing quality childcare for LBC (Guo, 2021; Liu et al., 2020). Some children were taken into the care of relatives in their parents' generation, but problems could still arise in these cases. Similar to grandparents, these carers were more concerned with the children's material well-being and did not pay enough attention to the children's behaviour and psychological health (Ruan, 2008; Wang, 2008; Zhou, 2019).

The existing qualitative studies of LBC show some methodological limitations that this research seeks to address. First, the questions used in qualitative interviews showed limitations. Most of the existing studies used interview questions that focused on children's general and overall perceptions of parental migration and their lives during migration. For example, in their study of rural LBC's adaptation to

parental migration Zhao and Zhang (2011), used interview questions such as: 'How has your life changed since your parents migrated?'; 'What are the impacts of parental migration on your life?'; and 'How has your relationship with your parents changed after migration?'. While these general questions reflected the research aims of the study, they might have limited scope for generating rich and detailed descriptions of children's life experiences. Moreover, such abstract questions may be cognitively challenging for the child participants of these studies.

Second, most of these Chinese qualitative studies lacked detailed descriptions of their research designs and methodologies. Many studies simply described their methodologies as 'interviews' (e.g., Zhao & Zhang, 2002; Zhou, 2012; Fan et al., 2012) without further clarifying the qualitative methodologies that guided their research, e.g., ethnographies, grounded theories. Even researchers who stated they used case studies (e.g., Lv, 2007; Wang, 2013), only mentioned interviews in the methodology section of their articles. They did not explain how they conducted their research as case studies or how they analysed the case study evidence. None of the authors of the assessed qualitative studies were transparent about their analytic strategies or analytic frameworks that guided their coding decisions. The authors of two studies (Zhao & Zhang, 2011; Liu et al., 2007) presented their results in terms of themes they developed from coding, however they did not describe their methodologies as 'thematic analysis' or give an account of their coding processes. It was unclear how they developed the themes from their original data. The study by Fan et al. (2012) stated that the researchers went through the process of 'open coding' and 'axial coding' before developing core categories. Their coding process was relatively similar to the grounded theory data analysis by Corbin and Strauss (1998). However, the whole study did not seem to be an example of

grounded theory research as it did not use the signature techniques of grounded theory, e.g., theoretical sampling, and it presented its findings as several thematic categories instead of a coherent theory. High-quality qualitative work needs to describe the process of data collection and data analysis in sufficient detail for someone to follow the same steps (Stenfors et al., 2020). For these Chinese qualitative studies that lacked detailed accounts of research methodologies, it was hard to assess whether their methods best fitted their research questions, and how their chosen methods informed their findings, compromising the transparency, rigour and credibility of the studies.

Furthermore, the findings of these studies seemed to lack conceptual depth. The majority of the study authors presented their findings as the summaries of the interview transcripts. For example, Zhou (2012) presented findings on LBC in terms of 'the basic conditions of the participants', 'growth and development', 'mental states and behaviour', 'interpersonal interactions', 'academic results' and 'grandparenting'. These findings may have revealed important information about the LBC's lives but lack in-depth understanding of the studied phenomena and fail to show one of the key characteristics of sound qualitative research, that is, to develop a theory or generate an original conceptual framework (Stenfors et al., 2020).

Another methodological limitation was that these studies lacked theoretical frameworks. A theoretical framework transmits the values of the researcher that justify the epistemological approach and methodical approach of the research. Merriam and Tisdell clarified: 'The meaning we give to the data we collect is also influenced by the theoretical framework. That is, our analysis and interpretation – the findings of our study – will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models and theories that structured the study in the first place' (2016, p. 88). This makes it clear

that when coding and analysing, the connection between the data analysis and the theoretical framework must be explicit. The importance of theoretical frameworks cannot be overstated. A qualitative study lacking a theoretical framework could significantly reduce its coherence and depth. For example, the researchers in a case study by Liu et al. (2020) summarised the themes in the children's interviews. They discovered that children experienced emotional changes following parental migration and stated that the change from intense feelings to less intense feelings was the healthiest change pattern, showing positive adaptations to the situation. They did not take into consideration the role of psychological defences in emotional regulation, as well as its long-term developmental impact. The understanding of the findings lacked analytic depth.

Third, these studies only revealed limited aspects of the children's lived experiences and the exploration of their experiences was usually conducted around preconceived themes. It seemed that many areas of children's experiences of parental migration were left unexplored. For example, there were no studies investigating children's initial experiences of parental migration, or how children experienced the temporary or permanent reunions with their parents. In literature on transnational families, some studies investigated the reunion experiences of LBC, which could happen either when migrant parents returned home, or LBC moved to join the parents (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). The initial experience of parental migration was explored in a limited manner in international literature, with some studies indicating that children were usually excluded in the family's decision making of migration (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015).

Fourth, while the qualitative Chinese studies on LBC that explored children's opinions and perceptions of migration showed the researchers' recognition of

children's agency to some extent, they solely focused on how children were impacted by their parents' actions and did not show how children may have the potential to impact their parents. The researchers focused more on how migration changed the lives of LBC rather than how LBC took initiatives to construct their own lives after parental migration or even change their parents' actions (e.g., Liao et al., 2009; Zhou, 2013; Ye et al., 2006). Children were not viewed as playing an active and influencing role in the parental migration process. For example, some researchers explored parent-child communications after migration and reported that children experienced low contact frequency and communication lacked emotional intimacy (Ye et al., 2006; Liao et al., 2009). These studies did not explore the roles that children play in their communication with their parents.

This critical evaluation of existing Chinese qualitative studies on LBC showed that there were many gaps in the literature and provided the context for the development of the current research. The justifications for the current research based on these gaps are presented in Chapter 4

1.4.3 International literature on LBC

Migration is a global phenomenon that almost all countries have experienced and are still experiencing. It is common in developing countries for parents to move away from their families for work and leave their children behind. Countries in Eastern Europe, south-east Asia, Africa and Latin America have also witnessed a high magnitude of parental migration (Ackah & Medevdev, 2012; Afulani et al., 2016; Fernández-Sánchez, 2020; Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Jaenisch et al., 2020). Surveys showed that around 36% of all children in Moldova (Svintradze & Ubiria, 2007), 39% of all children in Georgia (Vanore, 2015), 40% of children in rural South Africa (Whitehead & Hashim, 2005), 10.5% of children in Trinidad (Jones et al.,

2004) and 27% of children in the Philippines (Reyes, 2007) were living in migrant households.

For a considerable length of time, the migration literature has focused on the discussion of remittances, poverty relief and household welfare (Adams & Page, 2005) from an international development and economic vantage point. In recent decades, the global literature on migration has undergone several shifts from focusing on the macro-level impact on the regional economy to the micro-level impact on migrant individuals and families, from focusing on the migrants to those left behind, and from focusing on adults to including children themselves.

Many qualitative studies have explored the children's life experiences of being apart from their parents and the resulting changes in family structures (Fresnoza-Flot, 2018; Hoang et al., 2015; Tymczuk, 2015). The migration literature introduced the concept of 'transnational families' to depict households with core members living in at least two countries in order to achieve socio-economic goals (Halabuza, 2014). Families with one or both parents who migrated for economic purposes and 'left behind' other family members, including children, is a common type of transnational family.

The studies of transnational families used to focus on the migrants or the retrospective accounts from adult children who had already settled in the destination countries. Recently, some scholars have become interested in the experiences of children themselves. The studies of children left behind in transnational families show that parental migration took an emotional toll on them. Children had feelings of anger, loneliness, abandonment, confusion and other worries (Adumitroaie & Dafinoiu, 2013; Dreby, 2007; Jones et al., 2004).

Parental migration transformed the family structures. Similar to studies about families within China, after parents migrated children often had increased housework chores or even had to work in the fields (Démurger, 2015). Older children usually stepped up to assume adult-like responsibilities prematurely, such as managing the remittance sent by parents or taking parental roles for younger siblings (Pottinger & Brown, 2006). Some researchers further reported that elder left-behind daughters were at greater risk for work overload due to traditional gender stereotypes, especially after a mother's migration, since fathers did not necessarily take over the duties previously performed by their wives (Reyes, 2007; Yeoh et al., 2020). The increased work for children might lead to 'parentification' and have negative developmental implications for them (Titzmann, 2011).

Long-term separation also impacted the relationships between migrant parents and children left behind. Some families were able to overcome geographical distances to maintain family bonds by practising various forms of 'transnational motherhood' (Fresnoza-flot, 2009; McCabe et al., 2017). Many other families experienced estranged relationships. Children reported feeling distant or resentful towards the migrant parent (Dreby, 2007; Menjivar, 2000). In Dreby's (2007) study on Mexican children, the children responded to separation from parents due to migration by naming carers as mothers, feigning indifference about parents, disregarding parental authority and appearing reluctant to migrate. Many LBC did not identify their migrant parents as authority figures and did not respond to parental control (Smith et al., 2004), which could lead to increased child delinquency. In Guatemala and Moldova, the LBC were perceived to have higher rates of behavioural problems, such as alcohol and drug abuse, or engaging in risky sex and criminal activities, which have been anecdotally linked with parental migration and

the resulting loss in parental control of children's behaviour (Moran-Taylor, 2008). However, it has also been suggested that children's problematic behaviour could be a way of acting out to express their emotional distress and attract their parents' attention (Moran-Taylor, 2008; Smith et al., 2004).

Compared to the Chinese literature, the international literature on the LBC tends to pay more attention to the family dynamics of the LBC. They investigate the LBC's experiences in the context of the migrant families and explore the multiple interactions in which the children, migrant parents and other family members engaged. These family-level perspectives had implications for the current research that the LBC's experiences should be explored and understood in relation to their family dynamics.

The increasing focus on children's experiences in transnational families occurred along with the recognition of children's active role in the family migratory process and the progress from seeing children as silent belongings to active agents (Huijsmans, 2011). Researchers started paying more attention to the children's own voices and how they perceived the migration (Hoang et al., 2014; Schapiro et al., 2013).

The children could display varying levels of acceptance of their parents' migration, according to their age. Younger children may simply experience the feeling of being abandoned (Moran-Taylor, 2008; Reyes, 2007), while adolescents may have more ambivalent feelings towards parental migration, such as feelings of acceptance, resentment, pleasure and grief (Reyes, 2007; Valtolina & Colombo, 2012). Some LBC accepted their parents' migration and saw it as a way to improve their living standard and to pay for expensive items. They developed a materialistic, money-oriented view of the world and a tendency to belittle the value of family

relationships (Bakker et al., 2009; Reis, 2008; Valtolina & Colombo, 2012). An overemphasis on the economic gains of migration could push children to decide to become migrants themselves in the future, which could have negative impacts on their overall study motivations (Kandel & Kao, 2001).

Similar to the scholarly attention paid to the social, educational and emotional impacts of parental migration on LBC in China, studies have been conducted in other major labour exporter countries, such as the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Mexico, Moldova, and Caribbean countries, examining various development outcomes of LBC after parental migration (Wickramage et al., 2015; Vanore et al., 2015; Intemann & Katz, 2014).

Generally, the evidence for the impact of parental migration on child outcomes has presented a mixed picture. Regarding education, some studies found that parental migration and remittances were positively associated with children's educational performance in Mexico (Kandel & Kao, 2001) and Romania (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2014); time allocation in schools in El Salvador (Intemann & Katz, 2014); university enrolment in Moldova (Görlich et al., 2007); secondary school enrolment in Tajikistan (Bennett et al., 2013); and school accessibility and gender equality in primary school education for LBC in India (Roy et al., 2015). These studies show the role of the remittances in supporting the LBC's education through increased investment. On the other hand, some studies indicated different results. The study in Sri Lanka (Sarma & Parinduri, 2016) found that parental migration had no significant impact on children's education. Studies in Mexico (McKenzie & Rapoport, 2010), Ecuador (Cortés, 2007), Moldova (Salah, 2008) and Albania (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010) have found that parental migration was linked to worse school performance, declining attendance and decreased graduation rates.

Similarly, the effects of parental migration on the LBC's psychological development proved to be heterogenous among studies conducted in different countries with different indicators of child development. Some studies found no significant differences between LBC and NLBC (Adhikari et al., 2013; Cebotari et al., 2018), whereas others have reported clear disadvantages in the outcomes for LBC (Jordan & Graham, 2012; Lahaie et al., 2009). In the studies that have found greater risks for LBC, they have found links between parental migration and an increased incidence of emotional and behavioural problems, low life satisfaction, reduced cognitive abilities and other forms of psychological difficulties in Mexico, Southeast Asia, Romania, Ghana and India (Heymann et al., 2009; Jordan & Graham, 2012; Lahaie et al., 2009; Nguyen, 2016; Tomsa & Jenaro, 2015; Wu & Cebotari, 2018).

As illustrated above, the inconsistency in the findings on the LBC between studies in international contexts also appeared in the Chinese context. There are several meta-analyses providing more coherent and robust evidence of the development of the LBC in China. However, such meta-analytic work was very limited for the LBC in international contexts. The researcher found one meta-analysis by Fellmeth, Rose-Clarke and colleagues (2018) that consisted of 111 studies on LBC from 16 low-income and middle-income countries. This meta-analysis showed that the left-behind children and adolescents had poorer outcomes than children and adolescents of non-migrant parents, with the children of migrant parents having increased risk of mental problems including depression, anxiety, conduct disorder, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and nutritional problems such as wasting and stunting. The global findings on mental and behavioural problems of the LBC were in line with findings on the Chinese LBC regarding the developmental disadvantages of the LBC.

All the evidence showed that LBC were vulnerable populations in countries beyond China. The financial benefits of labour migration often came at a cost to their development, with children facing multiple and complex impairments. In a world where labour migration is increasingly prevalent, more research and interventions are needed to protect these young people from long-term negative effects on their health and development.

The international literature had more thorough explorations of the LBC's experiences and revealed more complex findings of the family separation experiences involved in international emigration processes. These experiences were more complex perhaps due to the fact that international emigration had more diverse elements than internal migration processes. The motivation for migration has been a primary factor in migration diversity. In addition to financial motivation, many people migrate because of social-political factors and personal reasons. For example, emigration from South Africa has been largely caused by the growing crime and violence in the country (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012). Moreover, the migratory separation experiences could be further complicated by issues of immigration detention or deportation. In general, the literature on Chinese LBC and LBC in other countries produced similar findings and could reinforce each other. The studies in China offered stronger evidence of the psychosocial developmental outcomes of the LBC and the studies worldwide offered more insights into the lived experiences of the children.

The range of the existing literature on the LBC had great implications for the development of the current research. First, the ample evidence of LBC's developmental outcomes showed the magnitude and seriousness of the children's disadvantages, which could have long-lasting impacts on the individuals and society

as a whole. For example, LBC in rural China were found to be more likely to commit crimes (Guo, 2018; Liu, 2018). Adults with childhood left-behind experiences were found to have higher rates of mental health problems (Lan et al., 2019) and even lower job stability (Wang & Huang, 2014). These factors could generate significant social and economic costs. Therefore, it is of great importance to continue the study of the LBC and provide suggestions about how to help children adjust to parental migration positively and mitigate the negative impacts of migration. Second, the evidence showed that the impacts of parental migration on children were very complicated and manifested in almost all aspects of the children's development, such as mental and physical health, personality development, coping, socialisation and education. The current research paid attention to the 'multidimensional' effects of parental migration. Third, children had their own views of the migration experience, whether viewing it as abandonment or as an economic strategy. The children's own voices are emphasised in the current research rather being regarded as passive receivers of the impacts of parental migration. Fourth, the children's experiences were impacted by their social networks, especially family networks, such as how they interacted with the caregivers. Therefore, the exploration of the children's experiences should be placed in the context of their interactions with their environments.

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework of the attachment theory

This chapter first presents an overview of several theories that explain the underlying mechanisms through which the separation from parents could affect a child's development. Then a focus on the attachment theory, describes the primary theoretical framework of the current research in understanding the impacts of parent-child separation induced by parental migration on the LBC. Then, an overview of attachment theory is presented, including its basic concepts, its relation to children's development, how disrupted attachment affects children and the measurement of attachment. Finally, the evidence regarding the distributions of the attachment styles in Chinese samples is given, followed by a review of the studies on LBC using attachment theory as the theoretical framework.

2.1 Potential underlying mechanisms

The LBC's developmental disadvantages raised public concerns and attracted scholarly attention towards the potential mechanisms linking the state of being left behind and the LBC's negative psychosocial outcomes. Previous literature investigating the developmental consequences of child-parent separation focused largely on situations of parental death, divorce or desertion (Mazzucato, 2014). These situations of separation, while different from the separation resulting from parental migration, helped model expectations about how child development evolves following parental separation and loss. There are some frameworks to explain the mechanisms through which early family separation experiences could harm children's development.

For example, from the biological perspective, parent-child separations often cause stress responses in children with the release of stress hormones (Appelhans

& Luecken, 2006). Having high levels of stress hormones for a long period of time can have a long-term impact on a child's development, disrupting their processes of emotion and stress regulation and learning abilities (Shonkoff, et al., 2011).

A mother commonly uses a hug or touch to sooth their child when they are crying or upset. Physical touch could help reduce stress responses in children (Ardiel & Rankin, 2010). Sometimes, even without touch, the mere presence of their mother could have a similar calming effect on the distressed child. Studies suggest that the amygdala of the brain becomes more active in children when their mothers are absent than when they are present (Gee et al., 2014). Therefore, children who are separated from their parents are under serious stress and also are deprived of their primary coping method for stress, i.e., the parents' presence and comfort.

Other theories, such as the social baseline theory (Beckes & Coan, 2011), postulate that social relatedness is the 'baseline' condition for human individuals as the human brain evolves in a highly social environment characterised by familiarity and interdependence. Relational loss represents a move away from the social baseline condition to the alone condition, leading to an increased need for responding to threats with additional vigilance and self-regulation efforts (Coan et al., 2006). As a result, experiences of disruption in parent-child relationships, caused by separations, rejection, isolation, or neglect could be psychologically damaging and often become the causes or amplifiers of mental health problems (Hughes et al., 2012).

Among the numerous theories explaining the influence on children of separation from their parents, attachment theory is one of the most widely recognised. Attachment theory provides an empirically based theoretical model for understanding human development in the context of early care-giving relationships

and has worked as a useful framework for exploring the impact of prolonged parent-child separation on LBC (Liu, et al., 2017; Suárez-Orazco et al., 2011). It has a strong theoretical foundation, considerable supporting empirical evidence, and strong implications for the children's psychosocial development. The current research utilises attachment theory as the primary theoretical framework. As there are many existing studies using attachment theory to study the LBC, a review of these studies is conducted after the introduction of the main concepts and basic tenets of attachment theory.

2.2 The theoretical framework: attachment theory

The attachment concept has both intra-psychic and interpersonal aspects. Externally, attachment refers to an enduring affective relationship between the child and the caregiver. Internally, every infant is equipped with an innate psychological system, the 'attachment behavioural system' (Bowlby, 1969). The attachment system has two main functions, it creates: a safe haven to turn to when distressed and a secure base from which to explore the environment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The system is usually activated by events that threaten a person's sense of security. In such cases, the person is motivated to maintain a sense of security by seeking actual or symbolic proximity to an attachment figure.

2.2.1 Attachment behaviours

Attachment behaviour is the behaviour that individuals in distress use to seek either actual or symbolic proximity to supportive others (attachment figures).

Attachment behaviour changes with age. When young children feel their security is threatened, they usually display the behaviours of clinging, crawling and walking towards their attachment figures (Van den Boom, 2004). Children at this stage still seeks physical proximity to their attachment figures and rely on actual physical

contact for comfort. They are sensitive to separations from the attachment figures. Therefore, Ainsworth (1980) designed the 'strange situation' exercise for the toddlers by making their mothers leave the room to observe children's separation and reunion behaviour. As they approach preschool age, a child's need for proximity gradually lessens. They become more capable of tolerating separations (Kamza, 2019). Children learn to balance their need for autonomous exploration and their need for love and protection from their attachment figures. When they are distressed, children still seek closeness to their primary caregivers and display occasional separation anxiety (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008).

As they approach school age (middle childhood), children are more concerned with the psychological availability of their attachment figures than their physical proximity. They are much less threatened by brief separations from attachment figures. In the study by Bodner et al. (2019), the researchers combined separation from mothers and other developmental task-relevant stressors, such as 'comparison with peers' and the 'inability to measure up to expectations' to elicit children's distress and their need for parental reassurance in middle childhood. In middle childhood, children still display the same attachment behaviours as younger children and thus often seek physical contact when they need to be comforted by their mothers (Vandevivere et al., 2015). However, attachment-related behaviour extends beyond these easily observable behaviours (Bodner et al, 2019). For instance, mother and child can also give and receive support by simply exchanging gazes (Mayseless, 2005). Parents and children's attachment relationships start to turn into 'supervision partnerships' in which problems are solved together in a collaborative alliance and decisions are negotiated (Koehn & Kerns, 2016).

Adolescence is a stage of critical neurological, cognitive and social development. Adolescents start to spend less time with parents, explore new social roles and develop attachment relationships with peers and romantic partners (Moretti & Holland, 2003). However, parental attachments still play a significant role in adolescents' development: serving as the secure base for fostering exploration and the development of psycho-social competencies (Allen et al., 2003). These developments in adolescence manifest in their attachment-related behaviour. While young children require proximity and physical availability of parents for comfort when they are distressed, adolescents do not need the same degree of proximity and can derive comfort from knowing their parents are supportive even when they are not present. In addition to parental sensitivity, the ability of parents to establish a 'goal-directed partnership' with their child is essential in establishing secure attachment during adolescence (Mudrick, 2016).

2.2.2 Internal working models

Bowlby stated that for the attachment behavioural system to accommodate complex developmental changes and remain organised around the same goal of 'felt security', the attachment system must be guided at the representational level (Bowlby, 1982). The attachment system is regulated by a cognitive representation of the parent-child relationship, which is termed the 'internal working model' (Bowlby, 1969, 1982, 1973).

The internal working model is conceptualised as having an information-processing component and an emotion and behaviour regulation component. Bowlby proposed that an infant as young as 12 months uses his or her internal working model of attachment to perceive and appraise attachment-related information and

make predictions about the possible reactions of the attachment figures or possible outcomes of their own behaviour.

The emotion and behaviour regulation component becomes activated when (negative) emotions arise out of the appraisal process and lead to specific forms of attachment behaviour. Based on the experiences an infant or a child has with his or her caregiver, specific connections between input (e.g., emotional distress) and specific behaviours for regulation (e.g., proximity-seeking or avoiding caregiver) become established (Beebe et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the infant's representation of attachment is the foundation of their personality development. Based on their internal working model of attachment, the infant (and later child and adult), develops expectations about the self and others: the self as worthy or unworthy of care and protection and others as available or unavailable to provide care and protection (Hagekull & Bohlin, 2003; Milkovitch et al., 2018).

Children's attachment working models are based on real-life experiences of day-to-day interactions with parents (Beebe et al., 2012). A child who is cared for by a caregiver who is sensitive and responsive to the child's needs will develop positive representations of the self being loved and wanted and of their significant others being trustworthy and reliable. Such stable and sensitive caregiving ensures the development of secure internal working models of attachment in the child. Once established, an infant's 'primary attachment strategy' should be to seek safety and protection from the parent (Main, 1989). If the child cannot find protection, they are likely to regulate their behaviour accordingly and develop secondary attachment strategies – either by being excessively worried and demanding (i.e., anxiously

attached), or by withdrawing from others and attempting to achieve a high degree of self-reliance (i.e., avoidantly attached) (Ascone et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2015).

These strategies may not be effective in cases of extremely insensitive parenting (Out et al., 2009), when parents themselves may be suffering from unresolved trauma (Madigan et al., 2006), childhood maltreatment or abuse. In these cases, children are likely to experience a momentary breakdown of the attachment system and develop the disorganised attachment, as they fail to develop organised and coherent strategies for coping and maintaining security (Granqvist et al., 2017).

In the course of development, an infant's sensorimotor–affective internal working model becomes increasingly complex and mentally manipulable (Johnson et al., 2007; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). In middle childhood, many changes take place at the emotional, cognitive and behavioural level which are related to attachment systems (Allen, 2008). Children's internal working models develop from procedural, sensorimotor schemata as 'pre-conscious' interaction rules into social scripts and explicit knowledge concerning context-specific emotional states and their causes (Panfile & Laible, 2012). Moreover, children begin to develop the meta-cognitive skills to check their mental states, as well as the ability to recognise positive or negative aspects in their relationships with parents.

Given the decline in the frequency and intensity of attachment behaviours in middle childhood, along with the child's enhanced coping abilities, most studies in middle childhood no longer assess the child's attachment through the child's secure base behaviour toward a caregiver. Instead, a series of attachment measures were designed to elicit mental representations of attachment through speech or drawings with the assumption that inferred mental representations reflect children's attachment organisation, e.g., Separation Anxiety Test (Shouldice & Stevenson-

Hinde, 1992), story stems (Bretherton et al., 1990), and doll play (Solomon et al., 1995).

2.2.3 Attachment models

The earliest conceptual model of attachment, the monotropy model of attachment, posited that a child has an instinctual tendency to direct attachment behaviour to a specific figure rather than to whoever is nearby (Duschinsky, 2020). This model highlights that the principal primary attachment figure has an exclusive impact on the child's development. However, there are risks with a single caregiver, for example, the loss of that caregiver would have a devastating impact on the child. Also, a sole caregiver might be too overburdened to provide optimal care for the child. The concept of monotropy has been particularly criticised for describing the limited reality of Western nuclear families compared to the globally more common broad social networks (Keller, 2016). In contrast to monotropy, the network perspective on children's attachment works in the context of kinship care, where the child establishes multiple attachments to people who might be able to provide better care than a mother who has to meet all a child's needs alone (Keller, 2014; Thompson, 2022). In an attachment network if one attachment figure was unavailable, other figures could fill in. Also, different people could take different childcare roles and share tasks, for example some may offer emotional support, others academic guidance.

The establishment of a network of attachments for a child has some prerequisites. Multiple attachments means that the child has distinctive mental representations of several different attachment figures, with accompanying

expectations about each attachment figure's availability and specific attachment strategies (e.g., hyperactivating or deactivating strategies) within each relationship.

Multiple attachment representations form a hierarchically organised attachment representational network, which allows flexible operation across relationship contexts (Overall et al., 2003). The activation of different representations should depend upon the specificity of the relationship context. The more attachments a children forms, the more complex the cognitive underpinnings of the attachment network can be. Therefore, it might be more feasible for slightly older children to develop an attachment network (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021).

To build attachment, a child needs to have frequent interactions over an extended period with the attachment figure. Being surrounded with a high number of caregivers may limit the child's interactions with specific caregivers, which could actually preclude stability and feelings of safety. Studies on institutionalised care have warned that the caregiving net can be spread too wide (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021).

Nonetheless, attachment networks could provide a haven of safety for a child without overburdening the primary caregiver (Keller 2006; Keller, 2007). The number of attachment figures in a network frequently increases with the child's cognitive development (Becke & Bongar, 2018).

Nonetheless, attachment networks could provide a child heaven of safety without overburdening the primary caregiver (Keller 2006; Keller, 2007). It is expected that along the development, the number of attachment figures may increase in size with the child's cognitive development (Becke & Bongar, 2018).

2.2.4 Attachment and development

The quality of early attachment relationships has substantial implications for the psychological development of children. A secure bond with the caregiver helps reduce distress in stressful times and allows the infant to develop a healthy personality (Cohen et al., 2016). A longitudinal study conducted by the University of Minnesota showed a strong association between attachment experiences and the development of self-reliance, emotional regulation and the emergence and growth of social competence (Sroufe, 2005). Attachment insecurity was found to be more prevalent among people with a wide variety of mental disorders, ranging from mild distress to severe personality disorders and even psychosis (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012; Tasca & Balfour, 2014; Wiltgen et al., 2015; Brown, 2017). These findings suggest that attachment may explain the development of psychopathology to some degree. Attachment insecurity may be seen as linked to a general vulnerability to mental disorders with the development of the specific symptomatology dependent on a combination of genetic, developmental and environmental factors (Milan et al., 2012; Ein-Dor et al., 2016).

One of the potential developmental pathways linking insecure attachment to psychopathology may be underlying internal working models of insecure attachment that could contribute to a cognitive vulnerability to various mental disorders (Lee & Hankin, 2009). For example, individuals with insecure attachment representations are likely to have dysfunctional beliefs about themselves. They are prone to be self-critical, or use dysfunctional defences, such as destructive perfectionism, to overcome a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness (Martins et al., 2015).

Another important mechanism that could mediate the link between attachment insecurity and psychopathology is the emotional regulation process. The attachment

experiences with caregivers provide actual and symbolic supports for learning emotion-regulation strategies (Brumariu, 2015). Sensitive and responsive care from caregivers helps children regulate their emotions and develop constructive strategies to regulate distress (Housman, 2017). Conversely, the provision of insensitive, inconsistent or neglectful care is thought to result in deconstructive emotion-regulation strategies that either amplify a negative affect (i.e., hyperactivation, as in the case of attachment anxiety) or fence off emotions from their awareness (i.e., deactivation, as in the case of attachment avoidance) (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019).

The evidence of the impact of attachment on children's development has strong implications for understanding the LBC's development. The LBC may build negative internal working models and develop destructive emotion-regulation strategies due to disruptions in parental care. These risk factors may increase their chances of developing mental health problems, contributing to the developmental disadvantages of the LBC that were observed in many empirical studies.

2.2.5 Attachment, separation and loss

Separation and loss are key themes in attachment theory. The attachment theory emerged from Bowlby and Robertson's observations of hospitalised children who had been separated from their caregivers for a week or more (Alsop-Shields & Mohay, 2001). The researchers found that the children went through three stages of reactions after being separated from their main caregivers: protest (separation anxiety), despair (grief and mourning) and detachment (denial or repression). During the phase of protest, children showed significant distress and engaged in proximity-seeking behaviours, including crying or angry outbursts. Children were preoccupied with the expectation that their mothers would return. In the phase of despair, children began to acknowledge that their mothers were not responding, and thus the children

experienced sadness and stopped seeking proximity to their mothers. During this stage, children were still longing for their mothers' return but the hope of it being realised gradually faded. After a period of time, the final stage of detachment set in. The children became apathetic, withdrawn and started to explore the environment independently. At this stage, the children began to look for new attachment figures that could provide the resources and care necessary for survival (Bowlby, 1973).

Later, Bowlby extended his work on separation anxiety to loss and grief. In cases where separation was not resolved, children would display more intense attachment behaviours. After a substantial time had passed, children's efforts would cease when they realised, they could not restore their previous attachment bonds (e.g., in the case of parental death), 'the pangs of grief and perhaps an urge to search are then experienced afresh' (Bowlby, 1980, p. 43). Bowlby described four stages of loss: the numbing phase, the phase of yearning and searching for the lost figure, the disorganisation and despair phase, and the phase of re-organisation and recovery.

Children's separation experiences may have a long-term impact on them. In a study by Rusby and Tasker (2008), the researchers investigated the attachment status of older adults who were evacuated from their homes in Britain during the Second World War. After decades, respondents who were evacuated in childhood showed significantly lower incidents of secure attachments than those who were not evacuated. In Bryant et al.'s (2017) study, they assessed the attachment of individuals who experienced brief separations from parents due to a major Australian bushfire disaster in 1983. They found that childhood brief separation from parents was significantly related to having an avoidant attachment style as an adult.

Attachment theory is used as the primary theoretical framework in the current research. Attachment theory is particularly useful as parental migration is a special case of the disruptions to the bond between children and their primary attachment figures. The children's reactions following separation from their mothers that were observed in attachment studies might have implications for the LBC's experiences. The LBC may have emotional responses to parental migration similar to the reactions of 'despair to detachment'. However, the LBC's emotional experiences may also be different from those caused by permanent parental loss, as the parent-child bond usually continued after migration despite the physical separation. Moreover, many of the observations of the children's emotional reactions following separations were conducted in an unnatural environment, e.g., the lab or hospital (Alsop-Shields & Mohay, 2001; Chae et al., 2018). In children's real ecological environments, their emotional experiences following separation could be impacted by the other factors present in their environment, e.g., the interactions with their parents before and after separations, the presence and the interactions with the other adults.

2.2.6 Attachment and social-economic status

Maternal sensitivity towards their children was identified by Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1978) as a significant predictor of infants' secure attachment to primary caregivers. However, it was not the only factor that promotes secure attachments. Authors of empirical studies have argued for consideration of additional factors, such as social support, marital relationships and parental psychological resources (Aviemer et al., 2003; Esposito et al., 2017).

Generally, it has been agreed that a child's attachment security towards their parents is influenced by a combination of factors including the child themselves, such as their temperament, parental factors, such as maternal sensitivity, as well as environmental factors, such as social-cultural background. Social-economic status has a strong influence on a child's attachment security. Children who live in poverty display insecure attachment more commonly than those who live at a high economic level (Cerezo et al., 2008). African-American children's attachment security was found to be substantially lower than in white children and researchers have attributed the difference to the persistent poverty experienced by the African-American families (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2004). In a meta-analysis of adult attachment, secure representations of attachment were under-represented in low socio-economic status samples (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010).

The link between economic hardship and attachment insecurity was consistent with general findings that economic difficulties could have a negative impact on child development (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2017). Two processes were responsible for this association. First, the family stress model shows that a low family income influences a child's development because of its impact on parental mental health, which then influences parenting practices, which in turn are associated with children and youth outcomes (Holmes et al., 2020; Newland et al., 2013). A second model, known as the investment model, hypothesises that income is associated with child development because it enables parents to purchase materials, experiences and services that are beneficial to children's well-being and development (Sohr-Preston et al., 2013).

In terms of the impact of economic status on attachment, there is some empirical evidence supporting the family stress model. Socio-economic disadvantage increases exposure to unstable and stressful environments, which can hinder a mother's emotional availability for their infants and their ability to provide optimal care for their children (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Little & Carter, 2005; Whitesell et al., 2015). Low socio-economic status was also linked to mothers' neural processing of their infants' emotions (Kim et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2017). Among neural changes associated with parenting, researchers have identified that heightened amygdala sensitivity to infant emotional expressions, particularly positive expressions, play an important role in secure mother-infant attachment and sensitive parenting (Feldman, 2015; Swain et al., 2014). Low income was associated with a dampened amygdala response to positive infant faces and elevated amygdala response to negative infant faces (Kim et al., 2017).

These findings demonstrate that the development of attachment is subject to contextual influences. It should be noted that maternal sensitivity only partially accounted for the association between income and attachment security (Kim et al., 2017). The remaining associations between income and attachment security might be found in the domains of parental behaviour, which exert more direct influence on their children's psycho-social development. There are some studies showing that economic hardship contributed to less warm and responsive parenting practice and an increased use of harsh punishment towards children (Hines et al., 2021; Leinonen et al., 2003). Many studies have investigated the role of maternal attitudinal and personality factors in child attachment, but the impact of maternal behavioural variables is relatively small.

Research into the pertinent behavioural variables of a child's daily interactions with their parents from the perspective of attachment research are lacking.

Moreover, the impact of a low income is often compounded with other contextual factors that could also hinder the development of a secure parent-child attachment by disrupting the stability of the parent-child interactions. For example, low socio-economic status is found to be linked with lower marital stability (Conger et al., 2010). Future studies could investigate whether low income alone contributes to a child's insecure attachment style or whether other compounding environmental factors play a more important role.

The findings on the relationship between family income and child attachment has relevance to the studies on the rural children in China. The urban and rural divisions in China are characterised by significant income gaps. In 2020, China's total per capital income of urban households was 43834 yuan (approximately 5385 GBP) and China's total per capital income of rural households was 17131 yuan (approximately 2105 GBP) (National Bureau of China, 2021). Rural families are much more likely to experience economic disadvantages than urban families. The urban-rural economic differences were also found to be associated with differences in parent-child relationships. The study by Du & Su (2009) found that rural mothers scored significantly lower on 'emotional warmth and understanding' and higher on 'denial and rejection' and 'intrusiveness'. Studies on the attachment distribution of Chinese children (which are reviewed in section 2.2.9) all focused on urban children and the findings showed that the most prevalent attachment classification was the secure attachment style. Studies on the attachment distribution of rural children are lacking. It is possible that rural children may have a higher percentage of insecure attachment styles, and rural LBC are even more vulnerable than other rural children.

LBC are exposed to stressful environments compounded with economic difficulties and long-term parental migration. More studies are needed to investigate the rural LBC's attachment styles, especially how these children interact with their parents in their contexts that could contribute to their attachment features.

2.2.7 Attachment measurement

There are differences in each individual's attachment functioning, reflected through distinctive systematic patterns of relational expectations, emotions and behaviour developed from particular attachment experiences.

There are two main approaches to measuring individual differences in attachment: observer-rated measures of behaviour or narratives and self-report questionnaires (Roisman, et al., 2007). These approaches were designed based on the different operationalisations of the attachment organisation. The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) (Ainsworth et al., 1978), a well-established behavioural measure of attachment, was developed to examine young children's behavioural strategies for maintaining proximity to their attachment figures. Beyond infancy, attachment assessments used semi-projective play techniques, such as the story-stem procedure (Emde et al., 2003) to reflect children's attachment representations. The development of the interview-based method, such as Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (Main et al., 1985) represented the 'move to the level of representations in the study of attachment beyond infancy'. The AAI assessed the inferred attachment representations of adults as they were required to reflect upon early attachment-related experiences whilst maintaining coherent narratives (Roisman et al., 2007).

Previously, the dominant attachment measurement for children in middle childhood was the story-stem procedure that assesses inferred representations from their drawings and stories (e.g., The Manchester Attachment Story Task; the

Separation Anxiety Test). These assessments indirectly elicited representations that could be influenced by distortions or idealisations caused by cultural stereotypes or wishful thinking and might not reflect actual representations (Target et al., 2003).

The Child Attachment Interview (CAI; Target et al., 2003) was developed using direct questioning to address the measurement gap in middle childhood. It was designed to assess children's mental representations of their attachment relationships through reflection on their current attachment relationships and experiences (Venta et al., 2014). The CAI captures information about the children's perception of the availability and responsiveness of their attachment figures, as well as the value children placed on their attachment relationships. The interview also focuses on times of illness, loss, abuse and separation – times when the attachment system is likely to be activated. Unlike the AAI, the CAI assesses the attachment style for each parent separately.

Another major approach to attachment measurement is the self-report measure. This measure asks about a person's feelings and behaviours in the context of a close relationship with the attachment figure. Self-report questionnaires use different operational definitions of attachment security and tap into different components of attachment. For instance, the Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ; Kenny, 1990) measures the attachment of older adolescents to their parents. It has three subscales: Affective Quality of Relationships, Parental Fostering of Autonomy, and Parental Provision of Emotional Support. The PAQ was developed to examine 'the extent and function of the parent-child bond following the late adolescents' departure from the family' (Kenny, 1990, p. 18). And the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR; Wei et al., 2007) measures two dimensions of

attachment, avoidance (discomfort with closeness) and anxiety (fear or abandonment).

The self-report measures commonly adopt a dimensional model of attachment and are based on the subject's conscious and deliberate responses. The responses are observed to access the overt, explicit representations of attachment, and are 'probably limited to accessing conscious aspects of attachment' (Jacobvitz et al., 2002). These self-report measures are also prone to response bias (Lilly & Lim, 2013). On the other hand, narrative-based attachment measures make inferences about the defensive mechanism associated with a person's current state of mind regarding attachment relationships. They usually adopt a categorical model of the attachment of individual typologies by assigning each person an attachment style, e.g., secure, preoccupied (anxious-ambivalent), dismissing (avoidant). These measures assess implicit representations of the attachment at the unconscious level and are able to show the distribution of attachment styles of a particular population, such as children who experienced a certain type of trauma (Bifulco et al., 2016; Maier et al., 2004).

Previous research has found moderate correlations between self-report measures and interview-based measures of attachment (Roisman et al., 2007). From the practical perspective, the use of interview-based measures often requires extensive training, is expensive and time-consuming. These measures have been used more extensively in clinical settings. The self-report measures are usually easy to use and do not require training in coding. They are more widely used in quantitative studies, such as investigating the correlation between attachment constructs and other constructs (e.g., Wiltgen et al., 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2012).

There is a large amount of empirical evidence supporting the validity of various attachment measures, for example the observer attachment Q-sort (Cadman et al., 2017) for infant attachment; the security scale (Brumariu et al., 2018); the CAI (Borelli et al., 2015); and the Manchester Child Attachment Story Task (Allen et al., 2018) for children in middle childhood; the AAI (Haydon et al., 2011); and other self-report attachment measures for adult attachment (e.g., the Adult Attachment Scale, Revised Adult Attachment Scale, Adult Attachment Questionnaire, Experiences in Close Relationships, and Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised) (Graham & Unterschute, 2015). All the studies of attachment measures, many of which are meta-analytic studies, proved the sound validity of the measures. Attachment studies conducted in China have mostly used self-report measures for children beyond infancy and adults. To the researcher's best knowledge, interview-based attachment measures have not been used in China possibly due to difficulties in accessing the coding training. The limitations to the use of attachment measurements have restricted exploration of children's attachment, especially the LBC's attachment in China. The current research attempted to fill the measurement gap in attachment research in China by using an interview-based attachment measure, the CAI.

2.2.8 Attachment distribution in China: universality and cultural impacts

Meta-analyses of 32 samples ($n = 1990$) drawn from attachment studies in eight different countries, conducted by Van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988), reported global evidence for patterns of attachment types corresponding to the original study of attachment classification by Ainsworth et al. (1978) and confirmed the universality hypothesis of the attachment theory.

The hypothesis posited that secure attachment is the most widespread attachment pattern when influencing risk factors are considered (e.g., low income,

stressful environments). Evidence drawn from strange situation research (Van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988), as well as research using the Q-set (Posada et al., 2004) indicated that, cross-culturally, secure attachment emerges as the most common form of attachment.

In China, research on the attachment classifications of children has focused on the maternal attachment representations of children in early childhood using the strange situation procedures. The majority of these studies were conducted on samples of children in stable families and found that the percentages of secure maternal attachment ranged from 53% to 78% (Archer et al., 2015; Hu & Meng, 2003; Li et al., 2003; Li et al., 2004; Liang et al., 2000; Shi et al., 2017; Yue et al., 2010). Two other studies in China on children living in institutions found a low prevalence of secure attachment, only 17% (Archer, 2012) and 20% (Lin et al., 2012). The evidence shows that Chinese children also fit the normal hypothesis of attachment regarding maternal attachment.

There is less evidence relating to paternal attachment than for maternal attachment. Generally, it has been recognised that the father can serve as an attachment figure and paternal attachment exhibits similar patterns to maternal attachment (Bretherton, 2010). Moreover, a moderate to high concordance between paternal and maternal attachment has been found across studies (De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997). Studies investigating mother and father attachments respectively, showed a predominance of secure attachment to the father in stable family groups and elevated prevalence of insecure attachment among maltreated children (Zachrisson et al., 2011; Venta et al., 2014). However, to date there are no studies investigating the father attachment patterns of children in China. There is only evidence of distributions of attachment styles for young children in China, but this still

provides valuable background information for comparison with the results of the current research regarding the attachment status of LBC.

Despite the 'universality' of the attachment theory, the literature has been interested in how attachment is impacted by culture (Keller, 2013; O'Toole, 2019). Children's attachment behaviour takes place in their unique caregiving environment and may reflect the norms and the demands of a cultural context. Cultural norms in China, especially rural China, are more collectivist than those in Western societies. Collective culture favours interdependence and harmonious interpersonal relationships. In Chinese culture, the construct of self, significant others and relationships are inseparable entities (Wang & Song, 2010).

Within this cultural context, Chinese people are more likely to have an excessive fear of not belonging or of not maintaining good relationships, a strong need to seek approval from significant others, and a tendency to suppress negative thoughts and feelings in order to protect interpersonal harmony.

Cultural norms underpin child-rearing beliefs and practices in a specific culture as well. While Western cultures aim to raise autonomous and independent individuals, child-rearing practice in Eastern cultures seeks to cultivate interdependence (Sorkhabi, 2005). Furthermore, Chinese culture has the norm of emphasising extended family networks. It is common for children to interact with several caregivers across generations and develop multiple attachments with possibly different attachment styles (Wang & Song, 2010). As a consequence, children learn to navigate a complex interpersonal network. This practice is consistent with the optimal socialisation outcome in the collective culture.

Studies on the attachment distribution of Chinese children have found that their attachment patterns were generally consistent with global norms. However,

some findings suggested variations in Chinese children's attachment. For example, in Hu and Meng's (2003) study, children classified as 'avoidant' did not display affectionate responses during separation and reunion, but they exhibited explorative behaviour that was comparable to the children classified as displaying secure attachment. The study also found that children who showed ambivalence towards their mothers upon reunion, did not exhibit clear signs of resistance to them. In the study of the young children in Beijing by Liang et al. (2000), the researchers identified four categories of attachment pattern in children: secure, clinging, detached and disorganised. The clinging attachment was very similar to the ambivalent attachment pattern, except those Chinese children classified in this category rarely displayed anger, resistance or physical attacks towards their mothers during reunions. The detached attachment pattern was very similar to avoidant attachment except those Chinese children in this category rarely displayed obvious avoidant behaviour towards their mothers (Liang et al., 2000). Some factors were proposed to explain the distinctive attachment behaviour of Chinese children, including the influence of the collective culture and traditional Chinese family values, the availability of the multiple caregivers in the families and the reduced time spent by mothers with their children (most urban Chinese mothers went back to work when their babies were three months old) (Hu & Meng, 2003).

Though the impact of Chinese culture on the attachment of Chinese children remains largely unexplored, the available evidence had implications for the current research on the LBC's attachment. For example, two studies by Hu and Meng (2003) and Liang et al. (2000) both suggested that Chinese children with insecure attachment styles tended to display less overt negative behaviour towards their parents. It is possible that the LBC might have similar features in their attachment

behaviour. The LBC's situation of physical separation from parents certainly deviated from the standard parent-child relationships. However, rather than pathologizing their experiences, the researcher remained open to the attachment behaviour of LBC and was sensitive to their distinctive characteristics in their social contexts. For example, the LBC may develop context-specific representations of their migrant parents and adopt strategies other than seeking physical proximity to maintain a sense of security when they are in distress. Moreover, the caregiving and care-seeking practice in the parent-child relationship may take different forms in the context of parental migration. How children perceive the major disruption of parent-child attachment, i.e., parental migration, and construct the attachment representations of their attachment figures and attachment relationships in the context of migration will be the focus of the current research.

2.2.9 A review of the studies of the LBC using attachment theory

Research on the LBC in transnational families usually adopted the attachment theory to understand their experiences and explore their attachment relationships with migrant families or substitute caregivers (e.g., Dreby, 2010; Parreñas, 2005). The research has shown that children remaining in their countries of origin were usually able to maintain some form of attachment to their parents over time through remittances and communication (Artico, 2003; Pottinger, 2005). It has been suggested that remittances represented the transnational parent-child bond, such that they become 'the currency of transnational love; [the] . . . only means through which parental presence can cross international boundaries' (Horton, 2009, p. 38).

Another body of research linking attachment theory and LBC, mainly conducted in quantitative approaches and in China, used self-report questionnaires to assess the cognitively based representations of attachment, by measuring

children's subjective sense of attachment security derived from parents. The existing literature produced inconsistent results, with some studies finding LBC having lower parental attachment security than NLBC (Xiao & Chen, 2009; Zhao & Li, 2017) whereas other studies found no significant difference (Fan et al., 2009; Liang, 2017).

A number of studies have explored various psychological correlates of attachment, such as mental health conditions, life satisfaction, emotion regulation and coping, and found that lower levels of attachment security were associated with lower levels of psychological well-being (e.g., Cheng et al., 2020; Fan & Wu, 2020; Wang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020). Research has also explored contextual factors of parental migration that could moderate the impact on the attachment of LBC, such as the gender of the migrant parent, whether one or both parents migrated, the length of the separation and the frequency of contact with the migrant parents (Fan et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2017). For example, several studies showed that for children with both parents who had migrated, attachment security with migrant mothers was higher than that with migrant fathers and the substitute caregivers (Fan et al., 2009). Children who experienced one parent migrating had higher attachment security than children with both parents migrating (Chen et al., 2012). Higher contact frequency with migrant parent or parents increases the attachment bond between parents and children (Du et al., 2015). The study by Chen et al. (2012) found that for children with both parents absent, girls tended to have higher attachment security than boys. However, the gender difference was not found in other research (Yang, 2009).

The impact of separation age and length on the attachment of left-behind children showed inconsistent results as well. Generally, research that considered the impact of age and length of separation agreed that the younger the age of the child

at the time of separation, the lower their subsequent parental attachment (Peng et al., 2017; Woodward et al., 2000). In addition, several studies identified some contextual factors (e.g., relationships with teachers, attachment with peers and substitute caregivers) and psychological factors (e.g., self-efficacy, psychological resilience and perceived social support) that would moderate or mediate the influence of the left-behind children's attachment on some developmental outcomes (Wang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2020; Zhao & Li, 2007).

Qualitative inquiries and quantitative inquiries applied attachment theory on the LBC in different ways. Qualitative studies mainly cited the theory as a theoretical background to highlight the importance of the relationship between the LBC and the migrant parents. However, these studies often failed to use the theory to interpret the research findings or use the findings to implicate the attachment theory. Some studies focused on exploring children's experiences of the attachment with migrant parents or substitute carers. These studies seemed to equate parent-child relationships with attachment (Fan & Wu, 2020; Li et al., 2021), while in fact, attachment refers to one specific aspect of relationship which is about the 'felt security' (Bowlby, 1988).

All the quantitative studies assessed the LBC's attachment as a dimensional variable and did not explore it categorically at the level of subconscious internal working models. These studies usually aimed to provide straightforward findings of the impact of parental migration on the attachment of the LBC, by comparing the attachment security between LBC and the NLBC. These studies were not able to reach consistent findings regarding the attachment security of LBC, or their impacting factors. Furthermore, the studies that focused on the assessment of

attachment security did not seem to elaborate on the implications of the findings for understanding the LBC's development.

Based on the gaps in the literature, the current research would continue the study of the LBC's attachment. Firstly, it aimed to resolve the inconsistencies of the impact of parental migration on the LBC's attachment security between individual studies by conducting a meta-analysis of the existing literature. The meta-analysis is presented in chapter 3. Secondly, the researcher aimed to place the LBC's attachment experiences in their ecological contexts by proposing an integrated framework combining attachment theory and family systems theory. Thirdly, a study on the distribution of the attachment styles of the LBC was conducted with the interview-based attachment measure. Its finding was used to integrate with the finding of the children's experiences of parental migration.

Chapter 3

Meta-Analysis of the attachment of left-behind children

Attachment theory has been widely accepted as the underlying mechanism explaining how parent-child relationships influence children's development and potentially may be applicable in understanding the impact of parent-child separation due to migration on the LBC's development. To answer the questions whether LBC had lower paternal and maternal attachment security than NLBC and what factors could moderate the effect of parental migration on the LBC's parental attachment, a meta-analysis of the available literature was performed. The results could provide more robust evidence on the impact of parental migration on the LBC's attachment.

3.1 Rationale for a meta-analysis on the LBC's attachment

The LBC's parental attachments are placed in their attachment networks of multiple caregivers. As cultural psychologists have explained, there may be multiple adaptive solutions to universal developmental tasks for children (Schröder et al., 2012; Weisner, 2002). It has been posited that it is the quality of the attachment in the network of relationships rather than the quality of parental attachment per se, that influences children's socio-emotional resilience and development (Becke & Bongard, 2018; Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018). Though the relationships with other caregivers might provide care and protection for the LBC and they may form secure attachments with them, the quality of their parental attachments remained important. First, attachment research on the LBC in rural China has supported the notion that the quality of parental attachment predicted children's developmental outcomes, such as mental health, emotional development, self-esteem, social competence and academic achievements (e.g., Cheng et al., 2020; Fan & Wu, 2020; Wang et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2016).

Second, many qualitative studies and ethnographic accounts of the LBC in rural China have shown that the children's relationships with their surrogate caregivers, mostly grandparents, were emotionally distant and lacked communication (Fan et al., 2012; Xiong, 2011; Ye et al., 2006). These studies stated that the LBC often received little emotional care from their grandparents for a variety of reasons, for example grandparents were often exhausted with the increased household duties after their adult children's migration and did not have enough energy to pay more attention to their grandchildren's emotional needs. Also, grandparents in rural areas often had low educational levels and still held the traditional attitude to parenting that only emphasised children's material needs (Fan et al., 2012; Xiong, 2011; Ye et al., 2006).

Overall, even in the context of multiple caregivers, the parental attachment for the LBC is worth investigation. And the impact of the disruption in parent-child bond should not be underestimated. As stated by Ainsworth (1989, p.711), 'an attachment figure is never wholly interchangeable with or replaceable by another, even though there may be others to whom one is also attached'.

Attachment theory suggests that constructing mental representations of the attachment mainly focuses on building expectations of specific caregivers as havens of security, which develop according to the children's experiences with their caregivers (Bosmans et al., 2020). For the LBC, prolonged physical separation from parents may diminish children's expectations that they can rely on their parents as havens of security. Consequently, it would be expected that the LBC may have lower parental attachment security than the NLBC who were living with their parents. However, the previous review of empirical work on the attachment of LBC has shown

inconsistent findings regarding the comparison of the attachment security between the LBC and the NLBC (e.g., Peng et al., 2017; Zhao & Li, 2017).

The inconsistent findings suggest that there are certain factors potentially buffering the effects of separation on the children's attachment. For example, the attachment representations of older children may be less impacted by parent-child separation, or some children were still able to have positive experiences with their migrant parents, for instance they may receive support through phone calls when in distress.

Previous studies have attempted to reveal some of the moderating factors, but did not reach consistent findings (e.g., Fan et al., 2009; Liang, 2017; Liu, 2011). The discrepancies might be related to methodological reasons and the samples. Methodologically, these studies used different scales to measure the children's attachment. Some studies used the Kerns Security Scale (KSS) (Kerns et al., 1996) which assessed the attachment security based on availability and dependability (e.g., Yu, 2013; Wang & Lei, 2016). Other studies used the measure of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) assessing security based on trust, communication and alienation (e.g., Peng et al., 2017; Liang, 2017). These two measures assess different aspects of children's relationships with their parents and could potentially lead to different results regarding the children's attachment.

Time factors may also partly explain the inconsistencies. For example, studies on the LBC focused on children of different separation lengths and different ages. Different separation lengths could have different impacts on the parent-child attachment, with the longer length causing more disruption. Children's ages might be another time-related factor. Children of different age groups have different

attachment needs and behaviours. Young children seek close physical proximity to their attachment figures for safety and security. The emphasis on physical proximity to caregivers decreases with increased maturity (Sroufe & Waters, 1977; Simpson & Jones, 2019). The older the children are, the better they can withstand physical separations from their parents. Therefore, the studies on LBC of different age groups could have significant variations in study outcomes.

It is of continued importance to determine how and to what extent parental migration influences the attachment of LBC in China. A narrative review may not draw robust conclusions based on the available studies; therefore, a systematic quantitative synthesis of the existing data is required. Meta-analysis offers a way to bring some degree of order to a large and inconsistent body of findings (Rosenthal, 1991), while at the same time allowing for the testing of specific hypotheses statistically.

The meta-analysis synthesized studies to answer the question of whether LBC had lower paternal and maternal attachment security than NLBC. The current meta-analysis further investigated potential factors that could moderate the effect of parental migration on the LBC's attachment – the migration condition and the children's gender. For the migration condition, children with both parents migrating might have a stronger sense of loss than children with only one parent migrating. Moreover, due to the gendering roles of parenting, the labour migration of mothers might have a greater influence on the LBC's attachment and development.

Regarding the relationship between children's gender and attachment, there are still many theoretical and empirical gaps in literature (Del Giudice, 2019). However, there is some evidence that sex differences in attachment styles start to emerge in middle childhood (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 2009). It

has been suspected that factors such as sex hormones and gender socialisation could lead to gender differences in attachment (Del Giudice, 2019).

Though the factors of parental migration condition and gender were hypothesised to have impacts on the LBC's attachment, the empirical evidence is limited and inconsistent. For example, the study by Fan et al. (2009) found that LBC's attachment did not differ by their parental migration condition, whereas Zhao and Li (2017) found that LBC with both parents migrating had significantly lower parental attachment security than LBC with one parent migrating. Similarly, Fan et al. (2009) found that left-behind girls had higher parental attachment security than left-behind boys, whereas Liang (2017) had the opposite finding. It was necessary to conduct a meta-analysis for the moderator effects of these factors on the children's attachment.

While the inconsistent research findings of the studies on LBC's attachment suggested a need to undertake a meta-analysis, the high variations in study outcomes may compromise the robustness of the pooled effect sizes. High heterogeneity is usually caused by the differences in the studies (between study variables), such as the research designs. In the meta-analysis, it was important to perform heterogeneity analysis and investigate potential sources for causing heterogeneity. One way of doing that was to conduct a subgroup analysis based on study variables. The variables should be chosen not only because all studies reported relevant information, but also because they were presumed to influence the study outcomes.

The current meta-analysis carried out subgroup analysis based on the demographic variable of children's age and the methodological variable of attachment measure. Children of different age groups have different attachment

needs and behaviours. Young children seek close physical proximity to the attachment figures for safety and security (George, 2014). The emphasis on physical proximity to caregivers decreases with increased maturity (Borelli et al., 2010). Children at school age (6-12 years old) care less about the actual physical proximity to attachment figures but more on their perceived availability (Clark & Symons, 2009). Adolescents (12-18 years old) are at a phase of development during which they drive to maintain strong attachments to parents, as well as establishing autonomy and independence (Perl, 2008; Xiang & Liu, 2018). Therefore, the studies on LBC of different age groups could have significant variations in study outcomes. Regarding the attachment measure, self-report measures of attachment used by the studies adopted different definitions of attachment. The Kerns Security Scale (KSS) (Kerns et al., 1996) assesses security based on availability and dependability. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) measures security based on trust, communication and alienation. These two measures assess different aspects of children's relationships with their parents and could potentially lead to different results regarding the children's attachment. Therefore, these two variables were chosen for the subgroup analysis.

3.2 Method

This section introduced the methods and procedures of the present meta-analysis. The current meta-analysis followed the protocol of the PRISMA Statement and was registered on Prospero (CRD42019125296) (Moher et al., 2015).

3.2.1 Search strategy

A systematic database search was performed on PubMed, Web of Science, PsycINFO, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Wanfang database and Weipu database (CVIP) to identify relevant studies published in Chinese or English

from 1990 to 2018. PubMed, Web of Science and PsycINFO are popular English databases. CNKI, Wanfang database and CVIP are the largest and continuously updated Chinese journal databases. The keywords used in searching Chinese databases were '留守儿童 (left-behind children)' and '依恋 (attachment)' in Chinese. The keywords 'left behind children', 'children left in rural areas', 'parental migration' and 'attachment' were used to search English databases.

3.2.2 Inclusion criteria

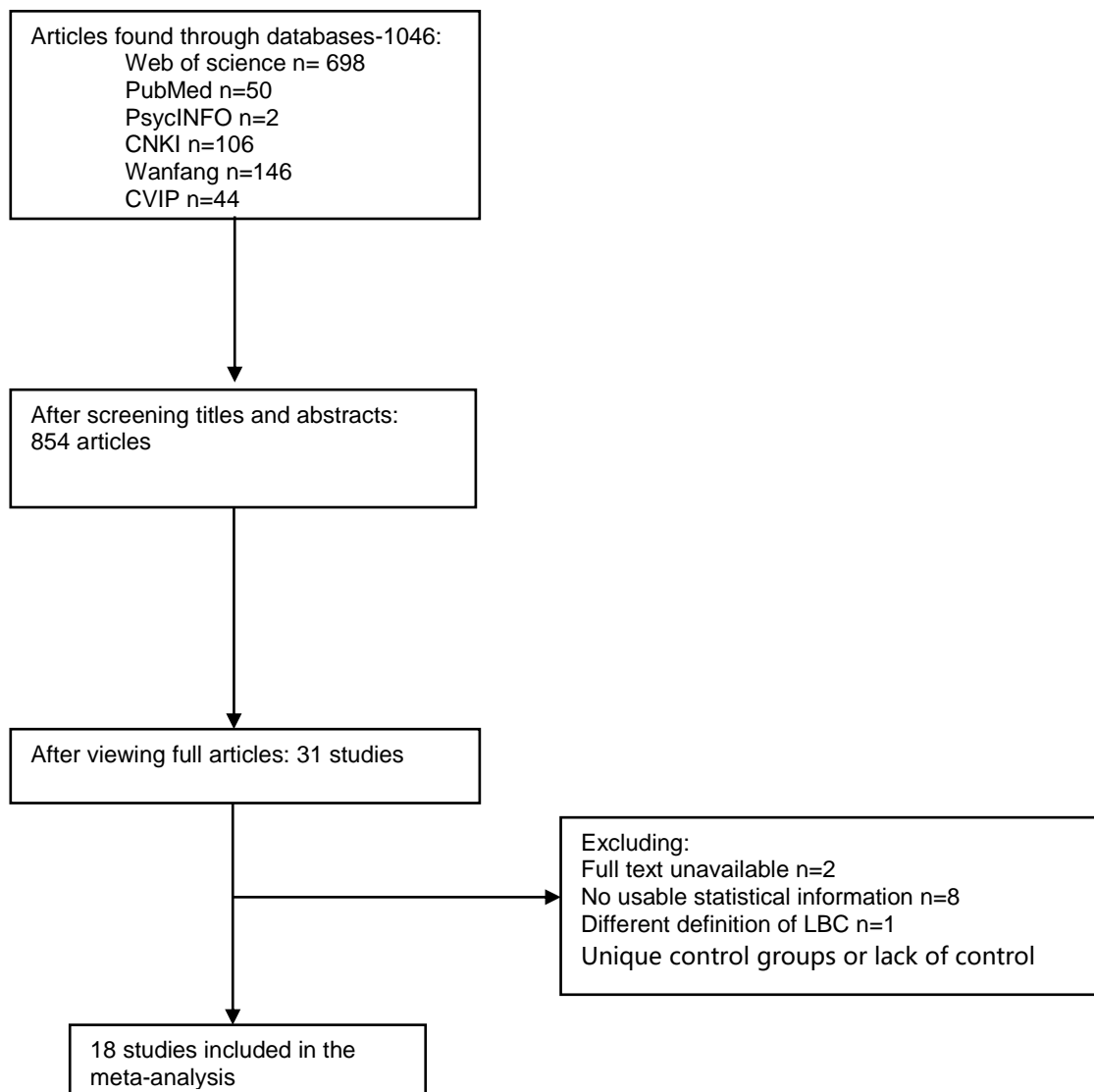
Studies were included based on the following criteria: (a) the LBC were in rural China under the age of 18 years and were not living with their parents, who had migrated to cities for work; (b) at least two groups of data were included for comparison, such as the scores of attachment measures of LBC and NLBC, or left-behind boys and left-behind girls, or LBC with different parental migration conditions; (c) cross-sectional or observational studies used validated attachment measurements, such as IPPA, KSS or other self-report measurements to assess the level of attachment security regarding the father and mother respectively; (d) reported sufficient statistical information for the calculation of effect sizes, including means (M), standard deviations (SD) and sample population (N). Studies were excluded if they were non-empirical studies or lacked the necessary statistical information, such as sample size and means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the attachment security of participants and the control group. Studies were excluded if they were: (a) not empirical or quantitative studies; (b) lacked sufficient statistical information for the calculation of effect sizes; (c) duplicate studies; (d) lacked comparison groups.

3.2.3 Search results

In total, 1046 articles were identified and screened for titles, abstracts and full texts after removing duplicate records. The flow chart of the review process is shown in Figure 1. Finally, 18 studies providing comparison results of attachment on LBC and NLBC were included in the meta-analysis. All the studies were conducted by Chinese researchers and published in Chinese. No English-language research articles were found, which might suggest that the issue of the attachment of LBC has not drawn much international attention.

Figure 1

Flow chart of the selection process



3.2.4 Quality assessment

The methodological quality of each study was assessed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) (Luchini et al., 2017; Wells et al., n.d.). This scale has been adapted from the Newcastle-Ottawa Quality Assessment Scale for cohort studies to perform a quality assessment of cross-sectional studies (Herzog et al., 2013). The quality score was calculated on the basis of three major components: selection of study groups, comparability of study groups and assessment of the outcome of interest (Herzog et al., 2013). A higher score indicates better methodological quality. The assessment result for each study was reported in Table 3.

3.2.5 Data extraction and data aggregation

The information extracted from each study includes author, publication year, article type, attachment measure, number of LBC, number of children in the control group, sampling region, scores of paternal and maternal attachment scales (M and SD), gender, parental migration conditions and school grades (year groups) of children. If certain information was unavailable, it was coded as 'N/A'. The M, SD and number of children in LBC and NLBC groups were used to calculate the effective size comparing two groups.

There was substantial variation in how the included studies reported scores of the attachment measurements for LBC and the control groups. Table 1 exemplified three ways in which data were reported in the primary studies. Of all the studies, 12 studies reported the scores of attachment scales of LBC versus NLBC (e.g., Peng et al., 2017), whereas six studies reported the attachment scale scores (M and SD) of subgroups of LBC versus NLBC and did not report the scale scores of LBC as a whole group.

Table 1*The examples of data reported in the primary studies*

| Study | Grade | Migration Condition | N | Maternal attachment | Paternal attachment |
|----------------------|---------|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------|---------------------|
| | | | | M±SD | M±SD |
| Du et al., 2015 | | NLBC | 415 | 51.47±4.67 | 51.98±4.72 |
| | | LBC with both parents migrating | 339 | 50.15±4.43 | 51.10±4.47 |
| | | LBC with only mother migrating | 27 | 51.25±4.20 | 51.47±4.48 |
| | | LBC with only father migrating | 245 | 51.27±4.79 | 51.58±4.94 |
| Peng et al., 2017 | | NLBC | 611 | 79.31±15.37 | 68.40±15.34 |
| | | LBC | 577 | 77.29±15.88 | 67.51±16.10 |
| Yao et al., 2015 | Grade 4 | NLBC | 110 | 52.32±4.66 | 53.02±4.45 |
| | | LBC with both parents migrating | 118 | 50.40±4.64 | 51.08±4.55 |
| | | LBC with only mother migrating | 18 | 52.33±4.76 | 52.40±6.77 |
| | | LBC with only father migrating | 89 | 51.80±4.75 | 52.08±5.03 |
| | Grade 5 | NLBC | 139 | 51.13±4.33 | 51.35±4.59 |
| | | LBC with both parents migrating | 115 | 50.61±4.09 | 51.47±4.20 |
| | | LBC with only mother migrating | 15 | 51.83±3.31 | 51.50±3.27 |
| | | LBC with only father migrating | 74 | 51.06±4.09 | 51.26±5.11 |
| | Grade 6 | NLBC | 162 | 51.25±4.92 | 51.85±4.91 |
| | | LBC with both parents migrating | 104 | 49.27±4.57 | 50.64±4.74 |
| | | LBC with only mother migrating | 14 | 48.65±4.57 | 50.25±3.40 |
| | | LBC with only father migrating | 76 | 50.86±4.68 | 51.36±4.71 |

Among these six studies, four of them (Du et al., 2015; Fan et al., 2009; Yao, 2015; Zhao & Li, 2017) divided LBC into subgroups according to their parent's migration status (single-parent-migrating vs. both parents-migrating, and father

migrating vs. mother migrating vs. both parents-migrating). The other two studies by Yao et al. (2015) and Wen (2008) divided their samples into three and five subgroups respectively according to children's school year-grade groups. Each subgroup contained the comparison of NLBC group and LBC group within the same grade. Yao et al.'s (2015) study further divided LBC of each grade into three groups of fathers migrating, mothers migrating and both parents migrating. Wen's (2008) study further divided LBC and NLBC of each grade into two groups according to gender.

For studies that only reported attachment scale score for subgroups of LBC, data aggregation was required in order to include these studies into the meta-analytic modelling. The mathematical process is to combine the number of children (N), M and SDs of several groups from the same sample mathematically to yield the N, M and SD of the combined group (Higgins & Green, 2011). The mathematical formula used is shown in Table 2. Such data aggregation processes were common in meta-analytic studies. For example, in the meta-analysis on the LBC's personality traits by Hou et al. (2017), the researchers aggregated data from two subgroups of the LBC (left-behind boys and left-behind girls) into one group using the same mathematical formula as the current research. In the current meta-analysis, for the four studies (Du et al., 2015; Fan et al., 2009; Yao, 2015; Zhao & Li, 2017), the LBC's subgroup data by parental migration conditions were aggregated once to form the data of LBC as a whole group.

Table 2*The formula to combine subgroups into a single group*

| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Combined groups |
|-------------|---------|---------|--|
| Sample size | N_1 | N_2 | N_1+N_2 |
| Mean | M_1 | M_2 | $N_1M_1+N_2M_2/N_1+N_2$ |
| SD | S_1 | S_2 | $\sqrt{(N_1 - 1)S_1^2 + (N_2 - 1)S_2^2 / (N_1 + N_2 - 2)}$ |

For Yao et al.'s (2015) and Wen's (2008) studies, data of LBC could be aggregated only once within each school-grade group or twice to form one comparison between LBC and NLBC across grades. Despite the convenience of data aggregation and its popularity in data analysis in social science studies, it should be used with caution because information loss may occur when using aggregated data as a substitute for micro-level data. More information may be lost with the increasing level of aggregation (Clark & Avery, 2010; McKee & Miljkovic, 2007). In the current meta-analysis, the researcher decided to choose the optimal aggregating procedure that produces as little loss of information as possible. The data from each school grade in Yao et al.'s (2015) and Wen's (2008) studies were treated as individual samples. Therefore, the study by Yao et al. (2015) was treated as three independent comparison samples and the study by Wen (2008) was treated as five independent comparison samples. Of these studies, the data of the control groups did not need to be aggregated.

There are a total 18 studies with 24 samples included in the present meta-analysis. In terms of the scores of the attachment scales, 22 samples reported the

overall scores of paternal and maternal scales. There were five samples that reported the scores of the dimensions of the paternal and maternal attachment scales. Among these samples, two samples that used the IPPA only reported the dimension scores, i.e., trust, communication and alienation, and did not report the scores of the total scales (Chen, 2018; Li & Liu, 2013).

3.2.6 Statistical analysis

Effect sizes

The studies included in the current meta-analysis assessed the paternal and maternal attachment securities of LBC and NLBC. The values of the attachment security between these two groups were compared, yielding a raw and non-standardised mean difference for each study. The primary aim of the current meta-analysis was to pool the mean difference in parental attachment between the LBC and NLBC across all studies. As the studies included in the meta-analysis used different measurements to assess the children's attachment security, the mean differences across studies could not be pooled directly but were divided by their respective standard deviations (SDs) to yield the standardised mean difference (SMD) (Andrade, 2020a). The SDs used here were pooled from the LBC and the NLBC groups. The SMD from each study was weighted and later pooled in the meta-analysis. The SMD results were pooled with greater weight assigned to more precise SMDs, i.e., those with smaller standard errors of the mean (SEM) (Andrade, 2020b). The pooled SMD results yielded a summary estimate of pooled effect size with Cohen's *d* coefficient and its associated 95% confidence interval (CI). According to Cohen (1988), the standardised mean differences of $d = 0.2$, 0.5 and 0.8 were identified as the small, medium, and large reference values. In addition to the effect sizes based on the overall attachment scale, such as the total score of the IPPA, the

mean difference calculated from the subscale of the attachment measure, such as the score of the trust subscale of the IPPA, were also used for the comparison between the LBC and the NLBC.

After pooling the SMD, publication bias was also calculated. Publication bias states that a study with statistically significant results is more likely to be published than a study with non-significant results (Rothstein et al., 2006). Publication bias exists in all areas of research and certainly is a potential threat to the validity of the studies included in the meta-analysis. As meta-analysis aims for an objective appraisal of literature, the issue of publication bias must be taken seriously. Publication bias was diagnosed with Egger's test (Egger et al., 1997). If publication bias existed, further analyses of the Trim and Fill method (Idris, 2012) was used to find unpublished studies to correct the bias.

Moderator analysis

The next step of the analysis was moderator analysis for the factors that might impact on the children's attachment. For the current meta-analysis, two potential moderators were tested to see if they account for significant changes in attachment: parental migration conditions and gender.

Heterogeneity analysis

Cochrane's Q was used to test for heterogeneity and index I^2 was used to determine the degree of heterogeneity. I^2 values smaller than 25% indicated low heterogeneity, I^2 values covering 25-75% indicated moderate heterogeneity, I^2 values greater than 75% indicated high heterogeneity (Higgins et al., 2002). If heterogeneity was low, the fixed-effects model was used; otherwise, the random-effects model (Barili et al., 2018) was used. In the case of substantial heterogeneity,

strategies including outlier detection, influence analysis and subgroup analysis were adopted.

Outlier analysis was carried out to detect outlier studies of meta-analysis models. An outlier study is a study that differs significantly from the overall effect. A study is defined as an 'outlier', if its confidence interval does not overlap the confidence interval of the pooled effect size of the meta-analysis model (Viechtbauer & Cheung, 2010). Statistical outliers may cause concern for the validity of the pooled effect sizes. For paternal attachment and maternal attachment, outlier studies were detected, and new pooled effect sizes were examined after removing outliers. After identifying the statistical outliers, the next stage explored whether any individual studies in the meta-analysis exerted an overly high influence on the overall results, using influence analysis.

Subgroup analysis was also conducted to find the potential source of heterogeneity. The current meta-analysis first conducted subgroup analysis according to the demographic variable, i.e., the LBC's age group (primary school vs. middle school) and then according to the methodological variable, i.e., the attachment measure used by the studies (IPPA vs. KSS). The subgroup analysis first separated studies in the meta-analysis into subgroups according to study-level variables and then conducted analysis separately for each subgroup. If the studies within subgroups are relatively homogeneous, but there is considerable variation between subgroups an important cause of heterogeneity may be identified.

All statistical analysis was performed using the 'metafor' (Viechtbauer, 2010) package in R Studio.

3.3 Results

The literature search identified 18 studies that were eligible for inclusion in the meta-analysis. All studies were cross-sectional studies using self-report questionnaires to assess children's perceived security regarding maternal and paternal attachment.

Table 3 shows the main characteristics of all 18 studies included. The 18 included studies were published between 2008 and 2018, and the total sample size of LBC in these studies ranged from 74 to 979, with a total sample size of 8045 LBC. All 18 studies reported the school age-grades of the participants, ranging from grade 1 to grade 12. Only four studies reported the age range of the participants. Extrapolating from school grades, the children included in the meta-analysis were estimated to range from 7 years old to 18 years old. There was not enough information to calculate the mean age of the included children.

Parental migration conditions varied from having one parent migrating (father or mother) to both parents migrating. Nine of the included studies reported the different parental migration status, with a total of 1238 children with one parent migrating and a total of 2456 children with both parents migrating. Four studies further differentiated between the father migrating the mother migrating in single-parent-migrating groups, 444 children only had their mothers migrating and 999 children only had their fathers migrating.

Table 3*The characteristics of the included studies*

| First author | Year of publication | Article type | Measure | LBC N | Control N | Grade |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------|---------|-------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Chen | 2018 | Dissertation | IPPA | 715 | 211 | Middle School |
| Du et al. | 2015 | Article | KSS | 584 | 415 | Primary School |
| Fan et al. | 2009 | Article | IPPA | 382 | 173 | Middle School |
| Li, Liu | 2013 | Article | IPPA | 979 | 2096 | Primary to Middle School |
| Liang | 2017 | Article | IPPA | 148 | 99 | Middle School |
| Liu et al. | 2017 | Article | IPPA | 763 | 781 | Middle School |
| Peng et al. | 2017 | Article | IPPA | 577 | 613 | Middle School |
| Wang, Lei | 2016 | Article | KSS | 74 | 135 | Primary School |
| Wen | 2008 | Dissertation | IPPA | 354 | 810 | Middle School |
| Wu | 2016 | Dissertation | IPPA | 546 | 600 | Middle School |
| Xiao, Chen | 2009 | Article | IPPA | 492 | 514 | Middle School |
| Xu | 2014 | Article | AQ | 156 | 256 | Middle School |
| Yao | 2015 | Dissertation | IPPA | 723 | 310 | Primary School |
| Yao et al. | 2015 | Article | KSS | 367 | 411 | Primary School |
| Zhang | 2016 | Dissertation | IPPA | 277 | 274 | Primary School |
| Zhang | 2011 | Article | KSS | 164 | 193 | Primary School |
| Zhao, Li | 2017 | Article | IPPA | 453 | 288 | Middle School |
| Zhou, Xie | 2015 | Article | IPPA | 291 | 405 | Middle School |

Note. All Chinese children must attend schools for at least 6 years of primary school (1–6 grade) and 3 years junior middle school (7–9 grade). Children usually start their primary school at age 6 or 7, attend junior middle school at age 12 to 13 and senior middle school at age 15 to 16.

IPPA: The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)

KSS: The Kerns Security Scale (KSS)

AQ: Attachment Questionnaire

Of the 18 studies, 13 studies used the IPPA, four studies used the KSS, and one study used the Attachment Questionnaire (Zhang, 2005). The IPPA contained three dimensions of trust, communication and alienation. The KSS contained two dimensions of trust and closeness. The attachment questionnaire contained only one dimension of the overall attachment security. All these systems measured paternal and maternal attachment separately.

The Attachment Questionnaire (AQ) is a relatively new measure developed by a Chinese researcher and was originally designed for junior middle school students (usually aged between 12 to 14/15 years old) (Xu, 2014; Zhang, 2005). For studies

using IPPA, eight reported the reliabilities for paternal and maternal attachment scales separately, with the reliabilities for paternal attachment ranging from 0.77 to 0.94 and the reliabilities for maternal attachment ranging from 0.71 to 0.93. For the studies using KSS, five reported the reliabilities for paternal and maternal attachment scales separately, with reliabilities for paternal attachment ranging from 0.75 to 0.84 and reliabilities for maternal attachment ranging from 0.66 to 0.81. The reliability for the attachment questionnaire was not reported.

3.3.1 Study quality

Based on the quality assessment scale, all studies received middle to high level scores. Four studies received a quality score of five, three studies received a quality score of six, seven studies received a quality score of seven and three studies received a score of eight. Common causes for not getting points on the scale included: no description of sampling strategies, no justification of the sample size, no validation of the measurement tool and not controlling additional confounding factors. Table 4 provided the quality ratings for each study.

Table 4*The quality assessments of the included studies based on Newcastle- Ottawa Scale (NOS)*

| First author | Year of publication | Selection of study groups | Comparability of study groups | Assessment of the outcome | Total quality assessment |
|--------------|---------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Chen | 2018 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Du et al. | 2015 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 8 |
| Fan et al. | 2009 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Li, Liu | 2013 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Liang | 2017 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Liu et al. | 2017 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 8 |
| Peng et al. | 2017 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| Wang, Lei | 2016 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| Wen | 2008 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| Wu | 2016 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Xiao, Chen | 2009 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Xu | 2014 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Yao | 2015 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| Yao et al. | 2015 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| Zhang | 2016 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 8 |
| Zhang | 2011 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Zhao, Li | 2017 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| Zhou, Xie | 2015 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 7 |

3.3.2 Attachment security of LBC and NLBC

Among the 24 samples, two samples (Chen, 2018; Li & Liu, 2013) only reported the dimension scores of the attachment measure, and the remaining 22 samples reported the overall scores of paternal and maternal attachment scales for the LBC and NLBC (ten samples with primary unaggregated data and 12 samples with data aggregated from subgroups of the LBC). These 22 samples were included to answer the question of the current meta-analysis: whether the LBC had lower

paternal or maternal attachment security than NLBC. There were several ways these samples could potentially be used in meta-analytic modelling. If only samples with unaggregated data were used, the meta-analysis would include fewer studies and might fail to reveal information that could be found from other studies. However, if all possible samples were included, the artificial data aggregation processes may have unexpected effects on the results. Therefore, the decision was made to run the analyses twice, first with samples containing unaggregated primary data; then all the samples containing both unaggregated and aggregated data (data calculated as described in the methods section) were combined in the second run of the meta-analytic modelling.

The comparison of paternal and maternal attachment between LBC and NLBC based on the ten samples with primary unaggregated data, and the 22 samples overall showed significant differences regarding attachment security. All results are displayed in Table 5. LBC reported significantly lower levels of attachment security towards both fathers (Unaggregated: d (SMD) = -0.3520, P = 0.0020, k = 10; Mixed: d = -0.1867, P = 0.0070, k = 22) and mothers (Unaggregated: d = -0.6792, P = 0.0003, k = 10; Mixed: d = -0.3323, P = 0.0006, k = 22) compared to NLBC groups. The effect size for maternal attachment with the ten samples was (d = -0.6792) consistent with a medium effect size, and the other effect size values (d = -0.1867 to -0.3520) were all small effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). It is worth noting that the comparison of maternal attachment had bigger effect sizes than those of paternal attachment. Furthermore, the effect sizes of the 22 mixed-data samples were smaller than those of the ten samples containing unaggregated primary data.

Table 5**Parental attachment comparison between LBC and NLBC**

| Parental Attachment | Data-aggregation | k | SMD (95% CI) | z | P | Test of heterogeneity | | Egger's test | |
|---------------------|------------------|----|----------------------------------|-------|--------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|---------|
| | | | | | | Q | I ² (%) (95% CI) | t | P |
| Paternal Attachment | Unaggregated | 10 | -0.3520 [-0.5756; -0.1285] | -3.09 | 0.0020 | 195.02 | 95.4% [93.2%; 96.9%] | -1.2836 | 0.2352 |
| | Mixed | 22 | -0.1867 [-0.3224; -0.0510] | -2.70 | 0.0070 | 285.79 | 92.7% [90.2%; 94.5%] | 0.43662 | 0.6671 |
| Maternal Attachment | Unaggregated | 10 | -0.6792 [-1.0432; -0.3151] | -3.66 | 0.0003 | 505.32 | 98.2% [97.6%; 98.7%] | -2.4561 | 0.03956 |
| | Mixed | 22 | -0.3323 [-0.5227; -0.1420] | -3.42 | 0.0006 | 562.52 | 96.3% [95.3%; 97.1%] | -1.2773 | 0.2161 |

3.3.3 Publication bias

Egger's test showed no evidence of publication bias in paternal attachment but did find bias in maternal attachment (Unaggregated: Egger's test: $P = 0.03956$, $k = 10$). The Trim and Fill method (Duval, 2006) identified three hypothetically missing studies generating a new estimate of $d = -0.2434$ ($k = 13$; $95\%CI = [-0.6701; 0.1833]$, $P = 0.2636$, $Q = 1015.50$; $I^2 = 98.8\%$). With the added studies, the original medium effect size ($d = -0.6792$) dropped to a non-significant small effect size ($d = -0.2434$), thus all effect sizes detected were small, suggesting the lower effect sizes were more robust.

3.3.4 Sub-scale dimension scores

Five studies provided scores of three dimensions (trust, communication and alienation) of the IPPA (Chen, 2018; Liang, 2017; Li & Liu, 2013; Liu et al., 2017; Wu, 2016). Regarding paternal attachment, the results showed significant differences between LBC and NLBC in trust and communication dimension scores ($P < 0.05$), with LBC scoring significantly lower than NLBC. Both the effect sizes were

at a small level ($d = -0.1119$ and $d = -0.1182$ respectively). The difference between groups for the alienation dimension did not reach a significant level ($P > 0.05$).

Regarding maternal attachment, findings did not show any significant differences (All $P > 0.05$). All comparisons used random-effects models (I^2 : 64.3%-93.8%) except the comparison in the communication dimension in paternal attachment ($I^2 = 28.2\%$) where heterogeneity was low and permitted a fixed-effects model. All the results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Sub-scales comparison

| Parental Attachment | Sub-scales | k | SMD (95% CI) | z | P | Test of heterogeneity | |
|---------------------|---------------|---|----------------------------|-------|--------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| | | | | | | Q | I^2 (%) (95% CI) |
| Paternal attachment | Trust | 5 | -0.1119 [-0.2038; -0.0201] | -2.39 | 0.0169 | 11.21 | 64.3% [6.2%; 86.4%] |
| | Communication | 5 | -0.1182 [-0.1679; -0.0686] | -4.67 | <0.000 | 5.57 | 28.2% [0.0%; 71.9%] |
| | Alienation | 5 | 0.0309 [-0.1112; 0.1731] | 0.43 | 0.6695 | 27.33 | 85.4% [67.6%; 93.4%] |
| Mother attachment | Trust | 5 | -0.1091 [-0.2442; 0.0260] | -1.58 | 0.1134 | 24.54 | 83.7% [63.2%; 92.8%] |
| | Communication | 5 | -0.1244 [-0.3114; 0.0626] | -1.30 | 0.1924 | 48.10 | 91.7% [83.6%; 95.8%] |
| | Alienation | 5 | -0.0255 [-0.2404; 0.1894] | -0.23 | 0.8160 | 64.02 | 93.8% [88.3%; 96.7%] |

3.3.5 Moderator analysis

Two potential moderators, parental migration conditions and gender, were tested to see if they account for significant changes in attachment. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Moderator analysis: single parent migrating vs. both parents migrating

| Parental Attachment | Data-aggregation | k | SMD (95% CI) | z | P | Test of heterogeneity | |
|---------------------|------------------|---|----------------------------|-------|--------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | | | | | Q | I ² (%) (95% CI) |
| Paternal Attachment | Unaggregated | 3 | -0.5908[-1.4206; 0.2390] | -1.40 | 0.1629 | 85.61 | 97.7% [95.5%; 98.8%] |
| | Mixed | 9 | -0.2415 [-1.4471; 0.9641] | -0.39 | 0.6946 | 1755.22 | 99.5% [99.4%; 99.6%] |
| Maternal Attachment | Unaggregated | 3 | -0.8669 [-2.0082; 0.2744] | -1.49 | 0.1366 | 150.77 | 98.7% [97.7%; 99.2%] |
| | Mixed | 9 | -0.3636 [-0.7119; -0.0153] | -2.05 | 0.0407 | 197.88 | 96.0% [94.0%; 97.3%] |

Attachment of LBC with different parental migration conditions

Three studies (Fan et al., 2009; Zhang, 2016; Zhao & Li, 2017) reported original data for single-parent-migrating children and both-parents-migrating children. After pooling the studies, the result showed high heterogeneity in paternal attachment $Q = 85.61$, $I^2 = 97.7\%$ [95.5%; 98.8%]. So, a random-effects model was used to compare single-parent-migrating and both-parents-migrating groups on the paternal attachment and found $d = -0.5908$, $K = 3$; 95%CI = [-1.4206; 0.2390], $z = -1.40$, $P = 0.1629$. The pooled effect size was not significant. The result for maternal

attachment in this domain was $Q = 150.77$, with high heterogeneity of $I^2 = 98.7\%$ [97.7%; 99.2%]. Using the random-effects model, there was no significant difference $d = -0.8669$ ($K = 3$; 95%CI = [-2.0082; 0.2744], $z = 1.49$, $P = 0.1366$). It should be noted that the lack of significant results may be due to the small study sizes. A small study size may be insufficient to clearly identify patterns.

Six samples (Du et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2017; Yao, 2015; and three samples from the study by Yao et al., 2015) provided data for children of paternal migration, children of maternal migration and children of both parents migrating. The scores of paternal migration and maternal migration groups were aggregated to form the scores of single-parent-migrating groups using the formula shown in Table 2. Combined with the above mentioned three samples (Fan et al., 2009; Zhang, 2016; Zhao & Li, 2017), a total of nine samples were used to test the attachment difference between single-parent-migrating groups and both-parents-migrating groups. The result regarding paternal attachment showed that $Q = 1806.85$, $I^2 = 99.6\%$ [99.5%; 99.6%]. Then, a random-effects model was adopted and found that $d = -0.5635$ ($K = 9$; 95%CI = [-1.6961; 0.5692]), $z = -0.98$, $P = 0.3295$. The pooled effect size was not significant. The model for maternal attachment showed that $Q = 197.88$, $I^2 = 96.0\%$ [94.0%; 97.3%]. Then, a random-effects model was adopted and showed that $d = -0.3636$ ($K = 9$; 95%CI = [-0.7119; -0.0153]), $z = -2.05$, $P = 0.0407$. Therefore, using the aggregated data results showed that children whose mother and father both migrated had significantly lower maternal attachment than children who experienced only one parent migrating.

Gender and attachment security

There were ten samples from four studies (Liu et al. 2017; two samples from the study by Fan et al. 2009; five samples from the study by Wen, 2008; two

samples from the study by Zhang, 2016) proving the scores of attachment scales of boy LBC and girl LBC. The studies by Zhang (2016) and Fan et al. (2009) reported scores of attachment scales of boy LBC and girl LBC of two different parental migration groups (single-parent-migrating and both-parents-migrating), which were aggregated to form groups of mixed migration status. Therefore, a total of 8 samples of children with mixed migration status were used to test the attachment difference between boy LBC and girl LBC. The heterogeneity analysis showed that $Q = 156.78$, $I^2 = 94.3\%$ [91.3%; 96.2%] for maternal attachment. A random-effects model was used because of its high heterogeneity and found $d = 0.2633$ ($K = 10$; 95%CI= [-0.1791; 0.7058]), $z = 1.17$, $P > 0.05$). For paternal attachment, the heterogeneity was $Q = 190.44$, $I^2 = 95.3\%$ [93.0%; 96.8%]. A random-effects model was used due to its high heterogeneity and found that $d = 0.4273$ ($K = 10$; 95%CI= [-0.0638; 0.9183]), $z = 1.71$, $P > 0.05$). Therefore, girl LBC and boy LBC did not show significant differences in paternal and maternal attachment security.

3.3.6 Heterogeneity

The current meta-analysis showed very high levels of heterogeneity both for the scores of maternal attachment scales (Unaggregated: $Q = 505.32$, $I^2 = 98.2\%$, $k = 10$; Mixed: $Q = 562.52$, $I^2 = 96.3\%$, $k = 22$) and paternal attachment scales (Unaggregated: $Q = 195.02$, $I^2 = 95.4\%$, $k = 10$; Mixed: $Q = 285.79$, $I^2 = 92.7\%$, $k = 22$), as shown in Table 5. The heterogeneity level in studies that included 22 samples (Mixed: $I^2 = 96.3\%$ for maternal attachment and $I^2 = 92.7\%$ for paternal attachment) only dropped slightly from the heterogeneity level of the ten studies (Unaggregated: $I^2 = 98.2\%$ for maternal attachment and $I^2 = 95.4\%$ for paternal attachment). The data aggregation and the number of studies included in the meta-

analysis did not seem to account for the heterogeneity in the meta-analysis of the overall scores of attachment scales.

Outlier detection

The heterogeneity after outlier studies were removed dropped significantly from high to moderate. For paternal attachment, the heterogeneity dropped to $I^2 = 68.2\%$ -71.8%; for maternal attachment, the heterogeneity dropped to $I^2 = 63.2\%$ -79.5%.

The results are shown in Table 8. After the removal of outliers, the pooled effect sizes still showed that LBC had significantly lower maternal attachment security and paternal attachment security than NLBC. The revised pooled effect sizes for maternal attachment were $d = -0.4230$, $K = 16$ and $d = -0.2202$, $K = 7$. The revised pooled effect sizes for paternal attachment were $d = -0.2030$, $K = 20$ and $d = -0.1289$; $K = 9$. All these effect sizes were small effect sizes. The effect sizes for maternal attachment were still higher than those for paternal attachment.

Table 8

Parental attachment: outlier studies

| Parental Attachment | Data-aggregation | Outlier study | k | SMD (95% CI) | z | P | Test of heterogeneity | |
|---------------------|------------------|---|----|----------------------------|-------|----------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| | | | | | | | Q | I^2 (%) (95% CI) |
| Paternal Attachment | Unaggregated | Xu, 2014 | 9 | -0.2030 [-0.2979; -0.1081] | -4.19 | < 0.0001 | 28.42 | 71.8% [44.6%; 85.7%] |
| | Mixed | Xu, 2014; Fan et al. 2009 | 20 | -0.1289 [-0.1987; -0.0591] | -3.62 | 0.0003 | 59.72 | 68.2% [49.4%; 80.0%] |
| Maternal Attachment | Unaggregated | Xu, 2014; Peng et al. 2017; Wu, 2016 | 7 | -0.4230 [-0.5625; -0.2834] | -5.94 | < 0.0001 | 29.25 | 79.5% [58.0%; 90.0%] |
| | Mixed | Xu, 2014; Peng et al. 2017; Fan et al. 2009; Yao, 2015; Zhang, 2011; Wen, 2008e | 16 | -0.2202 [-0.2947; -0.1457] | -5.79 | < 0.0001 | 40.74 | 63.2% [36.9%; 78.5%] |

Influence analysis

Influence analysis of the current meta-analysis indicated that the exclusion of any single study did not alter the pattern of findings for the random-effect size model of the meta-analysis. That is, the removal of any single study did not alter the finding that LBC were significantly less secure than NLBC.

In terms of heterogeneity, Xu's (2014) study had a stronger impact on the heterogeneity estimates of this research synthesis than other studies. The pooled effect size and heterogeneity of meta-analysis of paternal attachment (Unaggregated: $d = -0.3520$, $k = 10$, $I^2 = 95.4\%$; Mixed: $d = -0.1867$, $k = 22$, $I^2 = 92.7\%$) dropped noticeably after omitting Xu's (2014) study (Unaggregated: $d = -0.2071$, $k = 9$, $I^2 = 74.2\%$; Mixed: $d = -0.1132$, $k = 21$, $I^2 = 71.6\%$).

The pooled effect size and heterogeneity of meta-analysis of maternal attachment (Unaggregated: $d = -0.6792$, $k = 10$, $I^2 = 98.2\%$; Mixed: $d = -0.3395$, $k = 22$, $I^2 = 96.4\%$) dropped to a lesser degree after omitting Xu's (2014) study (Unaggregated: $d = -0.3381$, $P < 0.0001$, $k = 9$, $I^2 = 88.3\%$; Mixed: $d = -0.1881$, $k = 21$, $I^2 = 83.0\%$).

Subgroup analysis

The high heterogeneity indicated significant differences between studies that cannot be explained by chance. Therefore, further investigation of the factors associated with the variation in results across studies was conducted. Subgroup analysis was used to investigate potential sources of heterogeneity of the present meta-analysis. The subgroup analysis first separated studies into subgroups according to demographic variables of sample school-grade groups and methodological variable of attachment measures, and then conducted analysis separately for each subgroup. The results are shown in the Table 9.

Table 9**Subgroup difference**

| Parental Attachment | Data aggregation | Subgroup | k | SMD | 95% CI | Test of heterogeneity | | P (Subgroup difference) |
|---------------------|------------------|----------------|----|-------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| | | | | | | Q | I ² | |
| Paternal | Unaggregated | Middle School | 7 | -0.39 | [-0.71; -0.08] | 216.58 | 97.2% | 0.69 |
| | | Primary school | 3 | -0.32 | [-0.53; -0.11] | 5.55 | 64.0% | |
| | Mixed | Middle School | 14 | -0.19 | [-0.39; 0.01] | 253.86 | 94.9% | |
| | | Primary school | 8 | -0.18 | [-0.32; -0.04] | 31.72 | 77.9% | |
| Maternal | Unaggregated | Middle School | 7 | -0.69 | [-1.16; -0.22] | 473.80 | 98.7% | 0.88 |
| | | Primary school | 3 | -0.65 | [-0.82; -0.49] | 3.51 | 43.0% | |
| | Mixed | Middle School | 14 | -0.35 | [-0.63; -0.06] | 508.87 | 97.4% | |
| | | Primary school | 8 | -0.33 | [-0.53; -0.12] | 69.64 | 89.9% | |
| Paternal | Unaggregated | KSS | 2 | -0.25 | [-1.03; -0.21] | 4.68 | 78.6% | 0.77 |
| | | IPPA | 7 | -0.19 | [-0.63; 0.13] | 22.32 | 73.1% | |
| | | AQ | 1 | -1.94 | [-0.29; -0.09] | 0.00 | -- | |
| | Mixed | KSS | 6 | -0.19 | [-2.18; -1.70] | 10.84 | 53.9% | |
| | | IPPA | 15 | -0.08 | [-0.31; -0.07] | 57.16 | 75.5% | |
| | | AQ | 1 | -1.94 | [-0.17; 0.00] | 0.00 | -- | |
| Maternal | Unaggregated | KSS | 2 | -0.72 | [-2.18; -1.70] | 1.54 | 35.1% | 0.00 |
| | | IPPA | 7 | -0.25 | [-0.94; -0.50] | 37.31 | 83.9% | |
| | | AQ | 1 | -3.81 | [-0.38; -0.12] | 0.00 | -- | |
| | Mixed | KSS | 6 | -0.36 | [-4.14; -3.49] | 34.30 | 85.4% | |
| | | IPPA | 15 | -0.13 | [-0.58; -0.14] | 72.76 | 80.8% | |
| | | AQ | 1 | -3.81 | [-0.23; -0.03] | 0.00 | -- | |

School-grade age groups

All 22 samples were separated into two subgroups according to the age group of the sample: primary school (approximately 6–13 age range) and middle school (approximately 12–16 age range).

For the ten samples reporting primary unaggregated scores of attachment scales, seven recruited children from middle schools and three recruited children from primary schools. For the total 22 samples of unaggregated and aggregated scores of attachment scales, 14 samples recruited children from middle schools and eight recruited children from primary schools. For both paternal and maternal attachment, the differences between groups were not significant ($P > 0.05$). For paternal attachment, the studies within the subgroup of primary school had noticeably lower heterogeneity (Unaggregated: $I^2 = 64.0\%$, $k = 3$; Mixed: $I^2 = 77.9\%$, $k = 8$) than in the subgroup of middle school (Unaggregated: $I^2 = 97.2\%$, $k = 7$; Mixed: $I^2 = 94.9\%$, $k = 14$) and the meta-analysis without dividing subgroups (Unaggregated: $I^2 = 95.4\%$, $k = 10$; Mixed: $I^2 = 92.7\%$, $k = 22$). Similarly, for maternal attachment, the studies within the subgroup of primary school also had noticeably lower heterogeneity (Unaggregated: $I^2 = 43.0\%$, $k = 3$; Mixed: $I^2 = 89.9\%$, $k = 8$) than the subgroup of middle school (Unaggregated: $I^2 = 98.7\%$, $k = 7$; Mixed: $I^2 = 97.4\%$, $k = 14$) and the meta-analysis without dividing subgroups (Unaggregated: $I^2 = 98.2\%$, $k = 10$; Mixed: $I^2 = 96.3\%$, $k = 22$). The drop in the heterogeneity might be associated with the age group or simply because of the decrease in the study size. Small numbers of included studies have higher chances of homogeneity but also risk being less representative.

Attachment measure

One major methodological difference between studies is the attachment measure they adopted. Among all studies, one study (Xu, 2014) used the Attachment Questionnaire for middle school students, six studies used KSS, and ten studies used the IPPA. As the Attachment Questionnaire was only used by one study, it was not included in the subgroup analysis. Therefore, a subgroup analysis of studies using the attachment measurements of IPPA and KSS was performed to see if attachment measurement had an impact on the meta-analysis results. Regarding paternal attachment, there was no subgroup difference between studies using different measures.

For maternal attachment, a subgroup difference was detected when only ten studies were included ($P < 0.05$), with studies using KSS having bigger pooled effect size than studies using IPPA. However, the subgroup effect was not found while analysing maternal attachment with more studies. The heterogeneity within each subgroup was much lower than the heterogeneity of the whole meta-analysis, indicating that the cause of heterogeneity was either the variance in attachment measures or smaller study sizes.

3.4 Discussion

The previous studies comparing the LBC and the NLBC's attachment security showed inconsistent findings in China, and there was a lack of systematic appraisal of studies of attachment in LBC samples in China. The current meta-analysis aimed to bring together the available studies to reach a synthesized and more compelling finding regarding the impact of parental migration on the LBC. The current meta-analysis found that children who experienced one or both parents migrating to work in cities had significantly lower paternal and maternal attachment security than

children living with their parents. The finding was supported by testing scores of total scales and sub-scale of the attachment measurement and this confirmed the negative impact of migration on children's attachment.

While comparing total scores of paternal and maternal attachment scales, ten samples with unaggregated data only and 22 samples including unaggregated and aggregated data were examined respectively, the effect sizes derived from the smaller study size were bigger than those with the larger study size regarding maternal and paternal attachment. The difference might be because when more studies were included in the meta-analysis, more variances that could moderate the effect sizes were introduced, which deflated the final effect size. It has also been observed in other studies that effect size tended to drop when the sample size increased (Nelson et al., 2014; Slavin & Smith, 2009).

The SMDs of maternal attachment between LBC and NLBC were larger than the SMDs of the paternal attachment between the two groups. This showed that though both paternal and maternal attachment security decreased with migration, the maternal attachment decreased with higher a magnitude. Maternal attachment may be more vulnerable to physical separation. This may be connected with the traditional gendering roles of parents. In traditional Chinese families, fathers and mothers are expected to assume different roles, with fathers commonly assuming the role of breadwinners, and mothers assuming the role of caregivers (Shek, 2002). Therefore, paternal migration fits the traditional role of breadwinners, whereas the maternal migration might be viewed against the traditional view of caring motherhood.

The moderator effect analysis found that parental migration conditions had an impact on the LBC's attachment security. Children whose parents both migrated had

lower maternal attachment security than children who experienced only one parent migrating. The finding was consistent with the study by Zhao and Li (2017). The result could be because when a single parent migrated, it was usually the fathers who left while the children still remained in the care of their mothers (Xiao & Chen, 2009; Zhao & Li, 2017). This could also explain why children with a single parent migrating or both parents migrating did not differ in paternal attachment, as most of these children experienced their father's migration. This is consistent with the sixth population census in China, in which mother-only migration (16.87%) was less common compared to both-parent migration (46.74%) and father-only migration (36.39%) (Chen et al., 2020). Mothers did not tend to migrate alone; they usually went with their husbands. Therefore, children usually only experienced maternal separation when both parents migrated. The findings also suggested that children with both parents migrating were the most vulnerable among the rural LBC. The meta-analysis by Chen et al. (2020) has shown that single-parent migration is less harmful to the LBC's psychological adjustments than both-parent migration. The different effects of parental migration status on children's paternal and maternal attachments might also explain differences in the children's psychological development. Children with both parents migrating may have less parental attachment and therefore diminished psychological development. The findings confirmed that parental migration status is an important contextual factor influencing children's attachment security and potentially their development. Consistent with the ecological systems framework, we should integrate multiple individual factors and contextual factors to better understand the risk or protective factors for the attachment security of the LBC.

The current research did not find a relationship between gender and the LBC's attachment security. Attachment theory is developed in gender-neutral terms. Since male and female infants face the same threats and need the same protection from the attachment figures, there are no evolutionarily reasons to expect gender differences in attachment. However, the effects of gender might be different in different age groups. There was no evidence of systematic sex differences for young children (Giudice, 2009). When young people start to transit into adulthood, there is a tendency for males to display higher attachment avoidance and females to exhibit higher attachment anxiety (Giudice, 2008; Gloger-Tippelt & Kappler, 2016; Choi et al., 2016). The current meta-analysis involved LBC from a wide range of age groups, complicating the effects of gender moderation. Future research could focus on children of a specific age group to see if gender differences exist.

Furthermore, cross cultural studies show that gender differences in attachment are largest in Western and Middle Eastern countries, and smaller in places with high levels of adversity, mortality and fertility (Giudice, 2011). There is a tendency that in places where economic stress becomes more severe children develop increased avoidance, this is particularly the case with girls, and so the gender gap diminishes (Schmitt, 2003). This might explain why no gender differences were found in the current meta-analysis, as the LBC are living in disadvantaged contexts. The meta-analysis's result on gender moderation could further suggest that boys and girls showed similar responses to long-term parental absence, that disrupted their attachment to their parents.

When interpreting the findings, it is notable that there was substantial heterogeneity across all the various comparisons. Exclusion of outlier studies worked as an effective way of solving high heterogeneity, but caution should be taken when

using this method as statistical outliers might reveal new patterns to inform new research directions. Also, the exclusion of outliers may result in waste or underuse the available research evidence, and the reduced heterogeneity after removing outliers may only be due to the smaller number of studies.

High heterogeneity suggests that important moderators may be at play causing significant variances in effect sizes within studies. When the factors of sampling age groups and attachment measures were accounted for, the heterogeneity was reduced, but was still at a moderate level. And some of these drops might be based on the smaller study sample size. However, the influence of attachment measures shown in the subgroup analysis suggested that researchers should be aware of the impact of the selected measurement. After splitting all the studies into subgroups by school grade and attachment measure, the subgroups showed lower heterogeneities than the whole meta-analysis, suggesting that age and attachment measures may be the potential causes of heterogeneity. However, the heterogeneity values within each subgroup were still at a moderate to high level. These findings mean that there were still substantial variances in study results. The fact that studies could not achieve consistent results might be attributed to many other methodological differences in these studies. The methodological differences that have not been explored mainly involved differences in recruited samples. For example, some studies included children who were about the same school grade, e.g., grade three to four, whereas others included children across different school grade ranges, e.g., grade one to six. Another substantial variation among studies was the definition of LBC. The basic definition of LBC is that they are children separated from parents, who migrated to the cities for work, and are in the care of other people. There are many variations of this definition, such as separation length,

children's age, how many parents migrated. Some studies used narrower definitions of LBC, whereas others used broader definitions. In the studies included in this meta-analysis, seven studies did not specify the definition of LBC adopted by the researchers (Du et al., 2015; Liang, 2017; Wu, 2016; Zhang, 2011; Zhang, 2016; Zhao & Li, 2017; Zhou & Xie, 2015). Five studies considered the separation length when recruiting LBC in their studies (Chen, 2018; Liu et al., 2017; Peng et al., 2017; Xiao & Chen, 2009; Yao, 2015). Studies by Liu et al. (2017), Peng et al. (2017) and Xiao & Chen (2009) included 'separated from migrant parent(s) longer than six months' in their inclusion criteria. Studies by Chen (2018) and Yao (2015) used two years and four months respectively as the criteria for minimum separation length in defining LBC. Chen (2018) and Yao (2015) both considered children who had left-behind experiences in the past still as LBC, while other studies only recruited children who were currently left-behind as LBC. And Liu et al.'s (2017) study mentioned the criteria for the control group as 'always lived with parents since birth'.

In addition to clarifying the defining features of LBC, some studies also paid attention to the confounding factors that might impact the results of LBC's attachment, such as other negative life events. Fan et al. (2015) applied the exclusion criteria of children who experienced parental divorce or parental death in recruiting LBC in their studies. These variations in the definition of the LBC and the resulting differences in the recruited samples may impact the children's attachment security and lead to the high heterogeneity of the meta-analysis.

The current meta-analytic findings of the LBC were consistent with the attachment literature that the loss of a primary attachment figure will cause disruptions in children's parental attachment. Research on children separated from parents for other reasons had similar findings to the increased insecure attachment

of the children. For example, studies observed that institutionalised (Lionetti et al., 2015; Zaccagnino et al., 2014) and adopted children (van den Dries et al., 2009) had lower rates of secure attachment classifications compared to the other children. Moreover, the childhood separation experience could have a long-lasting impact on an individual's attachment. The studies on the college students with left-behind experiences in childhood have found that these students had significantly higher attachment insecurity, especially attachment avoidance, than the college students without childhood left-behind experiences (Guo et al., 2018; Li et al., 2010; Wang, 2010). These studies suggest that the impact of childhood separation experiences on attachment is not easily altered and may persist into adulthood.

The migratory separation experienced by the LBC have strong implications for their development, as Bowlby explained, 'experiences of separation from attachment figures, whether of short or long duration . . . being threatened with separation or an abandonment . . . divert development from a pathway that is within optimal limits to one that may lie outside them' (Bowlby, 1973, p. 370). The literature on attachment and development has shown that attachment insecurity was generally regarded as a vulnerability or a risk factor for developing mental health problems (Davila et al., 2005). Though attachment insecurity per se is unlikely to be sufficient cause for mental disorders (except for disorders such as separation anxiety or pathological grief), the reduced attachment security of the LBC was still concerning when these children were concurrently exposed to negative life conditions, such as family separations and poverty. The effect of attachment insecurity on the development of the LBC could be converged or amplified by their environments and life histories.

Parental migration is a unique type of parent-child separation as it creates financial benefits at the same time. However, the current study again pointed out that

we should not overlook children's separation experiences from their attachment figures. The research added to our understanding of the overall impact of parental migration on children by providing evidence of one potential psychological cost. If the primary motivation for parental migration is to improve children's life qualities, the potential psychosocial costs may lead people to re-evaluate decisions about parental migration, or revise their migration plans or adopt additional strategies to mitigate the negative impacts on children.

3.5 Limitations and future research

This research is the first and only meta-analysis comparing the attachment security of LBC and NLBC in China. The large sample size and the synthesis of the previous studies helped to provide a convincing conclusion and resolve the contradictions between studies. The meta-analysis also examined the role of gender and parental migration conditions in LBC attachment security. However, some limitations should be noted. First, the effect sizes reported in the current meta-analysis were mostly small to medium compared to the benchmarks proposed by Cohen (1988). However, Cohen has admitted that these benchmark values were somewhat arbitrary and were 'recommended for use only when no better basis for estimating the index is available' (Cohen, 1988, p. 25). It has been suggested that in order to interpret an effect size as small, medium or large, the effect size could be compared with the results of previous studies in the respective area of research (Cohen, 1988; Kotrlik et al., 2011; Thompson, 2002). The previous studies on the attachment of LBC in China did not report effect sizes when comparing the attachment between LBC and NLBC. The effect sizes in the current research could not be compared with other relevant studies to determine whether they were smaller

or larger. Nonetheless, the effect sizes reported in the current research could serve as a useful comparison for any future research.

Second, the high heterogeneity of the meta-analysis indicating significant variances between studies might compromise the results. High heterogeneity came from the variances between studies, such as the variance in the definition of LBC, and required further investigation. The current meta-analysis was able to identify several potential causes for heterogeneity, but more moderators that could provide explanations for heterogeneity could not be tested due to a lack of available data and therefore require future research.

Third, the reviewed studies did not allow more comprehensive analysis of factors that could be beneficial or detrimental to LBC's parental attachment security. The researchers were only able to test the effects of parental migration and gender. The effects of the interaction of parental migration with other factors (e.g., social-economic status, contact frequency with migrant parents) were not tested, because studies did not correct for these interactions or data could not be synthesized to include meta-analysis.

It is worth noting that parental migration is primarily driven by economic reasons (Jia et al., 2016; Zhang & Song, 2003). Therefore, the differences between LBC and NLBC's development might be associated with poor economic conditions (Wang & Mesman, 2015). But the current meta-analysis could not rule out the effect of this factor, as no included study had controlled for such potential confounding factors.

Furthermore, three studies examined the impact of parent-child interactions on children's attachment by controlling the factors of contact and visiting frequency between migrant parents and children and found higher contact frequency (Du et al.,

2015; Fan et al., 2009) and higher visiting frequency (Du et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2016) were associated with better attachment quality. Though due to the lack of standardised reporting of the data, this factor could not be investigated as an explanatory variable in the current meta-analyses. However, the information has implications for the parenting practice of the migrant parents, who could increase their children's sense of parental availability by maintaining frequent contact via modern communication devices, offsetting the impact of their physical absence. Future research on the mechanism through which parental migration changes children's attachment could look into the child-parent interaction in the context of parental migration, for example how migration changes the quantity and quality of the parent-child communication and how migrant parents provide support and care at a distance.

Fourth, all the studies in the current meta-analysis were cross-sectional studies with a limited choice of attachment measures for assessing attachment representations. The self-report questionnaires assessed the cognitively based representations of attachment and did not explore more aspects of attachment systems in children. In particular, there was a lack of measurement of LBC's attachment at the representational level using interview-based approaches. Moreover, the existing literature's reliance on self-report attachment measures meant that findings were unclear about attachment styles. For example, having lower attachment security than the NLBC did not lead to the conclusion that the LBC would have insecure attachment styles. It may be possible that the LBC were still able to maintain secure parental attachment styles, despite the fact that their perceived security was lower than that of the NLBC. If the LBC did tend to have insecure attachment styles, it was unclear which insecure attachment style was the most

prevalent. Therefore, future research on the attachment of LBC should not be limited to using self-report measures only. Future research may consider the distribution of attachment styles of the LBC using measures such as the Child Attachment Interview.

In the context of parental unavailability due to migration, it might be necessary to consider the roles of other attachment figures as secondary or supplementary attachments figures in the LBC's lives (Ainsworth, 1989). Secure and stable relationships with new caregivers may provide insecurely attached children with corrective experiences, and possibly change their mental representations of attachment and develop healthy emotion regulation skills (Collins & Read, 1994; Lawson-McConnell, 2018). Therefore, social workers, teachers and mental health professionals could provide services aiming to foster children's attachment security with their current caregivers.

In conclusion, the current meta-analysis found evidence that parental loss due to labour migration is associated with a substantial decrease in attachment security. The result should be understood in light of the issue of high heterogeneity. Future research with a more rigorous definition of LBC and more comprehensive research designs, should further reveal the mechanism underlying LBC's attachment development in the context of parental migration and explore the protective and risk factors that impact LBC's attachment. The findings were in line with the attachment literature, that the loss of a primary attachment figure will cause disruption in children's parental attachment. Research within the framework of attachment theory may provide an approach for mental health professionals, families and the government to understand LBC's plight and eventually help to overcome their disadvantages.

Chapter 4

Rationale for the current study and the research questions

These introductory chapters have identified several gaps in the literature of LBC in rural China and provide the basis for the current research, which seeks to address these gaps. Most of the existing studies on LBC were quantitative studies investigating children's psycho-social development. Studies exploring the first-hand subjective experiences of LBC are very limited. Researchers using a quantitative approach tended to regard their subjects as collections of attributes represented by variables, rather than as people capable of exercising their own agency (Sampson & Flyvbjerg, 2012). There are significant inequalities in researcher-participant relationships inherent in quantitative studies, where participants are viewed as vassals of data to test a hypothesis pre-determined by the researcher. In these studies, the participants typically respond anonymously to a survey designed by the researcher and rarely meet the researcher. Also, the researchers have few opportunities to engage participants in the research process. In these cases, there is a risk that children's voices will be silenced. The majority of the quantitative studies on LBC drew on psychologically based models and focused on how children were impacted by the migration mentally, physically and socially, for example by decreased mental health. This approach risks viewing children as passive recipients of their environment. By only focusing on the effects of parental migration on the LBC's development, the transforming capacity of these children in structural and social-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, the current study aimed to focus on children's sense of agency.

This perspective is consistent with the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997). It emphasises that children are active agents who shape the structures and processes around them (at least at the micro-level), and whose social interactions are worthy of study. Acknowledging the notion of the 'agentic child' (Woodrow, 1999), this research explores children's lived experiences of parental migration, especially how they make sense of their worlds, meet the challenges of parental migration and construct their realities as active social members.

Highlighting the children's agency in the current research involved empowering children in the research context. Methodological choices are central to creating spaces for empowering participants (Ross, 2017). To highlight children's agency, the current research aimed to reveal the experiences of LBC through their narratives. Interventions based on this research may be able to address LBC's real needs, and ultimately enhance their well-being.

On a practical level, emphasizing the LBC's agency meant facilitating their voices (Ashby, 2011). The current research mainly used a qualitative approach with open-ended and unstructured interviews, which created the potential for children to have their own ideas and explanations heard and understood (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999). In the course of these interviews, children had a meaningful engagement in the research. As stated by Rossetti et al. (2008, p. 370), 'Expressions of agency require contexts in which communication partners believe that an individual has something to say, provide communication supports, and possess the listening skills to "hear" them.' The unstructured nature of this approach to data collection empowered children by focusing upon what was important to them, rather to the researcher. The open interviews created opportunities for the participants to

voice concerns that may differ from, or even contradict, issues of dominant discourse (Tsikatah & Darkwah, 2014). In contrast, the focus of closed survey questions or even semi-structured interviews were determined in advance by the researcher, without input from the individuals who were the focus of the research (Ross, 2017). Open-ended interviews, on the other hand, empower participants, by allowing them to speak according to their own frames of reference (Spencer, 2014). This approach places the focus of knowledge production in the hands of research participants and allows for non-dominant perspectives to emerge.

Moreover, the researcher believed that the children had the potential to actively construct the realities of parental migration rather than being passively impacted by it. The LBC are active agents of their own lives. Therefore, it was believed that a narrative approach to the research with LBC would naturally elicit information about their agency in their lives.

The research design aimed to fill the gaps in the existing qualitative studies on the LBC's experiences. First, the current research explores the LBC's experiences more broadly with minimal preconceived themes and reveals children's roles in the parental migration process and how they adjust to their life with parental migration. These aspects have not been explored in previous studies. Secondly, the current study used the attachment theory as the theoretical framework to understand the LBC's experiences, in contrast to previous qualitative studies which lacked theoretical frameworks. Thirdly, the current research aimed to adhere to the guidelines of the chosen qualitative methodology rigorously, as many previous qualitative studies lacked methodological rigour and transparency.

In addition to the qualitative approach exploring children's narratives, the

current research also deepened the investigation of LBC's attachment by assessing their representations regarding their migrant parents. This process filled the research gap in existing literature that only investigated the attachment security of LBC and did not investigate children's attachment representations or attachment styles.

This study seeks to contribute to the literature of attachment theory by exploring specific types of parent-child relationships and family processes that are shaped by migratory separation, long-distance parent-child interactions, and interactions with extended families. In addition, this study contributes to attachment theory by conducting a meta-analysis of the attachment of LBC, using a newly translated attachment measurement in the Chinese context.

The current research adds to the global literature on migration. According to previous reviews, studies on LBC in China and other countries had many overlaps in terms of research topics and research findings. This research especially contributes to the literature on left-behind families in communities where migration for work is common, by providing evidence from the LBC in rural China in the wake of internal rural-urban migration.

In the current research, children identified as LBC were children in middle childhood (8 years – 13 years) and had been separated from both of their parents for longer than one year due to labour migration. Also, the children had not experienced any major separations from their parents before migration such as divorce, or parental death. The criteria were set to focus on the impact of parental migration on children's lives.

The children in the current study were in middle childhood when children go through several developmental changes. Their cognition improves with more

advanced conceptual thinking ability, which allows the children to move attachment experiences into the level of representation. In middle childhood, the child does not necessarily perceive longer separations and larger distances as threats to their caregiver's availability and accessibility (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). The developmental characteristics of children in middle childhood made it possible to conduct a narrative inquiry with them and potentially provides new insights into children's perspectives of living with parental migration.

The primary research questions were as follows:

1. How do LBC experience the parent-child attachment?
2. How do LBC experience the parental migration?

Chapter 5

Methodology

This chapter outlines the paradigm and methodology of the current research. The philosophical assumptions underpinning the research are introduced first. The research adopted pragmatism as the research paradigm with a mixed-method research design combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach used guidelines from the constructivist grounded theory as the methodology to explore LBC's experiences. The quantitative approach used the established attachment measurement and statistical analysis to assess the attachment representation of the LBC. The data collected from different approaches were later integrated to further address the research aims. Next, the procedures for the empirical studies are described including sampling, ethical consideration, recruitment, data collection, data analysis and reflexivity.

5.1 The paradigm of the research

Before embarking on the research process, it is important to consider the paradigm of the research, which refers to the philosophical assumptions that guide social inquiry decisions and actions (Greene & Hall, 2010). A research paradigm usually contains ontological assumptions regarding the nature of reality or the world view of the researcher (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) and epistemological assumptions of 'a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know' (Crotty, 2003, p.3). Different paradigms (e.g., post-positivism, constructivism) often contain distinctive ontological and epistemological assumptions that are incompatible with each other.

It can be seen from the previous review that researchers interested in LBC investigated the phenomena from multiple perspectives with different methods. The

quantitative studies, such as studies investigating the incidents of mental disorders of the LBC focused on testing hypotheses, constructs from existing theories, or examining relationships between variables. The qualitative studies, such as studies investigating children's perception of their care arrangements, focused on exploring the meanings and actions of personal experiences and social processes. These two types of approaches followed research paradigms that were commonly used in social science inquiries. The former adopted a post-positivism paradigm which had the ontological belief in a single 'real' and 'apprehensible' reality (Bryman, 2012). The latter took a constructivism paradigm stating that reality is an essentially subjective human experience and there are in multiple realities, as different people make different interpretations of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

The choice of the paradigm for the current research was based on the world view of the researcher and attempts to best resolve the research questions. The researcher understood the realities of the LBC were neither purely objective and external to the actors (as proposed by the post-positivists using quantitative methods), nor completely constructed differently by each individual (as proposed by the social constructivists using qualitative methods). For the current research, the researcher took a world view that did not fit a purely post-positivism or constructivism paradigm but was somewhere in-between. The researcher believes in an objective reality that could only be understood through experience (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). People construct their realities based on their interpretations of their experiences. No two individuals would interpret their experiences in exactly the same way, and therefore would not have precisely the same world view. However, people may have varying degrees of shared

experiences, as well as shared interpretations or beliefs, the extent of this common ground influences the likelihood of people acting in a similar way in the same situation (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This world view fits a pragmatic paradigm that suggests realities are both individually unique and socially shared (Morgan, 2014).

The current research also values the primary importance of the research questions and seeks to ensure freedom in decision-making during the research process. Paradigms like post-positivism and constructivism usually have a set of fixed protocols for conducting research, including the viewpoint of the researcher, the use of a particular method, etc. These fixed protocols might constrain the process of the research by using complicated and exploratory questions. The current research follows a use 'what works' principal promoted by pragmatism, instead of being restricted to a specific methodology (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This approach chooses methods flexibly based on what best fits the research purposes and the nature of the research questions (Creswell, 2003).

The researcher chose to use pragmatism as the philosophical paradigm because its stance on realities, research questions and methodologies match the researcher's approach to the work. Pragmatism embraces the propositions of both post-positivism and constructivism and suggests that there could be single or multiple realities (Creswell & Clark 2011), and that knowledge is both real and socially constructed (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000). Its emphasis on research questions offered the researcher the flexibility to adopt or combine different philosophical approaches and methods in answering the research question and achieving the research aims.

5.2 Mixed methods research

Informed by the pragmatism paradigm, a mixed-method research design combining the qualitative and quantitative approaches was chosen as it provided the optimal fit for the research question. The research question about the parent-child attachment was mainly investigated using the quantitative approach. The research question about the LBC's subjective experiences of parental migration was explored using the qualitative approach. The two approaches were mixed in the research as the researcher 'collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry' (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4).

Although paradigm purists (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) regarded qualitative and quantitative approaches as mutually exclusive, pragmatists considered a mix to be legitimate or even desirable to answer research questions. In research literature, pragmatism has been well recognised as the supportive paradigm for combining different methods in one study (Allmark & Machaczek, 2018; Brierley, 2017; Scott & Briggs, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

In the current research, qualitative and quantitative data were collected using different methods from the same group of participants. The data collected from the two sources were first analysed separately and then integrated for a further analysis. There are several advantages for adopting a mixed method approach. First, the findings from different methods could complement each other and provide 'dual perspectives' on the studied social phenomenon. The quantitative approach focuses on 'what is' and its findings describe the conditions of the phenomenon at a given moment (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In the current research, a quantitative approach was used to assess the static features of the LBC's state regarding their parent-child

attachment at the time the research was undertaken. The qualitative approach focuses on 'what goes on' and its findings capture processes in phenomena. Qualitative studies explore how processes unfold over time, conveying a sense of change and flux (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Instead of producing static data, the qualitative approach produced data relating to changing interactions, actions, meanings and communications over a period of time. The danger of depending on a single approach in isolation is that it might limit the breadth of data, and the ideas that could emerge. The combination of quantitative and qualitative findings provided static and processual features of the phenomenon, extended the findings obtained from using only one approach and extended the understanding of the LBC's social world.

Second, in mixed method research, the weakness in one method could be overcome by the strengths of the other method. In the current research, the qualitative approach explored the pattern of the social phenomenon. The quantitative approach tested and measured the construct related to parent-child attachment. Combining the approaches strengthened the connection between qualitative findings and attachment theory. The quantitative approach added another lens through which to look at children's experiences of parental migration. However, the quantitative approach alone could only test pre-determined concepts on a population whose experiences have not been sufficiently explored. The nature of the quantitative measure may limit the phenomena under exploration (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001). The unstructured in-depth interviews used in the qualitative method enable participants to steer the interviews about their experiences in unexpected directions rather than fitting their experiences into forced-choice responses (Scott et al., 2007).

This process yields insights of the phenomena that the quantitative method alone would not be able to yield.

Third, mixed method research allowed for the triangulation of the research findings, i.e., the comparison of the results derived from the quantitative and qualitative methods (Migiro & Magangi, 2011). The main purpose of integration is to find potential convergence between results, and to 'use the results from one method to help develop or inform the other method' (Bryman, 2006). More importantly, the parent-child attachment as the focus of the quantitative approach is embedded in the children's experiences of parental migration. Locating the quantitative investigation in the context of qualitative findings fits the ecological model of the attachment. Integration increases the validity and richness of the research findings, and it helps produce more robust answers to the research questions (Hess-Biber, 2010).

Different paradigms in the mixed method research could be operated sequentially, for example one paradigm could work to inform another paradigm, or could be undertaken concurrently, and happen in different ways at any stage of the research process, including research design, data collection, analysis and inference (Creamer, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013).

The current mixed method uses a multi-stage mixed methods framework including a sequential component and a convergent component. In the sequential component, the researcher first collected and analysed the quantitative data, then the findings of informed qualitative data collection and analysis (Ivankova et al., 2006). Qualitative data helped to illustrate or explain the quantitative data (Bowen et al., 2017). Such explanatory sequential design is very common in mixed method research. For example, in Carr's (2000) study on the effect of post-operative pain on patient outcomes following surgery, he first used the questionnaire to assess the

severity and impact of pain on the patient's functioning and later conducted semi-structured interviews to gain a greater understanding of the patients' responses about the questionnaires. In the current research, children's attachment representations were assessed by the attachment measure. Qualitative data of codes and illustrative interview quotes were extracted to interpret and clarify the quantitative findings. If information relevant to the quantitative findings did not emerge naturally in the early stage of data collection and analysis of the qualitative approach, specific feedback would be sought from the participants in the subsequent interviews to expand understanding of the quantitative findings.

The current mixed method research also adopted a convergent design which started when the quantitative and qualitative collection and analysis were both completed separately within a similar time frame (Hong et al., 2017; Moseholm & Fetters, 2017). In the convergent design, the data from two approaches merge and 'talk to each other'. The data merging started with data transformation in which one type of data transformed into the other type. In this case qualitative to quantitative data transformation was followed by merging of the transformed quantitative data with the other collected quantitative data (Fetters et al., 2013; Zickmund et al., 2013). The merging allowed for new data analysis integrated with illustrative examples from the original qualitative dataset. A similar research design was used by Ruffin and colleagues (2009). In their study on the factors influencing choices for colorectal cancer (CRC) screening, the researchers first conducted focus group interviews and a survey concurrently. Then they transformed the qualitative responses from the focus group data about colorectal cancer screening preferences into quantitative variables based on the number of participants of each preference. The transformed quantitative data were merged with the other set of quantitative data and integrated

into the findings with representative quotations from three different constituencies (Ruffin et al. 2009).

In the present research, the qualitative data of codes and categories were transformed into quantitative forms based on the number of participants from whom the codes were sourced. The transformed data was merged with the quantitative data of the attachment classification of each participant for a further analysis of the distribution of the attachment styles within each code or category. Figure 2 illustrates the data collection and analysis procedures of the quantitative and qualitative phases and the phase of data integration in the mixed method research.

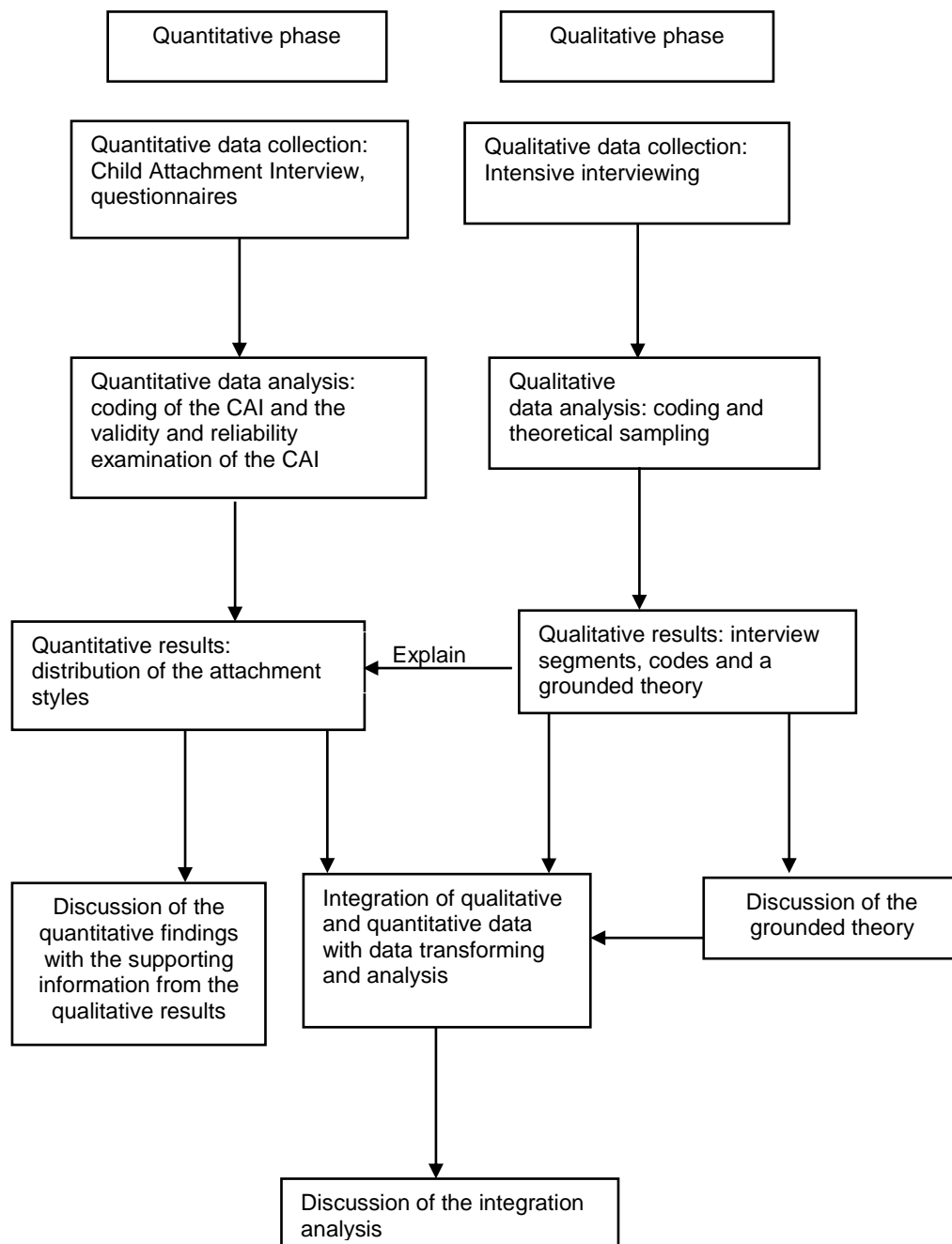
5.2.1 Reasoning in the research

Underlying a research paradigm, there is a reasoning process for the logic of the paradigm. Traditionally, it could either be deductive reasoning that starts with a hypothesis to be tested with data, and only if found to be true leads to a specific conclusion; or inductive reasoning where a series of specific observations reach a general conclusion that may or may not be true (Zalaghi & Khazaei, 2016).

Deductive reasoning usually works with quantitative research and inductive reasoning usually supports qualitative research. In addition, there is another type of reasoning, abduction. With the abductive approach, the research process starts with certain facts, some 'puzzles', then seeks to find the most probable answers to explain the facts (Kovács & Spens, 2005). Abduction reasoning works well with pragmatism (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Feilzer (2010) proposed that pragmatism supports using a mixture of different research methods, as well as various modes of analysis combined with a continuous cycle of abductive reasoning.

Figure 2

The process of concurrent mixed method research design



Whilst inductive reasoning requires fairly complete evidence of the subject being investigated, a feature of abductive reasoning is a lack of completeness, either in the evidence, or in the explanation, or both (Karlsen et al., 2020). Similar to decision-making in everyday life, Abductive reasoning aims to do its best with the

information at hand, which is often incomplete. Abduction itself may have less certainty than induction and deduction. But it has innovative potential to produce intriguing and educated guesses of studied phenomena.

As part of mixed method research, the quantitative study adopted deductive reasoning to assess established constructs. The qualitative study and the final data integration both relied on abductive reasoning, which essentially allowed the researcher to move back and forth between induction and deduction throughout the inquiry process (Morgan, 2007). Abductive reasoning had significant weight in the current research. During the qualitative data analysis, the researcher subjectively chose inference, for instance in the form of a code or category, that 'felt' accurate (Lipscomb, 2012), but there were other possible interpretations compatible with the data. The researcher's inference was also influenced by their theoretical and professional background. In triangulation, the researcher brought two sets of data together to allow the interpretation of the data from a multidimensional perspective. Each data set could be informed, questioned and enhanced by the others. Meanwhile, the researcher also explored the two sets of data to discover patterns, suggest plausible hypotheses and eventually find the 'most likely' explanations for the observed patterns.

5.2.2 Quantitative study in the research

To answer the research question 'how do LBC experience their parent-child attachment?', the researcher investigated the children's attachment representations with respect to their migrant parents. The meta-analysis in Chapter 3 proved that separation from migrant parents was associated with lower attachment security of LBC. However, there were still some gaps in the attachment studies of LBC.

First, there has been a lack of diversity in attachment measures used by previous studies in China. So far, the research studies on LBC's attachment in China all used self-report measures, such as IPPA (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) and KSS (Kerns et al., 1996) to assess attachment security levels of LBC with continuous outcomes (Chen, 2018; Liang, 2017; Wu, 2016; Zhao & Li, 2017). These measures relied on each individual's conscious perception of their attachment figures and their attachment relationships; they did not access the attachment system at an unconscious representational level. It has also been questioned whether children are able to provide honest and accurate appraisals of their attachment figures and relationships (Jacobvitz et al. 2002). Interview-based measures complement self-reports as they are able to tap into the unconscious psychological defences associated with the attachment through the coherence of the interview narratives. However, interview-based measures have been rarely used in China due to the difficulty in receiving training and accreditation in coding.

Second, there has been a lack of attention on LBC in middle childhood. Only one study (Wang & Lei, 2016) partly included children in middle childhood, other existing research mostly focused on children in later childhood and adolescence. Middle childhood is a developmental stage where children go through changes in attachment systems alongside an improvement in their cognitive abilities (Boldt et al., 2002) and increasing exposure to social interactions outside families. Physical proximity to attachment figures is no longer the primary goal of the attachment system in middle childhood, but rather the expectations regarding their responsiveness and availability (Ainsworth, 1990). Therefore, physical absence of attachment figures becomes less important to children (Bowlby, 1973). Children develop more and more complicated and abstract representations of attachment

figures, themselves and relationships (Bowlby, 1969). The children's developmental stage also makes it possible to interview them directly about their attachment-related thoughts and feelings.

Due to gaps in the existing literature regarding variations in attachment measures of LBC, and the lack of investigation into attachment representations of children in middle childhood in China, the current research chose to measure the LBC's attachment by assessing their attachment styles with interview-based measurements. This study is the first to measure the attachment representations of children beyond infancy in China, the first study to measure paternal attachment styles in China and the first to measure the attachment styles of the LBC. The study provides valuable insights into the features of the LBC's attachment styles towards their parents in the context of parental migration. The research compares the attachment distribution between the LBC, the NLBC and children separated from parents for other reasons. Furthermore, the study adds to the information regarding attachment distribution of children in China as well as the understanding of cross-cultural attachments.

5.2.3 Qualitative study in the research

In addition to the quantitative study measuring the LBC's attachment representations, the current research also included a qualitative approach to understand the phenomenon of the parental labour migration from the perspective of the LBC.

The qualitative approach generates rich, subjective and detailed data (Barrett & Twycross, 2018) that was useful in answering the research question regarding the LBC's experiences of parental migration. The research question did not aim to test

theories or constructs but looked for a deep insight into each child's subjective, unique and real-life experiences that were meaningful to them.

Qualitative approach is particularly suitable for research questions that had not been fully explored before (Creswell, 2013). This was the case with the current research, as a result, this study benefited from the exploratory and open-minded qualitative approach. This approach allowed the participants and the researcher to question concepts of parental migration, migratory separations, emotion adjustment, and family relationships and family processes, where quantitative research could have imposed meaning.

Qualitative approach has another advantage as it gives participants a chance to express themselves where their experiences are often hidden and unexpressed (Creswell, 2013). This was particularly the case with the LBC who may have been treated as the 'luggage' in the migration process and whose voices were often forgotten by the adults (Dobson, 2009). The qualitative approach could foster voice-giving as it provided opportunities for the participants to engage and express their experiences, and more importantly, the meanings they attached to their experiences.

Grounded theory as the qualitative approach

Among the qualitative studies on the LBC in rural China, the most widely used research methodologies were the narrative analysis (e.g., Fan et al., 2012; Liao et al., 2009; Liu, Zhao, & Shen, 2007; Ma, 2009; Zhao & Zhang, 2008) and the case study (Hong & Fuller, 2019; Iv, 2006; Xiong, 2011; Yan, 2013). The studies on transnational families that may or may not focus on the LBC, mostly chose the narrative analysis and the case study as methodologies as well (e.g., Baynham & De Fina, 2016; Castañeda & Buck, 2011; Hoang & Yeoh, 2012;). However, the current

research chose grounded theory for the qualitative analysis, as the grounded theory was the best fit for the research purpose.

The methodologies of the case study, narrative analysis and the grounded theory aim to study a phenomenon in the natural context for the people who have experienced the phenomenon. These methodologies differed in their research purposes. The case study aims to provide an in-depth description and understanding of a case or several cases. It analyses data through detailed descriptions of the case and themes of the cases (Crowe et al., 2011). The narrative analysis is much like 'story telling' (Elliot & Bonsall, 2018). In narrative inquiries, the stories themselves become the raw data (Bleakley, 2005) and the inquiries aim to explore the life of people. These two approaches both focus on understanding rather than explaining the phenomenon (Liu & Tseng, 2021). These features did not fit the current research that does not merely seek to understand the 'cases' or 'stories' of the LBC, but aims to illustrate the social processes engaged in by the LBC in context and to develop a theory that can explain the phenomenon.

In order to fulfil the research purpose, the researcher chose the method of grounded theory as the current research methodology. Grounded theory may be defined as the 'discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser & Strauss 1967). While approaches such as narrative analysis aim to describe and understand a reality, grounded theory mainly focuses on forming conceptual and theoretical knowledge that explains a social reality (Hussein, 2014; Liu & Tseng, 2021). Grounded theory fits the current research, as the purpose of the research is to move beyond descriptions of the experiences of the LBC and towards building a theory. As grounded theory originated from sociology, it not only focuses on an individual's unique personal actions, but also on their interactions within the

context that played a role in shaping their experiences, adjustment and outcomes of parental migration. This also fits the theoretical frameworks and paradigms of the current research which places an emphasis on each child's experiences in their particular context.

The grounded theory is also distinguished from other qualitative methods because it deploys a set of systematic procedures of data collection and data analysis to ensure quality, while staying open and flexible to the insights that emerge during analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Henwood, 2008). These systematic steps are especially helpful for novice researchers.

The method of case study emphasises that 'theory development prior to the collection of any case study data is an essential step' (Yin, 1994, p. 28). However, there is a paucity of studies on the experiences of the LBC, the literature and theories on this topic are very limited. So, the current research uses grounded theory, because it is particularly suitable for discovery-oriented research in under-theorised areas (Burck, 2005), such as the LBC where there are insufficient established theories to develop coding categories in advance.

Constructivist grounded theory

Over the decades, the grounded theory has developed several different trends with distinctive ontological and epistemological stances. Grounded theory (GT) was initially developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This theory is known as classical grounded theory and has a post-positivist stance (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). A more recent approach to grounded theory, the constructivist approach proposed by Charmaz (2006), takes a relativist position and sits within a constructivism framework that holds that truth is not discovered but rather constructed by human beings.

The pragmatism paradigm is able to contain both classical and constructive ground theory. It probably stays closer to constructivist ground theory as pragmatism is more concerned with the experience than the nature of reality (Morgan, 2014). Charmaz et al. (2016, p.9) also described the constructivist GT as having pragmatist roots and being 'a direct methodological descendent of the pragmatist tradition.

From a pragmatist point of view, it is more important to consider the 'usefulness' rather than the 'truthfulness' of a theory or a concept. The current study chose to use the constructivist grounded theory to guide the data collection and data analysis process (Charmaz, 2006).

Several considerations guided the choice of methodological approach to the current research: philosophy, the role of the researcher and the practical aspects of the research. Classic grounded theory has an objectivist epistemology which assumes that the researcher is separate from what is being studied and aims for an unbiased discovery of new knowledge (Charmaz, 2000). Data in classic grounded theory are objective and discovered, they aim to give a true representation of the participants' realities (Glaser, 2002).

Constructivist grounded theory was chosen for the current study because it corresponds with the constructivist epistemological perspective (Charmaz, 2014; Evans, 2013). This study assumed that the researcher brings with her some pre-existing knowledge of LBC, attachment theory and child development, as well as her life experience and her own position in the social world. The researcher and participants co-constructed the data, and thus, data were a product of the research instead of an observation or a window on reality (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). This stance acknowledges the subjectivity of data, aligning with constructivist grounded theory.

Classical grounded theory assumes that research findings correspond with reality (Thomas & James, 2006), and a certain set of data should produce the same results from which the same grounded theory may be formed if the research is rigorous (Duchscher & Morgan, 2004; Heath & Cowley, 2004). However, in the current research, the researcher's assumptions, as well as her interaction with participants and the data have actively constructed, rather than discovered, the findings and the subsequent theory. This is consistent with the constructivist grounded theory's view that theoretical understanding emerges from the researcher's interaction with the data, rather than from the data itself which an unbiased researcher discovers. Constructivist grounded theory 'constructs an image of a reality, not the reality' (Charmaz, 2000, p. 523), and there are likely many possible theoretical interpretations from one set of data (Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). Furthermore, the current research assumed that the data only reflects the perspectives of the selected LBC (and not, for example, of LBC with only one parent migrating). Thus, findings may only reveal part of the complete picture of LBC's experiences of parental migration, and the developed theory allows modification through reinterpretation and new data (Breckenridge et al., 2012).

Classical grounded theory posits that researchers should remain distant from participants to achieve an objective stance in the research (Glaser, 1998). Researchers are usually seen as the experts in the research area and take an authoritative position. The constructivist approach emphasises that researchers and participants are partners in generating the grounded theory. For the current research, the children with their first-hand experiences are seen as 'field experts' regarding the area of interest. Constructivist grounded theory was appropriate for this study because it does not seek to present the researcher's interpretation as an

authoritative view of what life with parental migration entails, as may have been the case with an objectivist approach. This is suitable when working with LBC because constructivist grounded theory may be less likely to impose the researcher's view on participants and, thus, be less likely to silence those who have been silenced before.

Following the constructivist grounded theory, the researcher attempted to build a more equal relationship with the participants, allowing them to contribute to the shaping of the research. The engagement of children within the research process as collaborative partners first depends on the researcher's view on children. For the current research, the researcher firmly believes that children hold a strong desire to 'both construct and share meaning about their world with significant others' (Rinaldi, 2006, pp. 83–84). This belief about children created the possibility of exploring and theorising children's accounts of their lived experiences.

To build a partnership with children, to invite them to share constructed meanings, the researcher was responsible for providing children with a respectful context in which their views could be heard. Ethical and methodological considerations are essential in creating such a context. For example, it is of paramount importance to inform children of the purpose of the research project, and respectfully invite their participation. In doing so, the researcher demonstrates they value children's cognitive and communication competencies. This gives meaning to the belief in the child as a competent individual 'able to attribute meaning to events' (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 84). The researcher-participant power imbalance is the major obstacle preventing the construction of a partnership. To build a more equal relationship with the children, the researcher needed to be reflective about how children respond to the power imbalances and express 'inferiority' in the research

process. Extra effort needed to be made to deal with the impact of power imbalances and enhance the participants' agency in the research. The researcher needed to design the research protocols in a child-friendly way to facilitate the children's expression. By taking these elements into consideration, researchers who work with children can be viewed as co-constructors in the generation of research data (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009). But the collaboration between the researcher and children extends beyond data collection, during data analysis, the researcher brought her own expertise in interpreting the children's 'meanings and actions of this experience' (Crossetti et al., 2015, p. 48) while respecting children's own frames of reference. As a result, the product of the grounded theory work was a combination of the perceptions and views of the researcher and the participants (Gardner et al., 2012).

Practically, classical grounded theory suggests that researchers approach the topic under investigation with a broad question rather than a prior set of specific research questions. In contrast, constructivist grounded theory proposes that researchers approach the research with tangible questions prior to data collection. Questions are developed from the literature and guide the interviewing process. The current research aims to answer the research question 'how do LBC experience parental migration?', aligning with the constructivist grounded theory.

Classical grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) recommends that researchers postpone a literature review and do not adopt external frameworks to avoid contaminating the findings with pre-existing theories and ideas. Within a constructivist grounded theory approach, Charmaz (2006) encourages researchers to recognise prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions and subject them to

rigorous scrutiny.-The current research uses an explicit theoretical framework of attachment theory. The constructs from the theory were not used as pre-established codes representing participants' experiences but served as heuristic devices to investigate a phenomenon that had not been well explored (Kelle, 2019). When coding the qualitative data, the theoretical frameworks guided the researcher's understanding of the data and choice of the most suitable code for the data. Such a process fits what has been described in constructivist grounded theory as abductive logic, an interactive process of the researcher moving back and forth between data and conceptualisation (Charmaz, 2009). Abductive reasoning is the key part of data analysis in constructivist grounded theory, it involves contemplating possible theoretical explanations until arriving at the most plausible explanation (Charmaz, 2014).

Furthermore, Glaser (2001) contended that the main purpose of coding was conceptualisation, which is done by abstracting the data from its contingencies. Such a process of abstraction was described by Charmaz (2008) as 'decontextualization'. In contrast, the constructivist grounded theory did not aim to achieve results devoid of context, but as an 'interpretative understanding of the phenomenon that accounts for context' (Charmaz, 2008, p. 402). The current research emphasised the role of context. The research subjects are social beings with self-awareness interacting in a specific social and cultural context. What the LBC experienced was socially constructed and interactively created. Therefore, the research emphasised 'contextualisation' of the knowledge, which is in accord with the constructivist approach.

5.3 Method

This section outlines the research procedures of mixed method research. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were collected through interviews from the same group of participants, so the introduction of the participants, the research site, interview preparation and research ethics are introduced first. Then the methods and procedures of the quantitative and qualitative approaches are detailed later, and separately.

5.3.1 Research sites

Two primary schools and one middle school in a county in Baoshan city of Yunnan Province were chosen for the current research (Figure 3). The county is a multi-ethnic poverty-stricken county located in the western mountainous area around Baoshan city. Yunnan province is located in southwest China bordering Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. The province has vast mountainous areas with many poverty-stricken counties (Bi & Tong, 2014). The underdeveloped local economy and the income gap between rural and urban areas encouraged large-scale labour migration, resulting in many LBC. According to a survey in 2015, there were 1.21 million LBC out of the total 12.5 million children in the Yunnan province (Road to school, 2015).

Figure 3

The Map of China and the map of Yunnan Province (Richelle, 2012)



5.3.2 Recruiting schools

Recruitment of subjects and data collection took place at local rural schools, one boarding primary school, one non-boarding primary school and one boarding middle school. Most of the participants came from one boarding primary school located in the centre of the county, open for all children across the whole county. The small non-boarding primary school was located in a village with only two teachers managing students of all ages from the village. The middle school was located right

next to the boarding primary school in the small rural town centre of the county. The researcher chose schools as research sites because they were ideal places to access children and understand their daily routines.

The chosen schools reflected the two basic types of school in rural China: the non-boarding school located within small villages with few teaching staff and poor equipment; and township schools that provide boarding (Zhang, 2013). As part of its effort to improve the overall level of basic education, China's State Council launched the Rural School Merger Program in the late 1990s (Mo et al., 2011). This programme aimed to close remote and isolated schools and merge students into geographically centralised schools, so students could benefit from a quality education through access to larger educational facilities (Mo et al., 2011). Statistics have shown that more than 200,000 rural primary schools closed between 1997 and 2006 (Xiong, 2009; Liu et al., 2010), and junior high schools were reduced in number by ten percent between 2000 and 2006. Many students now must board at school or walk long distances to attend day schools, because the centralised schools are often located far from students' homes in rural villages (Liu et al., 2010). As a result, many students leave home at a young age to live in school dormitories miles away from their families.

According to The Ministry of Education, in 2018, 26.6% of rural primary school students (aged between 6–12 years old) and junior middle school students (aged between 12–15 years old) were boarding. The boarding rate of primary school students was 14.1% in 2018. However, in some western areas in China, the rate could reach as high as 50% (The Ministry of Education, 2018).

The rising proportion of LBC among boarders is a new trend in rural boarding

schools. The Ministry of Education requires that priority be given to LBC to attend boarding schools. It was believed that attending boarding schools would help reduce the burden of the left-behind families, resolve the problems of LBC not having sufficiently high levels of guardianship at home and alleviate LBC's loneliness by strengthening their teacher-student relationships and peer relationships. According to survey data in 2013 from the 3482 boarders in six provinces, the number of left-behind children reached 2482, accounting for 71.1% of the sample who were now boarding (*Boarding schools had become the main type of rural school*, 2019).

The two boarding schools in the current research were built during this nationwide school merger programme initiated by the Chinese government. However, despite government investment, the quality of boarding school facilities and management has raised issues regarding safety, hygiene, nutrition and supervision (Zhao, 2021). The school sites in the current research had very typical campus facilities and schedules for rural boarding schools (Qiu, 2019; Zhao & Zhou, 2015). And the majority of the LBC in the schools were boarding. The combination of a small non-boarding school within a village and the boarding schools located in the town centre gave a good representation of schools in rural China. The schools had the campus facilities, schedules and school management typical for rural schools.

School dorms were shared by four to six students. The schools set up a list of rules for dorm life and teachers made regular dorm checks. The schools had basins for children to wash their faces and brush their teeth. However, none of the boarding schools had shower rooms for students. Boarding students went back home on Friday afternoon. For children living in villages far away from the town centre, their guardians would typically hire someone with a car to collect several children from the same village and bring them home.

The schedules of the two boarding schools were very similar. Boarding children managed their own breakfasts and started their morning sessions around 7:30 a.m. Students usually had seven classes each day. They had a two-hour lunch break at noon, when the children had a free lunch in the school canteen and then had a nap in their dorms. During the noon naps, teachers would occasionally check the dorms to see if children were sleeping.

After classes each day, students would have dinner in the school canteen followed by their night study session from 7 p.m. until 9 p.m. Night sessions were not formal classes, but teachers usually monitored children's studies. After the night session, students would have free time before the school sleep time around 10 p.m., when turning off the lights was mandatory.

Non-boarding students at the primary school usually left for home without having the free school dinner or attending the night sessions. Non-boarding students at the middle school usually remained at the school for the night sessions because they had more academic demands. Although boarding was not completely compulsory, schools recommended that children from certain villages should board. The decision was based on the home–school distance and whether guardians or parents were able to collect children from the school daily.

5.3.3 Sampling

The initial selective sampling criteria was informed by the definition of the LBC in the current study, i.e., children in middle childhood (aged 8 years to 13 years) who have been separated from both their parents for longer than one year due to parental labour migration. As one of the focuses of the research was the change of parent-child attachment due to parental migration, it was essential that migrant parents had developed attachment bonds with their children before migration. According to

attachment research, there are several developmental milestones in developing child-parent attachment bond. Around the age of two years old, children display clear-cut attachment behaviours towards their mother. By the age of three, children start to develop abstract attachment by constructing internal working models of attachment figures, self, and attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1972). Therefore, the children recruited in the research had at least one of their migrant parents acting as their main caregivers until the age of three or older.

Inclusion criteria were thus as follows:

- 1) Children aged from 6 to 12 years old.
- 2) Children's parents were both migrant workers
- 3) Children had been separated from their migrant parents for at least one year and had at least one of their migrant parents acting as their main caregivers until the age of three or older.

5.3.4 Participants

Thirty-nine children (20 boys, 19 girls) participated in the study. The mean age of the children was 11.7 years ($SD=1.65$ years). All children were attending free government-owned public schools. Thirty children were boarding at the schools, and nine children were not boarding.

All children sampled in the current study experienced lengthy separation from their migrant parents, ranging from two years to ten years with an average of four years. During these long-term separations, usually children were only able to see their parents during Chinese New Year or summer school holidays. Reunion frequency with migrant parents ranged from none to three times per year. Reunion time in a year lasted from a few days to two or three months.

5.3.5 Ethical issues

The ethical considerations of the current research revolved around 'safeguarding' children. The main purpose of safeguarding is to ensure children's safety and promote their welfare. Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is defined as:

protecting children from maltreatment; preventing impairment of children's health or development; ensuring that children are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care and undertaking that role so as to enable those children to have optimum life chances and to enter adulthood successfully (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, 2006, pp. 34–35).

In the current research, the ethical considerations also need to incorporate an understanding of the social-cultural context of rural China. In China, there are no ethical regulations or guidelines for conducting social studies with children either from governments or schools that host the research. Moreover, in rural China, there is no social service or any agency that holds responsibility for intervention in cases of suspected child protection issues. The social context in which the research has to respond to suspicions of welfare harm is therefore very different to the UK context. However, the researcher still has ethical responsibility and was guided by a more general ethic of care.

What this involved was that, wherever possible, the researcher attempted to avoid any harm being done to respondents, and where there was perceived to be a

danger of harm, ways were sought both to minimise harm or to offer appropriate help and support to participants.

Children are commonly considered vulnerable research participants, due to their limited freedom or capacity to consent and their vulnerability to coercion or undue influence (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017). The LBC's vulnerabilities arise from their young ages and their disadvantageous situations. The safeguarding procedures were modified to cater to their vulnerabilities.

Obtaining consent

Before the first field trip, the researcher contacted the headteachers and the class teachers of the schools to be used as research sites and provided them with information sheets that included: information about the purpose of the research; data collection procedures and sample questions (e.g., CAI and questionnaires); information about recording interviews (audio recordings of all the interviews and video recordings of the CAI); storage, use and distribution of the research data. The headteachers approved the research and gave permission and support for the researcher to conduct research at their schools. The schools that participated were interested in helping the left-behind students and had already been organising various activities to support the development of the LBC. The schools also agreed to offer a separate room for the researcher to interview children.

After gaining ethical approval for conducting the research in rural China from the University of Edinburgh, the researcher visited the research sites and spoke to the primary class teachers of LBC who may match the initial sampling criteria. The teacher in charge of each class usually had access to detailed students records with their personal information. The teachers identified those children who fulfilled the

criteria and sent out information sheets and consent forms for the children and their guardians. The information sheets included information about the purpose and procedures of the research, the main content of the interviews, and information about the children's rights.

In addition to recruitment via teachers, the researcher went into classes to introduce herself, the research project, and the sampling criteria, with the teacher's permission. After the introduction, the researcher handed out consent forms to all the students in the class. Children who identified themselves as suitable participants and were interested in the research took the consent forms home.

The LBC's guardians were identified as their migrant parents and the main caregivers in the rural homes of the LBC. The migrant parents delegated guardianship to these caregivers as defined in Article 22 of the Law of the Protection of Juveniles issued in China (The Law of the Protection of Juveniles, 2020). Whether the consent forms were sent directly by the teacher or taken home by the children, both the guardians and the children signed the forms. Most of the parental consent forms received in the current study were signed by the surrogate caregivers of the children. The researcher was initially concerned with the literacy of the guardians, often grandparents, of the children and whether they were able to understand the consent forms. However, all the children had at least one guardian who was able to read, understand and sign the consent forms. The researcher did not visit children's homes to talk to their guardians about the research in person, but she had the opportunity to meet two parents at school when they were picking up their children and they discussed the research. The parents reassured the researcher that they had been aware of the research and signed the forms for their children's participation. Before the beginning of the interviews with the children, the

researcher also confirmed with the children that their guardians who signed the forms understood the information sheets.

In China, researchers who study children are only required to obtain consent from the guardians of children (Zheng, 2011; Wang, 2015). The current research follows the current trend in research with children led by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, that emphasises the children's meaningful involvement in research (Ruiz-Casares & Thompson, 2016; Mayne et al., 2015). Children should consent (or not) to participate in research as 'subjects', rather as 'objects' of research (Loveridge & Cornforth, 2013). Therefore, the researcher sought meaningful consent from children themselves in addition to their guardians. To obtain meaningful consent, the children must be able to understand what they give consent to. Cocks (2006) suggested that meaningful informed consent consists of three essential components: the information provided by the researcher, the child's understanding of the research, and the child's response to the information provided. The researcher provided adequate information about the research to support children's decision to consent. The information sheet given to the children included details about what the research was about, what it involved for participants, explanations around voluntary participation and reinforced the notion that it was possible to withdraw from the research at any time. These documents were written using language that was age appropriate. Before starting data collection, the researcher also checked again that the participants understood what they were agreeing to.

The strategies used to recruit the children were developed to avoid any sense of compulsory participation. Though most of the LBC at the research sites were initially identified and approached by their teachers, they made it clear that it was up

to the children to decide whether or not to participate in the research. The teacher would not encourage or discourage the children to take part in the study. It was made clear that the children could make direct contact with the researcher themselves without notifying the teachers, so they did not feel compelled to participate in the research by their teachers.

The consent or assent obtained from the child participants in the research is considered as provisional, meaning that the consent is 'ongoing and dependent on researcher-researched and inter-participant relationships . . . built upon sensitivity, reciprocal trust and collaboration' (Cowie & Khoo, 2017). Consent is not a 'one-off' process that is completed with the signed forms, but a continual process throughout the research. The concept of 'ongoing' consent requires the researcher to assess the participant's voluntary willingness to continue at each point of contact. During the research process, the researcher reminded the participants of their rights to withdraw their participation before and during every interview session.

When the researcher introduced the research to the children before obtaining their consent, the researcher informed them of the possibility of having further interviews, which was also written on the information sheet provided to the guardians and children (Appendix 1 and Appendix 3). At the end of each interview, the researcher would discuss with the participant the possibility of having another interview. The researcher would seek verbal consent from the participant regarding participating in future interviews. After the verbal consent was obtained and recorded in the audio recording, the researcher might schedule another interview with the participant directly. If the schedule for the follow-up interviews was not arranged at the time, the researcher would ask the participant how he or she would like to arrange further interviews, for example by the researcher speaking to the participant

in class breaks or the researcher asking the teacher to schedule a time with the participant. Before starting a follow-up interview, the researcher would seek verbal consent again from the participant. All children agreed to have follow-up interviews after the first unstructured interview regarding their separation experiences. Two children did not participate in the follow-up interviews despite their initial consent as these two children left school and the researcher was not able to get in touch with them in the later stage of data collection. The characteristics and contribution of each child in the study (i.e., how many interviews each child had) were listed in the table in Appendix 9. A total of 18 children had more than one follow-up interview. These strategies were designed to reflect children's personal choices and increase their sense of control in the research process. Most of these follow-up interviews were guided by the theoretical sampling method of the grounded theory to further explore the themes that emerged in the data analysis. Some follow-up interviews were arranged because there was insufficient time in the initial interview to obtain sufficient information. The researcher felt that it was better to arrange a follow-up interview rather than having a long and tiring single interview with these children.

Reducing risks

Because the main research question was concerned with children's experiences of separating from their parents, it was possible that the interview would induce emotional distress. Before each interview started, the researcher informed the child about the content of the interview and potential emotional risks. The researcher also made sure that the children understand that they have the rights to refuse to answer any questions they do not feel like talking and to terminate the interview process.

Since Chinese people, and more particularly children, may not be accustomed to refuse directly a request from adult, the researcher therefore had to make sure that she watched for non-verbal cues that the respondent was ill at ease with the question being asked. It was also recognised that sometimes body languages could be a sign that they did not want to share further information. For example, lowering their heads meant they got upset about the questions, or a long silence meant they anxious about whether to, or how to reply and whether it is appropriate to do so. Their tone and emotion could be sensed in the interview as well.

During the interview, the researcher closely attended to the child's emotional state, as well as their body language while interviewing them. If the child or the interviewer believed that the child was experiencing significant distress, the interviewer would suggest they take a break until they felt ready to resume or to withdraw from the interview.

In some cases, interviewees were offered the opportunity to terminate the interview and the researcher sought help from other people. In rural China, professional support services, such as counselling or psychotherapy were not available for the distressed participants. So, the researcher sought help from the class teachers if necessary. During the research interviews, two children became very upset and started to cry. The researcher acknowledged the children's distress and asked if they needed a break or needed someone to help. They agreed to take a short break, calmed down in a few minutes and agreed to continue the interviews.

Debriefing was offered at the end of the interviews to calm the children's emotions and help them return to the regular emotional states.

In addition to prevent from potential harm caused by the research, the researcher believed that the current research could provide children some benefits. The interviews contained provided children the safe, open, and empathetic space to discuss some parts of the significant life events in their lives with a patient adult listener. Though the interviews were not counselling sessions, such conversations could help children process and comprehend their experiences to some extent. And open conversations and empathetic listening has been proven to have a healing impact on trauma recovery (Wilson & Thomas, 2004).

Maintaining participants' anonymity and confidentiality

The researcher ensured all information obtained from the participants was kept in strict confidence. First, the data (in the form of audio recordings, video records, interview transcripts, filed notes, participants' contact information, questionnaires and consent forms) collected were saved on a computer, which was password protected and encrypted. Only the researcher had full access to all the data. However, the digitally anonymised interview transcripts of the CAI were shared with a second coder for calculating inter-rater reliability and some of the other interview transcripts were shared with the researcher's supervisors for help with the data analysis. The CAI required the video recordings of the interviews, which was not shared with the second coder or the supervisors. Second, the documents were made anonymous with pseudonyms for the names of the schools, villages and the participants. For example, the children's real names were removed from their interview transcripts and replaced with code names of 'child one, child two'.

Despite the importance of confidentiality in the research, especially in the qualitative research, it could not be fully guaranteed (Coolican, 2004). There were

exceptional circumstances under which confidentiality could be broken. For the current study with children, in addition to avoiding any harm induced by the research itself, the researcher also had the responsibility to intervene to protect a child from any suspected harm, such as child abuse or neglect. If the researcher had concerns about the child's well-being, she would first discuss them with the class teacher. Then, she would contact both guardians and parents through the class teacher or directly regarding these concerns, unless she thought this would put the child at even greater risk. If it was not appropriate to share the information with the class teacher, the researcher would seek help from the school headteacher.

After discussing her concerns with the teachers, the parents and guardians (where possible), if the information revealed by the child implicated a crime, the researcher would also contact the local authorities (e.g., police department). She would either contact them in person or let the teacher, guardians, or parents contact the local authorities regarding the nature of the risks the child was exposed to. In the latter case, the researcher would seek confirmation that the teacher, guardians, or parents had indeed contacted the local authorities.

In all cases, the researcher would consult the children first about who may be able to help make things better for them. Any action to disclose the information to a third person, guardians, parents, teacher, or local authority, would also have to be explained to the child (Neill, 2005). Also, in all cases at the beginning of their participation with the research, it was made clear to parents or guardians that the promise of confidentiality could be breached if a child's safety was thought to be at risk, but that this would not be done without discussing concerns with them first.

To safeguard children effectively requires the researcher to recognise and respond effectively to child abuse and neglect. However, child abuse is a very

complex social concept that is dependent on social-cultural perceptions of children, childhood and families. Child abuse is essentially a judgement about standards of parenting, which varies over time and between different social-cultural contexts (Furey et al., 2010). Therefore, all responses to suspected child abuse are made with some degree of subjectivity. Information about children that a researcher may feel the need to report in a one country may not be regarded as a possible child protection issue by a researcher in another country. Moreover, for the current research, it might be difficult for the parents, guardians, teachers, local authorities and the researcher to agree on whether a child is at risk. For example, a child being beaten by their parents is usually considered acceptable by the parents, teachers, and local authorities in rural China. In some cases, the researcher's concern about a child's safety and wellbeing may be regarded as an inappropriate intrusion into the family's private life.

If the researcher was faced with ethical dilemmas of whether to break confidentiality, she would generally draw on Chinese domestic violence law when making any ethical decision. Chinese law does not differentiate between child abuse and abuse towards other family members. According to the law, the term abuse refers to acts of regular persecution by some members of the family committed against other family members. This abuse may take many forms, such as positive acts of torture including freezing, forced overburden with manual labour, as well as passive inaction, such as not feeding, not providing clothes and not seeking necessary medical assistance. In law, abusive behaviour is continual and leads to severe mental and physical harm, it does not mean occasional acts of corporal punishment or verbal abuse. During the research process, one child who was living by himself attracted the concern of the researcher regarding his safety and well-

being. After discussing his situation with the student, the researcher reported the case to the schoolteacher. The teacher assured the researcher that school staff had already been following the case, were in contact with the child's parents and at the moment, the child was adjusting to school well and was visited by his relatives weekly. With this assurance, the researcher decided to not report the case to the local authorities. By the time the researcher returned for the second time to the field site for data collection, the child told the researcher that he had already moved into his uncle's place. The researcher did not encounter other situations that warranted their attention.

5.3.6 Procedure

At the start of the research, the researcher obtained permission for the interviews from the school authorities and written informed consent from the children, the parents or surrogate carers. Also, the children verbally confirmed their consent before starting the interviews and filling in the questionnaires. Data collection included open interviews for gathering qualitative data and semi-structured interviews and questionnaires for gathering quantitative data. In the early stage of data collection, each child was visited twice and asked to fill in the questionnaires and to answer the interview questions.

Interviews took place during lunch breaks or night classes after dinner if the interviewee was a boarder. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes. Interviews were arranged in a separate room equipped with chairs and tables suitable for conducting interviews. A recorder and a camera were placed in the room to record the interview. During the interviews only the interviewer and the child were present. Cookies, tea, paper tissues, coloured pens and paper were placed on the table to be

easily accessed by children at any point in the interview. The researcher sat at the table together with the child.

The open interview was scheduled first and finished with handing the child the two questionnaires to complete in the interview room. The semi-structured interviews were scheduled with the children individually at other times. In the later stage of data collection, additional interviews would be scheduled with the children guided by the data analysis.

5.3.7 Method for the quantitative study

This section introduces the methods used in the quantitative study of the mixed -method research, including the self-report measures used and the statistical analysis.

Child Attachment Interview

The Child Attachment Interview (CAI) (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008) is used to assess the child's attachment representations with respect to their father and mother. It is a semi-structured interview based on the Adult Attachment Interview and was designed for children in middle childhood. The interview comprises 17 questions and focuses on the state of children's current relationship with respect to their migrant parents. A sample question reads: 'Can you tell me three words to describe your relationship with your mum, that is, what it's like to be with your mum?' Children's narratives are rated on nine sub-scales from one to nine. The child's attachment classifications to their mother and father are decided using a combination of all nine scales. Three of these scales are evaluated separately for the mother and father (Preoccupied Anger, Idealisation and Dismissal). These scales are indices of insecurity with higher scores indicating stronger attachment insecurity (insecure scales). The five remaining dimensions (Emotional Openness, Use of Examples,

Balance of Positive and Negative Reference, and Resolution of Conflict) are rated across the entire interview. A score for Overall Coherence is assigned based on the overall constellation of ratings obtained from the nine scales. These scales are indices of security with higher scores corresponding to higher security (secure scales).

The final attachment classifications, specified separately for each parent, include three styles: dismissing, secure and preoccupied, together with the disorganised category of attachment. If the main classification was disorganised the secondary classification could be secure, insecure-dismissing, or insecure-preoccupied.

A case attachment classification combines the scores of the CAI scales with the essential characteristics of the main attachment classifications. Children are regarded as secure when they can explore their attachment experiences freely and value attachment relationships (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008). Children are classified as preoccupied if they are visibly angry to the point where they lose track of the interview during a discussion about their caregivers, or if they talk extensively about topics unrelated to the interview (Target et al., 2003). Children are classified as dismissing when they use the deactivating strategies of a 'suppressive, need-denying nature' (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 394) as their main attachment strategy. These children may emphasise their self-reliance and appear invulnerable in discussions about times of hurt or illness. They also tend to avoid emotional states that might activate their attachment system (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008). In disorganised attachment, children are classified according to atypical behaviour to the conversation. Behavioural manifestations of a disorganised attachment include sudden switches in affection; interrupted speech; emotional states that are

incompatible with the context and content of the topic discussed; bizarre descriptions of events; displaying a hostile, punitive or controlling stance towards the interviewer (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008; Target et al., 2003). Both the content of the interviews and the behaviour the children displayed in their interviews are considered in coding.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher. Each interview was coded by two independent coders who had been trained in coding the CAI at the Anna Freud Centre, London and had received CAI accreditation. The classifications assigned by the two coders were used to calculate the inter-rater reliability, then the subscale's rating of the form the two coders was calculated for correlation and are reported in chapter 7.

The CAI was directly translated by the researcher and checked by the second coder of the CAI who also spoke Chinese. The children who were interviewed with the CAI claimed that they did not have difficulties understanding the questions. In the review of the child attachment measures by Kuang et al. (2015), the researchers also presented the Chinese translations of the CAI questions. The translations were very similar to the translations of the CAI in the current research. The Chinese version of CAI had semantic and conceptual equivalence to the original CAI. However, the translation of CAI in the current research did not follow the standardised translation protocol of translating health measures (World Health Organization, 2003; Kalfoss, 2019). The WHO Translation Protocol aims to achieve different language versions of instruments that are conceptually equal in various cultures. The protocol includes guidelines for a forward translation, a panel of experts, back translation, pretesting, and creation of the final version. The translation of the CAI lacked the crucial step of back translation, which could fail to reveal the misunderstandings or unclear wordings in the initial forward translation and

compromise the accuracy of the translation (Tsang, 2017). In future, before extending the use of the CAI in China, either in research or clinical settings, the CAI should be translated following all the translation guidelines.

Inventory of Parents and Peer Attachment (IPPA)

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) is used to measure the validity of the CAI. It is a self-report questionnaire originally designed to assess adolescents' attachments and later also used with samples of older children (Coleman, 2003). The measure contains three subscales (mother, father, peer) assessing children's perceptions of trust, quality of communication and feelings of alienation regarding attachment figures. The current study used the maternal scale and paternal scale of the IPPA. These subscales measure the extent to which children view their parents as sources of psychological security. Each subscale has 25 items scored on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from one 'almost never or never true' to five 'almost always or always true'), yielding a total score of trust, communication and alienation (reversed such that higher scores correspond to less alienation) subscales for each parent. Higher scores indicate higher attachment security. Sample responses include, 'I can count on my mother when I need to get something off my chest', and 'I like to get my father's point of view on things I'm concerned about.' Previous research demonstrated adequate reliability (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The IPPA has been widely used to measure LBC's parental attachment and achieved sufficient reliability (Zhao & Li, 2017; Xiao & Chen, 2009). In the present study, the internal consistency was adequate ($\alpha = 0.831$ for mother and $\alpha = 0.719$ for father).

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) assesses five types of children's behaviour (conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional problems, peer problems, and prosocial behaviours). The questionnaire has 25 items scored on a three-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 'not true', 1 'somewhat true' to 2 'certainly true'). A sample question reads 'I am often unhappy'. Questions regarding prosocial behaviours are reverse scored. The total score is generated by adding the scores from all the scales. The resultant score ranges from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating more problematic issues. The questionnaire can screen for children's internalising and externalising problems in 4- to 16-year-olds and has been widely used in clinical and community samples. The questionnaire used in the current study is a Chinese translation of the original one, which has been modified and validated in China (Chen & Chen, 2017). In the present study, the internal consistency of the whole scale was adequate ($\alpha = 0.722$).

Statistical analysis

First, the researcher assessed the inter-rater agreement for the main classification of the CAI using the kappa statistic. Frequency analysis was used to test categorical variable distribution, and descriptive analysis was used to present continuous data. The chi-square test of categorical variables was used to test the difference between genders and boarding conditions about attachment classifications on CAI. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to test the association between the scores of subscales of the CAI, the self-report measures of attachment security (IPPA) and the self-report measures of children's mental health (SDQ). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare children across secure and insecure attachment classifications based on IPPA and SDQ.

The analysis was carried out using the software Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 21.0. An analysis was considered statistically significant if $p \leq 0.05$. Effect sizes were also computed measuring the strength of the relationship between variables. Cramer's Phi (ϕ) was used as the effect size for the chi-square test. The suggested norms are that $\phi = 0.10$ indicates a small effect; $\phi = 0.30$ indicates a medium effect; $\phi = 0.50$ indicates a large effect (Cohen, 1988). For the Pearson correlation, the correlation itself (r) is also used as an effect size measure. The suggested norms are that $r = 0.10$ indicates a small effect; $r = 0.30$ indicates a medium effect; $r = 0.50$ indicates a large effect (Cohen, 1988). The partial eta-squared (η^2) was used as the effect size for the ANOVA analysis. The approximate partial eta-squared size conventions are small = 0.01; medium = 0.06; large = 0.14 (Richardson, 2011).

5.3.8 Method for the qualitative study

Making the research method child-friendly

The current research utilised the interview as the main method to gather rich data. Besides interviews, ethnographic observations and written documents are also widely used in grounded theory works. The research seeks the perspectives of the children, which were less likely to be obtained from observations. Considering the age and language capacities of the participants in the current research, it was also less plausible to require children to provide lengthy and detailed written documents about their lives. The current researcher chose to use interviews as they fitted the characteristics of the participants and the research aim. Researchers have found that very young children (aged 3–6) hold their own views and opinions and are capable of expressing valuable perspectives regarding their situations and broader

issues (Clark & Statham, 2005; Dayan & Ziv, 2012). Interviews have been the most popular data collection approach in children's research (Clark, 2010) as well as in grounded theory studies.

The interview guidelines for working with adults, such as developing rapport, using open-ended and understandable questions, and attentive listening, are still applicable to interviews with children. However, there are additional methodological and practical considerations when conducting a qualitative interview with a child (Dayan, 2008; Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). Most of these considerations are related to the power dynamics between the adult researcher and the children being interviewed (Ailwood, 2011; Einarsdottir, 2010). In the current research, the issue of power imbalance might be particularly prominent. The researcher held the inherently greater power that adults would usually hold in their relationship with children, but in addition power was also associated with the children's perception of the researcher's affiliation with the school and the research context. The power imbalance could add to the ethical complexity of the current research, particularly influencing children's capacity to consent and the way children engage with the researcher in the interviews. To reduce the possible influence of power-submissive relationships, the researcher adapted the research protocols to be more child friendly.

Besides supporting children's decision to consent, the researcher made efforts to support children's decision to dissent. This was particularly important in the current research which was conducted in schools. The context of the research could have an impact on the children's perceptions and decisions to participate, because when asked to participate in educational research 'children sometimes find it difficult to refuse to take part as they perceive the research to be a "school" activity' (Bucknall 2012, p. 46). Not all children who did not feel like participating research

knew how to say or express 'no' assertively. Therefore, the researcher needed to be 'dissent sensitive'. Bourke and Loveridge (2014) suggested that researchers should be able to aware of what 'informed dissent' in educational research 'looks and sounds' like. This requires listening to the child, to both what is said and unsaid, and observing body language that may be reflecting dissent. Any dissent, as with ongoing consent, was a continuous process in the research, negotiated and reconfirmed again and again.

The interviews were focused on the private lives of the LBC. To reduce the intrusiveness of the interviews, the researcher introduced the themes that would be covered in the initial information sheet and reminded children at the beginning of each interview session again that the questions would be about their private lives. The researcher also reminded children they that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions. The researcher was concerned that the children were not used to refusing requests from adults verbally and directly. Therefore, the researcher reminded the children that they could simply shake their heads when they were asked any questions that they did not feel like answering. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked the child for feedback about the content of the interview and all the children confirmed that they were fine talking about the private lives of themselves and their families.

The researcher noticed that some children addressed her as the teacher in the interviews. To change children's perception of her as a teacher, at the beginning of the interviews, the researcher introduced herself to the children, and particularly emphasised her role as a PhD student who needed to prepare the most important homework for graduation by doing this research. In so doing, she especially highlighted her student status, pointing out that she was, in some ways equal to

them. She also showed them some photos of her studying at the University of Edinburgh, further emphasising her position as a student rather than a teacher. Some girls later chose to call the researcher 'older-sister Yanwei' rather than 'teacher Chen'. In addition to highlighting her student identity, the researcher also emphasised the children's roles as experts in their own worlds. As someone new to the town, she often 'consulted' children about the things she encountered in the town. For example, she asked children where she could purchase groceries, and when would the street market open. The researcher once asked a child what plant was growing on the child's family land. The child brought her the leaves of the plants from his family land in the next interview. In doing so, the researcher showed the children that she was in fact rather ignorant about their lives and needed their information and help. These efforts proved to be helpful in building a more equal and impartial relationship between the researcher and the participants.

Engaging children in interviews can be a challenge, as children are likely to respond to the researcher in an obligatory manner due to the power-submissive nature of the relationship. Fler and Li (2006) stated that interviews should avoid turning into a question–answer session but become a dialogue or extended conversation where children feel comfortable in putting forward their own thoughts. Charmaz also suggested using intensive interviewing for generating data which did not have a strict set of procedures but involved gently guided, one-sided conversation (Charmaz, 2014).

To create a dialogue and reduce the influence of power–based relationships, the researcher attempted more child-friendly interview techniques and methods to encourage children to express themselves more openly. The interviews used open-ended questions to invite participants to discuss the research topic in detail and

allowed their perspectives to emerge. The researcher was conscious of skipping 'why' questions, which might force children to come up with explanations or refuse to answer (Clark, 2010). The researcher listened to children's ideas and observed their expressions such as body language, facial expressions and silence (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011). Also, she used non-verbal behaviours such as eye contact and head nods, as well as verbal prompts, such as 'could you tell me more about it?' (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010) to explore the children's thoughts. In addition to these common interview techniques, the researcher also used the technique of 'mental reinstatement' developed by Dietze and Thomson (1993) to help children with narrative elaboration. The technique emphasised reinstating in the subject's mind, the environmental and personal context at the time the event took place to help the subject to retrieve memories. Using contextual cues of 'who', 'when', 'what' and 'where' helped children with event recall and retrieved rich and detailed descriptions of experiences.

Each session of the interviews including the grounded theory interviews and the CAI lasted from 20 minutes to 30 minutes with occasional breaks. The researcher was aware that long interviews could be onerous for children and challenging for children to stay focused. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher would remind the child that they could ask to suspend the interview for a break. The researcher managed to keep most of the interview sessions within 30 minutes without ending the interviews abruptly. All the children interviewed had been having 45-minute classes since the first year of the primary school. Therefore, they were accustomed to sitting still and keeping focused for longer than half an hour. During the interview the researcher watched the child to see if they showed signs of tiredness or impatience and reminded them that they could take breaks any time

they wanted. When the interviews lasted longer than 20 minutes, the researcher would ask the child if they needed a break, whether or not the child had asked. At the end of the interview, the researcher asked the child for feedback about the duration of the interview and none of the children found the length tiring or stressful.

The use of these techniques helped to generate rich data in the current research. The flexibility and fluidity of the interviews were also suitable for conducting research with vulnerable participants and for collecting sensitive data, as in the case of researching the potentially 'distressing and even traumatic experiences' of left-behind children (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Intensive interview in constructivist grounded theory

Intensive interviewing was used in the research for generating data. Intensive interviewing does not have a strict set of procedures, but involves 'gently-guided, one-sided conversation' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 56). It uses open-ended questions to invite participants to discuss the research topic in detail and allows their perspectives to emerge. The in-depth nature of intensive interviewing is suitable for getting rich data in grounded theory. Its flexibility and fluidity are also suitable for conducting research on vulnerable participants and collecting sensitive data, as in the case of researching the potentially 'distressing and even traumatic experiences' of left-behind children (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The intensive interview emphasises the reciprocal interplay between the researcher and participants. It provides an interactive space in which both interviewers and interviewees bring their agendas, knowledge and experiences to the interviews and they mutually construct the interviews. There are two focuses in conducting interviews for grounded theory: to understand the participants' experiences and their understandings and to pursue and construct theoretical analysis. It means the interviewer should keep a balance

between focused attention and open-ended inquiry, a combination of story and analysis. It is facilitated by incorporating the data analysis into the data gathering process and adjusting interviews constantly by reflecting on previous interviews.

Pilot interviews many qualitative researchers recommend practising and preparing interviews (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Willig, 2013), especially interviews regarding emotional topics (Charmaz, 2014; Goodrum & Keys, 2007). A total of two pilot interviews were conducted before the formal data collection. The interviewees in the pilot interviews were not LBC but acquaintances of the researcher, so the interviews were not around parental migration. The pilot interviews included the standard CAI and discussion of their common life experiences regarding interactions with their parents and temporary separations from their parents, such as going to stay with grandparents during a holiday.

The practice helped in testing recording equipment, interview procedures and appropriate interview strategies for talking to young children. It provided an opportunity for the researcher to become familiar with the narrative and conversational styles of young children and to practise how to engage in an interview with them. All the practice interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated to be discussed with the supervisors. After the pilot interviews, the researcher started to get in touch with the research sites and constructed the research protocol.

Constructing and reconstructing interview protocols

The interview protocol included the structure of the interviews and several broad sample questions. It ensured the interview adhered to the research purpose and had enough space to allow for spontaneity and flexibility. To gather rich data from the participants, the interviewer took the research topics and the characteristics of the children into account. The most important strategy for interviewing children in

middle childhood was to be mindful of the language style adopted in the interview. The language style suitable for interviewing children includes slowing down the speech speed, shortening sentences, allowing children sufficient time to process the questions, using simple, concrete and open-ended questions, avoiding the use of abstract words, and most importantly, not giving children suggestions or not putting words into their mouths.

A typical interview consisted of three parts: the warm-up, the conversation and the debrief. The warm-up step was especially important for child participants as they rarely had experience of interviews. It helped children feel comfortable in the interview setting and made sure that the children understood what an interview was and their rights during the interview. Usually, after greeting and welcoming the child interviewee, the researcher opened the conversation by introducing herself, eliciting discussion regarding the child's activities immediately before the interview and the child's daily life, followed by an introduction of the interview.

During the interview conversation, the researcher first asked the child about their personal background including their name, class grade, age and family structure. When asking about the children's family structure, it naturally elicited topics about which members had migrated, which members were left behind in the hometown and who was taking care of them. These discussions were mainly about collecting information. Following this, the researcher usually started to elicit descriptions of the child's life experiences regarding parental migration. In the initial interviews, the researcher followed the interview guide and first asked about their recent experiences of direct or indirect interactions with their migrant parents and gradually moved towards their earliest impressions of parental migration.

The final part of the process was the debrief. Interviewees might disclose stories or express emotions they did not expect to reveal. Children's psychological safety has a higher priority than gaining data, therefore, interviews should not end abruptly after the participants answered the main questions or while the participant appeared distressed. If the interview was paused or the child decided to withdraw from the interview, debriefing would still be provided. The debriefing brought the interview to a close at a normal conversational pace, making the child interviewee feel appreciated, soothing any remaining stress from the interview, and building a good collaboration facilitating follow-up recruitments and interviews.

During the debriefing, the interviewer thanked the child for participating in the interview and had an easy conversation with the child about their activities after the interview. If the child had emotional reactions during the interview, efforts were made to calm and comfort their feelings, and to ask if the child needed anyone for further help and support. Further interview appointments were sometimes made with the child at the debriefing stage.

Interview protocols were constantly reconstructed during data collection. The modification of interview protocols aimed to improve effective communications with the participants and to facilitate the development of emergent codes or categories. Reconstructing the interview protocol was primarily facilitated by reflective practice and reflective diaries.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling is sampling to develop the researcher's theory, not to represent a population (Butler et al., 2018). Theoretical sampling is a distinct data collection process within grounded theory. Its purpose is to obtain further data to fill

gaps in a tentative category, to make the categories more precise, explanatory and predictive.

In keeping with theoretical sampling principles, data analysis started as soon as the first few interviews were completed. From analysis of the first few interviews, some ideas arose from the data and some initial codes were developed. For example, some children recalled that they were not informed about their parents' migration at all until they realised their parents had left home. This piece of content could be developed into a potential category and made it worth gathering further data on the subject.

After initial sampling, the theoretical sampling of the current research could have taken several forms: 1) to go back to previously interviewed children and have further interviews with them; 2) to modify interview questions in subsequent interviews with existing participants; 3) or reselect participants to fit newly added criteria.

To further explore the themes that emerged from the first interviews, the researcher added new questions about whether there was any prior communication about parental migration with the children in their families. The interview protocol was modified to include the topic and to explore variations in this aspect of children's experiences. Further interviews focused specifically on exploring the newly developed category, as well as general understandings of the research topic.

Other examples of theoretical sampling included the further exploration of children's boarding and New Year experiences. During the first-round interviews, the researcher noticed that in the boarding schools many students had started boarding from a very young age. These children had separation experiences both due to migration and boarding. The boarding experience itself not only has a potential

impact on the children's psychological and social development but may also relate to children's migration separation experiences. For example, a child might be used to living in boarding school away from home, which might help the child cope with separation from parents due to migration. Therefore, the researcher turned to theoretical sampling to explore this category further, redirecting interview questions in further interviews.

The second research field trip took place after the Chinese New Year of 2018. The Chinese New Year festival is the most important traditional festival in China, celebrating the ideals of family 'unity' and 'reunion' (Stafford, 2000). Every year tens of millions of Chinese migrant workers return home for the holiday (Castillo, 2011). For many rural migrant families, it is the only time in the year for a family reunion. However, a lot of migrant workers will choose to stay in the cities and give up the opportunity to return home for the holiday (Road to school, 2015). For those who do return home, they must leave their children behind again after the temporary holiday reunion. The New Year reunion was a particular moment for children and the rural migrant families in the context of labour migration. In the literature on transnational families, family reunions have been frequently mentioned. Some studies used the reunion outcomes to examine the extent to which family relationships were impaired by migratory separations (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). The importance of the New Year reunion was also confirmed in the participants' responses in first-round interviews, with participants recalling their previous experiences of New Year reunions and some stating that they were looking forward to the next New Year. Therefore, the second-round interviews (from April to June 2018) explored children's New Year experiences regarding reunions with migrant parents.

Throughout the whole data collection process, the interview protocol was constantly restructured with theoretical sampling. The initial data analysis informed the questions in the next interview to further verify and develop the properties of the codes or categories. Data collection and analysis took place alternately. Usually by the time the researcher had completed three to four interviews, they had new insights and new ideas about what questions to ask in the following interviews. In addition to adding new questions or reframing questions, the preliminary data analysis also helped the researcher become more sensitive or alert to how the next participant would respond to a particular question and to make comparisons between different answers. These comparisons would further facilitate data analysis and data collection.

Data analysis

This section presents the methods and processes of the data analysis in a constructivist grounded theory and addresses the issues of constant comparison

Constant comparison is the signature analytic method of grounded theory. Comparisons may be made between data, codes, categories, incidents and concepts. Comparison is constant as it goes through the whole data analysis process in grounded theory. In the initial coding phase, comparative analysis included 'comparing sets of data within the same and across different interviews', 'comparing data and codes within the same interview and across different interviews' and 'comparing codes within and across the same interview' (Charmaz, 2014). The comparisons helped clarify the choices of codes and the fit of codes to the data. For example, in the interviews many children mentioned their feelings after their parents left. Some described 'feeling like one person less at home', or 'feeling like something

is missing at home'. These sets of data were regarded in comparison to feelings related to a sense of loss. Therefore, they were put under the code 'a sense of loss'.

In the later stages of coding, more comparisons were made between codes and emerging concepts to facilitate the elaboration of categories/concepts, find relationships between categories/concepts and to help build the theoretical model. For example, by comparing the code of 'focusing on materialistic aspects of parents' and the code of 'active devaluing migrant parents', a new focused code of the emotional detachment of children towards their parents was established. Furthermore, after comparing the category of separation of family members due to migration to the category of emotional detachment of children towards their parents, it seemed these two categories were referring to different types of family disintegration. The former was more related to the physical separation of family members, whereas the latter was more related to the breakdown of emotional connection between family members.

Memo writing

A memo is an informal research journal or note recording the researcher's thoughts during the research process. Memo writing creates a space for the researcher to stay connected with the data, to make comparisons between data and codes, to engage in critical thinking and maintain reflexivity (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007). By constructing analytic notes, the memos push the researcher to think of data analytically early in the research process and increases the level of conception when it comes to constructing the theoretical model. The memos were written spontaneously, in free style. The most common types of memos were case-based memos and conceptual memos. Throughout the analysis, the memos were constructed and reconstructed. The researcher would revisit memos and develop

new memos from old ones, order them and reorder them to help shape their own theories.

After each interview, the researcher wrote a case-based memo reflecting on what they observed in the interview and their intuitive impression of the participants' accounts. These memos were used to compare different interviews, and to question some of the established categories and pre-conceptions in relation to the content of the interview.

The researcher also kept records of their reflective thinking in addressing interview difficulties and developing new interview strategies for better interview outcome. It is a writing format of reflective practice. The conceptual memos focused on the codes being developed. These codes were more conceptual and abstract. The memos recorded thoughts regarding the properties of the codes/categories, the central process entailed in the code and the clarification of any pre-existing ideas underling the coding. Comparisons were made between data, cases and codes to find similarities and differences, and to raise questions to be answered in subsequent interviews.

The examples below illustrate part of a case-based memo and a conceptual memo.

Example of a case memo:

The child saw parents packing stuff and putting luggage on the motorbike.

Parents did not say anything to the child. The child thought they were going to the land, until he noticed parents had not come back for dinner and asked grandparents the whereabouts of the parents, he was told about migration.

The process of noticing parents were gone, asking grandparents about the

parents, and being told of migration by grandparents occurred in many children.

Example of a conceptual memo:

The code 'maturing' encompassed many codes showing qualities and behaviour of children relating to 'maturity'. These codes included 'engaging in housework', 'engaging in agricultural work', 'self-care', 'being considerate to family', 'being conscious of money'. Why did I regard these kinds of behaviour and mental states as 'mature' for children? I did not regard children's behaviour of doing hours of homework as 'mature' but regarded children's behaviour of 'cooking meals' as mature. To code children being mature came from my instinctive impression, which showed that there was an underlying model of what I considered to be developmentally normal for children.

Language issues in qualitative inquiry

Bilingual research processes have become increasingly popular, but there has been little discussion about the potential impact of language differences on the research (van Nes et al., 2010). This factor may be particularly relevant in qualitative research, as it deals with words. Language plays a central role in all phases of the research from data collection to representing results in research publications. Language differences started at the beginning of the present research process when the researcher began to interview participants. The data was collected in China with the participants speaking Chinese, whereas the whole study was conducted in English. Decisions regarding the use of language have to be made when transcribing and coding interview transcripts. The researcher conducted the interviews in Chinese and decided to transcribe the interviews in Chinese without translation, as translation was an interpretive act (van Nes et al., 2010), meaning something may

get lost in the translation process. For the purpose of ensuring interview quality only, the researcher translated several interviews to discuss with their supervisors. The whole coding process was conducted in English. Coding in English made it easier to follow the guidelines of constructivist grounded theory, which were mostly published in English, and to communicate with supervisors about the results.

The impact of language features on the coding was unavoidable. For example, it is highly recommended to use gerunds (-ing) in coding and in writing memos within grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). A gerund is the present participle of a verb used as a noun implying action. Using gerunds to code is regarded as a method for fostering theoretical sensitivity and helping researchers detect processes (Charmaz, 2006). The gerund form does not exist in the Chinese language. The use of English in coding brought the researcher the benefits of using gerunds to code. Meanwhile, difficulties occurred in coding in another language when no suitable words could be found. For example, children frequently used idioms and short four-character expressions to describe their feelings and experiences. In Chinese, such expressions are very widely used to make language more vivid, live and compact. In English, idioms have more specific meanings and are used less often. Chinese idioms rarely have corresponding English words that could be used as direct translations. Similar difficulties with many other words occurred in the interview transcripts. For example, when parents left home or called children on the phone, they typically communicated with children by the act of 'din'ning'. It is a way of one-directional hierarchical communication containing a mixture of exhort, urge and care. It was neither very emotionally intimate nor showed lack of care. This way of communication showed a picture of family communication patterns and family dynamics in rural migrant families. English words with similar

meanings, e.g., exhort or urge, could not fully represent its meaning. If the researcher chose to use phrases or sentences explaining its meanings as code labels without a direct translation, the simplicity of the original word would be lost. The solution here was to keep the Chinese word as the code. Language differences brought extra challenges to the coding process, but also prompted the researcher to constantly reflect on the fit of codes to data and become more aware of the subtle and implicit meanings of the data.

Abductive inferencing in data analysis

Qualitative results were developed from the children's interview responses. The current research found that children in middle childhood not only hold their own views and opinions, but also can express valuable perspectives regarding their life experiences and contexts (Clark & Statham, 2005; Dayan & Ziv, 2012). This again spoke to the notion that children themselves were the competent experts in their own lives (Clark, 2005). They were not dependent, incompetent and acted upon by others, but were rather competent social agents (Eldén, 2013) who possessed ideas and perceptions that might be best explored through their own voices.

During the interview process, the researcher also noticed that the quality of the children's interview narratives could be different from the narratives of the adult interviewees. The interview narratives of children often appeared short and incomplete, despite the researcher's encouragement and use of open-ended questions. Each time a child provided a very brief response, the researcher would use one or two extra prompts, such as, 'Could you tell me about it?', or 'Was anything else happening that day?' The brief replies may be partly due to the adult-child power dynamics in the interview relationship. Children have learnt that most questions asked by adults are just 'test questions' to assess knowledge rather than

to truly hear their opinions (Brooker, 2001). Due to these power-based relations, children tend to respond to adult questions in an obligatory manner, whether or not they have an opinion. The brief response may not be a failure in the interview but reflect the child's mental representations of their experiences. For example, a lack of emotional memories might suggest a lack of awareness of the experiences.

Even when children did give elaborate responses, their responses tended to be factual and descriptive, and sometimes lacked making inferences. This was consistent with cognitive development as children in middle school were still characterised by concrete thinking and lacked cognitive sophistication in abstract thinking (Crain, 2017). Apart from using general open-ended prompts for eliciting further information, the researcher largely avoided using 'why?' prompts to compel children to generate forced causal inferences.

The factual and descriptive narratives could present more challenges for the researcher who had to make inferences from the data. The inferences generated by the researcher, in the forms of codes, categories or theories, were judged to be most compatible with the data and guided by the theoretical frameworks of the research, i.e., attachment theory, family systems theory.

For example, child 30 described their experiences after their parents left, in response to the interviewer's question: 'How did you feel after they left?' The child stated:

The second day after they left, I got up, someone asked me to do stuff, to clean the floor. I was quite busy. And at night, we played a game and had quite a lot of fun. So, I just went to sleep. I didn't miss them that much.

The child was very descriptive about their experiences and did not make explicit inferences of how their daily activities related to their internal state. In the context of

a child discussing emotional experiences, the researcher made the abductive inference of 'activities helped children deal with the feelings of missing parents'. The researcher made the subjective choice of selecting one inference from many others that was regarded as the best fit for the data. The inference chosen by the researcher was also influenced a theoretical background in attachment theories, e.g., affect regulation strategies. Evers and Wu (2007) also emphasised the role of background theory in helping to adjudicate the selection of the best explanation for abductive reasoning in qualitative research. Strictly speaking, inferences are never generated in isolation but rather embedded in a theoretical context (Evers & Wu, 2007). Without the theoretical context to draw on, the researcher might become mired in data without the capacity to conceptualise the data or contextualise the inference within their existing body of knowledge (Morse, 2001).

Coding

The core part of data analysis is coding. To code is to assign a code to a portion of qualitative data. A code is usually a word or a phrase labelling the data by defining what is happening in the data and capturing its essence. In grounded theory, coding takes place in stages, starting with initial open coding and moves forward to focused coding and theoretical coding. In the initial coding stage, the researcher stays open to the data and creates as many codes as possible. In the following stages, the researcher would select and concentrate on certain codes and later move on to refine and integrate final central codes. Essentially, coding is a subjective decision-making process about deciding which codes are most important or relevant.

Initial coding

In initial coding, data is broken down into discrete units for examination. Despite the stated theoretical framework of the current research, it was important to be open minded to all the possible directions suggested by the data and not impose pre-existing concepts. All the codes were generated from the data inductively.

Initial coding often starts with line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014). Coding in a line-by-line manner gives researchers a good starting point for analysing hundreds of pages of interview transcripts. Going through a micro-analysis of line-by-line coding ensures a thorough and systematic analysis of the data without missing or overlooking ideas. However, line-by-line coding cannot be followed strictly because line length is largely dependent on the format of the document. One line of data could contain too many meanings or not enough meanings. Therefore, line-by-line coding was conducted flexibly in the current research as 'unit-by-unit coding', because one unit of data 'may be individual words, or small or large chunks of the data' (Punch, 2014, p. 173). As well as the variety in the magnitude of the data coded, codes ranged from a single word to a full sentence, for example, the code 'Being scolded for not doing housework at uncle's place' was lengthier than the emotional code 'Loneliness' (Table 10).

Table 10***Example of line-by-line coding***

| Transcript | Code |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Interviewee: Sometimes I was naughty; I went out to play and didn't mop the floor and then I would feel sad being scolded (Code: Being scolded by the carer for not doing housework). Because when I was in my own home, my parents were fond of me, wouldn't ask me to do this and that (More tolerance from parents). | Comparing carers to parents |
| Interviewer: How did you feel then? Interviewee: I felt very, very lonely. Very lonely. | Loneliness |

Note. The codes in brackets were allocated to the sentences in front of the brackets. The code in the right column was allocated to the whole section.

One piece of data was also not restricted to one code. Quite often one single segment of data contained several different meanings, each of which needed to be referenced (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Richards (2015) argues that almost all data will need coding at least three times: once with descriptive coding that gives information about the source (such as information about an interviewee); once with topic codes that label the subject of the text; and finally, with higher order abstract codes. For example, in the text segment from one interview, 'My dad said it's okay, he would be back soon', one code was assigned emphasising the action in the data ('Comforting children on the phone') and another code was assigned emphasising the content of the action ('Reassuring children of return'). In another text segment, 'Sometimes I was naughty, I went out to play and didn't mop the floor and then I felt sad being scolded', the participant described an incident in a relational context. Two codes were assigned, one from the perspective of the child ('Being scolded for not doing housework at uncle's place'), and the other from the perspective of the caregiver ('Disciplining children to do housework'). Sometimes, one single line could be assigned one code, but when the line combined with other lines, it produced another meaning in relation to its context and therefore was assigned another code for a combination of lines.

Initial coding captured what was happening in segments of data and prepared the basis for later higher-level analysis without constantly looking back to the detailed verbatim transcript. In the initial coding, codes kept to the data, remained largely descriptive and less abstract (Punch, 2014). During initial coding, sometimes higher level, more abstract analytic and interpretive concepts did emerge, but they were kept in memos for later analysis. By doing so, the researcher stayed open to all possibilities, was led by the data and did not narrow down analytic directions prematurely.

The codes created at this stage were provisional and could be renamed. Where some codes were too specific and too narrow, they were adjusted to incorporate more pieces of similar data by going through and comparing more transcripts. For example, codes such as 'Playing mobile game of Glory of Kingdom' and 'Helping housework from five years old' became the more general codes: 'Playing mobile games' and 'Helping housework since very young'.

Focused coding

Focused coding was the intermediate step in the data analysis process. It was based on the initial coding. Whereas initial coding breaks up the data at a descriptive level, focused coding reorganises data at a more analytic and abstract level.

The organisation of codes was done through constant comparison. By using comparison, some categories were subsumed beneath other categories, and some categories were combined to produce a new category. Categories were further developed with their properties and dimensions being refined (Tie et al., 2019). For example, the category of 'indifference to separations' referring to children lacking emotional responses to separating from parents due to migration, and the category of 'indifference to reunions' referring to children lacking emotional responses to

reunions with migrant parents, were organised together and led to a new category labelled: 'Indifference to migratory separations and reunions'.

This phase of data analysis was called 'focused' as it focused on certain initial codes that were judged to be more useful and more significant. As all initial codes went through organisation, some were regarded as less important and might be put aside, while other codes were judged as carrying more analytic power in the process of producing the theoretical category.

At this stage, the analysis process mainly worked with the developed codes. However, the researcher remained close to the data and constantly reaffirmed what was happening in the data (Table 11).

Table 11

Example of focused coding

| Text segment | Initial coding | Initial category | Focused coding |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| After parents left, less work in the land. Because both mum and dad were gone, only grandma and I were at home, grandma could not plant so much land. (Child 35) | Less land work can be handled | Reduction in the family labour supply | Parents' family roles unfulfilled after migration |
| After they left, I felt very, very sad and couldn't eat anything (Child 24) | Lost appetite | Depressive symptoms | Emotional distress after first migration |
| I felt sad but I would comfort myself that my parents are working in the city to make money for us, so they are still doing it for me, so I feel better. (Child 33) | Self-comforting by emphasising the motivations | Self-reasoning | Emotion regulation |

Theoretical coding

After focused coding, the most analytic and sophisticated level of coding is theoretical coding. Unlike the clear link between focused coding and initial coding, the move up from focused coding to theoretical coding is rather more explicit and achieved through theoretical integration. The purpose of theoretical integration is to illustrate the relationships between core categories and to tell a coherent story of the

phenomenon being investigated. Techniques, such as diagramming, were regarded as being very helpful in sorting out the relationships between categories and in producing the final category (Birks & Mills, 2015). The findings were presented as highly conceptual ideas rather than summarised themes. Theoretical codes should represent most of the information in the data and have the greatest explanatory power of the phenomena.

Theoretical saturation

In grounded theory, the concept of saturation is the end point of sampling (Charmaz, 2006). When the theory reaches saturation, each new item of data cannot fit into the existing theory without modifying the theory (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018). The theory is grounded in the existing data and should fully account for them (Charmaz, 2006). In practice, theoretical saturation is often mistaken as 'no new information' in the data. Charmaz (2014) has pointed out that saturation is not the same as the repetition of events or stories in the data. Instead, saturation should be understood as the point when no new properties of the categories are found.

However, saturation maybe an ideal condition. Although new data may produce further insights regarding the developed categories (Willig, 2013) most research projects are subject to time or financial restrains that should be considered when considering completing data collection.

Therefore, the current research supported a pragmatic use of saturation as a sufficiently robust and coherent theoretical construct. Nelson (2016) has proposed using the criteria of conceptual depth to address the challenge of reaching saturation in a qualitative study. He established a set of criteria for assessing the sufficiency of conceptual depth including range, complexity, subtlety, resonance and validity.

These criteria not only helped the decision-making process of saturation, but also was useful in assessing the quality of the final theoretical codes in grounded theory.

The first criteria of 'range' requires a wide range of evidence from the data illustrating the concepts. In the current research, all the codes were generated from the data with supporting quotations from the interview narratives. All the categories were built upon multiple sources of data, i.e., multiple quotes from several interviews.

The complexity criteria require complex connections between concepts and themes. In the current research, all the core categories formed a network within which there were complex connections between categories. The criterion of subtlety requires that the concepts in grounded theory have rich and multidimensional meanings. In the current study, the core concepts developed were high-level concepts in terms of conceptuality and representation. Each core concept contained multiple sub-concepts. These core concepts were developed from the merging, reshaping, expanding and modifying of lower-level concepts.

The criterion of resonance demands that the concepts have resonance with the existing literature in the relevant area. The current research had a link with the literature from the beginning of the research with an extensive literature review and the use of theoretical frameworks. Many of the findings resonated with the literature on the LBC in other countries. For example, the category of 'long-distance communication and reunification' was also identified with the LBC's experiences in transnational families. The final stage of the current mixed method research involved corroborating the theoretical codes with the findings from the quantitative research. As the quantitative research was designed to test concepts from the attachment theory, the process of the composite analysis further proved the link between the theoretical codes and the existing literature.

The final criterion is concerned with the validity of the research. The above discussion of the criteria of theoretical saturation has provided sufficient evidence for the 'internal validity' of the research, which was about validity in relation to the research process of methods, data collection and data analysis. The use of the constant comparative method, memos and diagrams in the current research was also explicit evidence for demonstrating the credibility and reliability of the research. For external validity, the researcher aimed to apply research results beyond their immediate context. To achieve this, researchers using grounded theory should not produce results that only speak about the immediate field of research or only be understood by a small group of professionals. The study results should be applicable to similar contexts. Several attempts have been made to raise the external validity of the current study. First, the language of the results is conceptual, therefore raising the level of analysis above technical description to more general themes (Nelson, 2016). Second, the link with the existing literature and the quantitative approach expanded the current grounded theory work to broader academic contexts. Third, during data collection, three different research sites were included. By the time it came to sampling in the third research site, focused coding and the core categories were basically generated. Adding the third site was not only a continuing part of the data collection to expand and modify the established categories, but also an attempt to increase the external validity of the categories by testing them in the third site.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of scrutinising, which includes the researcher's values, beliefs and assumptions in the research process. These predispositions influence the research process explicitly or implicitly. There are several strategies for facilitating reflexive practice, such as using the constant comparative method and

memo-writing (Dunne, 2011). As a PhD student, the supervisor-supervisee relationship also constituted a terrain of reflexivity for the researcher. The relationship with dialogical interaction helped the researcher question the decisions made in the research.

Reflexivity is particularly important in grounded theory as the approach emphasises the intense engagement of the researcher. In the current research reflexivity took place throughout the whole process in data collection and data analysis.

Reflexivity in the data collection

Reflexivity in the data collection stage focused on improving the quality of the interviews by reviewing interview records after each interview was undertaken and analysing the verbal and non-verbal interactions with the interviewees in the previous interview.

The researcher sought to improve the efficiency of the interview process by listening to recordings of previous interviews and discussing the translated interview transcripts with her supervisors. Listening to previous interviews not only helped the researcher to notice details, such as long pauses from the participants, that might be missed during transcription, but also helped the researcher to be mindful of any errors made during the interview processes, such as responding too quickly without giving the participants enough time to reply. These interview errors happened spontaneously during the interview process, without the researcher noticing and may have inhibited participants from exploring and expressing their experiences freely.

In addition to recordings, interview transcripts were revisited and discussed with supervisors to examine the interactions with the interviewees. In the interviewing process, it was important for the researcher to maintain a proper level of presence.

However, it could have been possible for the researcher to become too controlling during the interview and inhibit expression and communication by the participants. On the other hand, the interviewer's presence may have been so minimal that the interviews lacked relevance to the research aim. Revisiting interview transcripts helped check if such mistakes were occurring.

Another adjustment to the interview aimed to encourage children to open up in discussion. This was the first time that the majority of the children had engaged in detailed discussion about their personal lives with an adult. The interview could sometimes turn into a rigid 'ask and response' mode and lack a rich description from the children. To tackle this, the researcher used broad-scope questions to guide children without imposing a predefined focus of what was regarded to be more important. For children who found it challenging to articulate their experiences, the researcher used an interview technique of asking children to describe the exact details of situations when an event or activity took place. Questions included: 'Who was there then? What did your parents say? How did you reply? What were you doing at that moment? Where did this happen?' These questions helped to retrieve sufficient descriptive data from the children's memories without contamination from the researcher's own preconceptions.

In addition to communication styles, the implicit dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee also has an impact on the interview process. Child interviewees may be particularly vulnerable to the power relationship between themselves and adult researchers (Kuchah & Pinter, 2012). Children are predisposed to please adults and to fear their reactions to what they say (Barret & Buchanan-Barrow, 2012). This tendency could be more obvious in Chinese culture which emphasises the power hierarchy between older and young people. In the

interviews, the researcher noticed children interacting with her in a way they would interact with a teacher. They addressed the researcher as 'teacher' and appeared rigid and formal during the interview. In one of the earliest interviews, child nine asked the researcher: 'Teacher, how many students have you interviewed? Did some students give better answers than others?' The child's questions indicated a misunderstanding about the interview and a tendency to please the adult researcher. To diminish the impact of the imbalanced adult-child dynamics, it was important to build a trusting rapport with the children. Adjustments to the interview settings and interview process were made. In the later interviews, the researcher placed more emphasis on explaining the process at the start, she would ask children about their understanding of interviews, introduce herself as a PhD student and asked them to call her directly by name. Through these actions, the researcher intended to build a more equal relationship with the interviewees. The researcher also increased the warming up stage of the interview to make the children feel free to talk and have a sense of control over the interview. Children were also encouraged to feel in control because the researcher asked questions about subjects, they were more familiar with and experienced than the researcher herself, such as class arrangements in their school, the directions to a certain place on campus, information about their teachers etc. The researcher once asked a child what vegetables his family was planting, and how they engaged with the family's agricultural work. The child was very happy to share with the researcher and even brought her some vegetable leaves from the family land.

All these analyses of the interview processes were recorded in the researcher's reflective diaries in the format of memos to be used when reconstructing the new interview protocol.

Reflexivity at the data analysis stage

The second stage of reflexivity took place during data analysis. Taking a reflexive stance in coding ensured that the codes were generated from the data alone rather than borrowed from the literature or the researcher's preconceptions. Checking the developing analysis with the supervisory team was helpful in guaranteeing that codes were capturing the action and process in the data and reducing potential bias.

The third level of reflexivity involved a critical interpretation of the researcher's professional and personal assumptions. As the researcher was interested in the research topic and had proposed the research plan, they had inevitably brought their own professional understanding into the research. The process of reflexivity did not aim to get rid of these preconceived ideas, but rather to make the research process transparent, so the researcher's preconceptions were noted, and the research became more robust. The theoretical framework explained in the previous section detailed academic insights of the phenomenon. Despite the theoretical framework, it was also important to examine the researcher's personal stance and values and how they might induce potential bias into the research process. By engaging in reflexivity, the researcher became aware of several personal assumptions that were worth attention, including her prior experiences as a counsellor with adult LBC and her understanding of a middle-class family structure in the context of urban China.

The population of left-behind children has been the focus of several doctoral studies. It was interesting to see that in some doctoral studies (Xiao, 2014; Lu, 2011), the researchers revealed their personal experiences growing up as LBC. Unlike these insider identities, the researcher of the present study came into contact with this topic as a psychological counsellor. The initial interest in conducting

research in LBC stems from the researcher's counselling experiences with adult clients who were struggling with the long-term emotional consequences of parental migration. The counselling experience as well as her professional expertise in attachment theory inspired the research interest in this particular population group. The researcher aimed to openly inquire into the participants' separation experiences. In retrospect, however, the researcher's counselling experiences may have biased her towards seeing parental labour migration as emotionally traumatising for children. This had the potential to limit the research by overly focusing on the emotional aspect of the children's experiences. To identify and overcome personal bias the researcher used a reflective memo to record how the research interest and purpose evolved.

Second, the researcher's personal experience of growing up in a non-agricultural middle-class urban family may influence her understanding of children's experiences. The researcher became aware of her personal assumptions of child rearing and parenting when she felt 'shocked' by various aspects of children's narratives, including engaging in intense agricultural labour work, being physically punished by their parents, lacking emotional communication in the family and quitting school to migrate themselves. The researcher's instinctive judgement was that children were largely neglected, lacked sufficient parental care and were burdened by extra labour work. However, this judgement illustrated the existence of certain criteria about her attitudes to proper childcare. The researcher was unconsciously comparing the participants' experiences of parenting to a standard urban family's child-rearing practice, which she was exposed to personally. Parenting styles differed greatly between urban and rural families. In a typical urban family, parents greatly value their solitary child. Children are not required to engage in housework,

let alone agricultural work. Despite traditional hierarchical family structures, urban parents have begun to be more aware of the importance of their child's mental health and recognise the role of parental responsiveness in child development. The significant differences in parenting practice between rural and urban families were not only experienced by the researcher personally, but also confirmed in the literature (Li & Jia, 2012). After acknowledging her personal assumptions regarding parenting and child development, the researcher was able to avoid projecting her own judgment rather than reflecting children's perspectives. Such concerns came from the researcher's position as an outsider, she was a stranger to the participant's local community and local family cultures.

However, as a Chinese PhD student conducting research in China within a western academic context, the researcher was not a complete outsider to the participants. The researcher could be called a partial insider as she shared an identity to a certain extent with the participant's community (Chavez, 2008). During ongoing discussion with supervisors who were not familiar with China, the researcher became aware of how being a cultural insider would impact the research process. Being a partial insider gave the researcher a proximity to the participants and enhanced the depth and breadth of the understanding of the research topic. On the other hand, there was the problem of 'insider bias' (Van Heugten, 2004). Insider research can be accused of being inherently biased, if the researcher is too close to the culture under study to raise provocative questions (Merriam et al., 2001). The researcher became aware of her insider bias when she failed to realise the uniqueness of certain aspects of children's experiences.

For example, from children's narratives it became apparent that they were encouraged or taught by adults to be grateful for their parents' migration. Children

were constantly told that migration was a sacrifice made for them, and they should pay back their parents someday. Growing up in China, the researcher was familiar with such 'coaching'. After engaging in reflexive discussions with other 'outsider' researchers and the reflexive use of literature, the researcher realised how culturally unique this education practice was. The researcher became more sensitive to this particular practice of education and started to link it with other aspects of family interactions observed in children's narratives and realised that they were all part of the coherent social-cultural context that encompassed various strategies to maintain family solidarity.

Taking a reflexive stance was particularly important in beating the researcher's bias and raising the researcher's theoretical sensitivity in dealing with the data and the context of the research.

5.3.9 Integration of quantitative and qualitative results

During the integration of results, two main methods were adopted. First, the qualitative results were used to complement the quantitative findings and support them with 'further empirical evidence using another research method' (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003, p. 467). Second, a further integrative analysis was made based on the attachment style of each child interviewee and the numerous codes and categories developed during the grounded theory analysis. While the coding of grounded theory was based on the content of the interview transcripts irrespective of the interviewees, the quantitative study added another perspective to the codes in grounded theory by assigning an attachment style to each interviewee. As a category in grounded theory usually entails numerous codes from multiple interviewees, the integration allowed an analysis of the distribution of attachment styles from which the codes were sourced.

In the case of a category displaying an over-representation of a particular attachment style, for example if all or most of the codes within the category were developed from interviewees with the secure attachment style or the dismissing attachment style, it could indicate a potential link between the attachment style and the category.

Attachment research has found that individuals' attachment representations impacted their information processing (Barrett & Holmes, 2001), emotional perceptions and expression (Niedenthal, et al., 2002) and social interactions (Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2002). Therefore, as all codes and categories represented children's specific experiences in the context of parental migration, the link between a specific attachment style and a code/category may reveal how children's attachment styles manifested in their experiences.

This analysis might not be completely thorough due to two factors. First, the development of the categories, that is the organisation of codes, was a process of creativity and flexibility (Myers, 2013). There were no strict and clear guidelines about which codes or categories would be produced. Coding and the categorising of the same qualitative material is expected to have some variations between different coders. Even by the same coder, there could be multiple ways to organise codes into categories. For example, the code 'sadness' and the code 'loneliness' could be treated as two separate categories or organised into one category of 'emotional distress'. Second, unlike the processes of sophisticated statistical analysis, identifying whether a category was linked to a particular attachment was a manual and subjective process. Some could argue such analysis lacked statistical precision. For example, if a category entailed ten codes, with seven codes from children with the maternal dismissing attachment style and three codes from children with the

secure maternal attachment style, then questions were raised about whether such distribution qualifies as an over-representation of the dismissing attachment style. In the current research, the researcher makes the integration process as transparent as possible, ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings. An explicit list of codes or categories exhibiting over-representation of a particular attachment style is presented, including information about the number of interviewees from which the codes were sourced and the distribution of attachment styles among these interviewees. It enables the readers to see how the researcher measured and interpreted the evidence (e.g., the exact distribution of an attachment style among interviewees) and assess for themselves to what extent the evidence confirmed the conclusions (e.g., whether a particular attachment style is over-represented in a category). Descriptions of the listed codes/categories and extensive quotes of each code/ category are also presented. This enables readers to assess how the researcher used the narrative data to generate codes/categories, how she arrived at the inferences (e.g., how the attachment styles were reflected in children's experiences) and how precise those inferences were. In this clear and explicit way, the researcher provided the sources and content of the information she had drawn on in making inferences and ensured the data and analytic transparency of the integration process (Lupia & Elman, 2014). The reader is able to see clearly how the researcher started with 'messy' data and attempted to find patterns among the data.

The process of making inferences in the integration process may still have a remnant of uncertainty, however, following abductive reasoning underlying a pragmatist perspective, the researcher started with somewhat incomplete observations of reality and sought to make the most likely conclusions from the data, the 'inference to the best explanation' (Harman, 1965).

In summary, this chapter outlines the paradigm of the research, the design and the procedures of the research. The research followed a pragmatism paradigm. It was a mixed method research containing quantitative research using the CAI to measure the attachment styles of the LBC, the qualitative grounded theory to study the LBC's core experiences and integrative analysis to cross-check the findings from the two approaches.

The methods and procedures of the quantitative and qualitative study of the research are introduced as well as the integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings.

Chapter 6

Results of the quantitative study

The quantitative analysis of the current research assessed the attachment classifications of the 39 LBC in the sample with the CAI and analysed whether the distribution of attachment styles was related to gender and boarding conditions. Psychometric properties of the CAI were explored through correlations between subscales of the CAI, the relationship between CAI classifications, subscales and factors, and the validity analysis.

6.1 Interrater Reliability of the CAI

The interrater agreements (Cohen's Kappa, k) for paternal attachment and maternal attachment were $k = 0.89$ and $k = 0.95$. Intraclass correlations between the two raters' CAI subscale scores showed significant correlations on all subscales ($p < .001$ in all cases) and ranged between 0.65 (coherence) to 0.96 (emotional openness). The average correlation was 0.82.

6.2 The distributions of attachment classifications

Regarding attachment to their mother, 19 of the 39 children participating in the research were classified as secure and 20 were classified as insecure. All 20 insecurely attached children were classified with a dismissing attachment style. Regarding attachment to their father, 12 of the 39 children were classified as secure and 27 were classified as insecure. All 27 insecurely attached children were classified with a dismissing attachment style. No cases of preoccupied or disorganised attachment patterns were found in the current study. Thirty out of the 39 children had the same classification for both parents (77%, $k = .57$).

The chi-square test of independence showed a significant difference in the sample between paternal attachment distribution and maternal attachment

distribution [$\chi^2(1) = 12.7976$, $p = 0.0003$; Cramer's Phi (φ) = 0.573]. The effect size was large.

6.3 The distributions of attachment classifications across gender and boarding

The chi-square test of independence showed a significant gender difference in the sample between secure and insecure attachment to the mother [$\chi^2(1) = 5.757$, $p = 0.016$; Cramer's Phi (φ) = 0.384]. Girls showed higher attachment security to their mothers than boys. The difference was significant with a medium-level effect size. The sample did not differ significantly by gender in secure and insecure attachment to their father [$\chi^2(1) = 2.235$, $p = 0.135$; Cramer's Phi (φ) = 0.239]. The distribution of secure and insecure attachment by gender is presented in Table 12.

Table 12

Cross tabulation of gender by parental secure and insecure classification

| | Maternal attachment | | Paternal attachment | |
|--------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Secure | Insecure-dismissing | Secure | Insecure-dismissing |
| Female | 13 | 6 | 8 | 11 |
| Male | 6 | 14 | 4 | 16 |
| Total | 19 | 20 | 12 | 27 |

In terms of boarding conditions (boarders and non-boarders), the chi-square test of independence showed that the samples did not differ significantly in the distribution of secure and insecure attachment to the mother [$\chi^2(1) = .086$, $p = 0.770$; Cramer's Phi (φ) = -0.047] and secure and insecure attachment to the father [$\chi^2(1) = 1.027$, $p = 0.311$; Cramer's Phi (φ) = 0.162]. The distribution is presented in Table 13.

Table 13**Cross tabulation of boarding by parental secure and insecure classification**

| | Maternal attachment | | Paternal attachment | |
|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Secure | Insecure-dismissing | Secure | Insecure-dismissing |
| Boarding | 15 | 15 | 8 | 22 |
| Non-boarding | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| Total | 19 | 20 | 12 | 27 |

6.4 The descriptive statistics

Means and standard deviations for all subscales are presented in Table 14.

Table 14***Means and Standard Deviations of the CAI Subscales***

| Subscale | M | SD |
|----------|--------|---------|
| EO | 4.6154 | 1.77875 |
| BAL | 4.1538 | 1.27812 |
| UoE | 4.4615 | 1.52343 |
| A-M | 1.2051 | 0.65612 |
| A-F | 1.4487 | 0.96515 |
| I-M | 2.7308 | 2.00278 |
| I-F | 2.5256 | 1.97667 |
| D-M | 3.4615 | 2.29239 |
| D-F | 4.2436 | 2.11471 |
| RES | 4.9103 | 1.21326 |
| COH | 4.6923 | 1.29073 |

Note. EO: Emotional Openness; BAL: Balance of Positive/Negative References to Attachment Figures; UoE: Use of Examples; A-M/F: Preoccupied Anger With Respect to Mother/Father; I-M/F: Idealisation With Respect to Mother/Father; D-M/F: Dismissal With Respect to Mother/Father; RES: Resolution of Conflicts; COH: Overall Coherence.

6.5 Relationship between CAI Subscales

Relations between CAI scales were computed using the r coefficient (see Table 15). Correlation coefficients ranged from $r = 0.007$ to $r = 0.904$. The two scales of preoccupied anger with respect to both parents correlated with each other significantly but had no significant correlations with other scales. The idealisation scale in relation to the father had significant correlations with the balance scale, the idealisation scale in relation to the mother, dismissal scales with both parents, and the resolution of conflicts scale with medium-effect sizes. The idealisation scale in relation to the mother had significant correlations with the use of example scale, idealisation of the father scale, dismissal of father scale, and the resolution of conflicts scale with medium-effect sizes. All the other scales showed significant correlations with each other with large-effect sizes.

The scales of coherence and emotional openness showed strong correlations with other scales in terms of more significant correlations and higher correlations. Most observed correlations were in the expected directions, i.e., positive correlations between secure subscales and negative correlations between secure and insecure subscales.

Generally, in terms of the directions of the correlations, the secure scales (Emotional Openness, Use of Examples, Balance of Positive and Negative Reference and Resolution of Conflict) correlated positively with each other and negatively with the insecure scales (Preoccupied Anger, Idealisation and Dismissal). The insecure scales correlated with each other positively and negatively with the secure scales. The results were consistent with the theoretical directions.

Table 15**Correlations between CAI Sub-scales**

| | EO | BAL | UoE | A-M | A-F | I-M | I-F | D-M | D-F | RES | COH |
|-----|----|--------|--------|-------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| EO | | .825** | .774** | 0.148 | 0.007 | -.547** | -0.252 | -.833** | -.866** | .666** | .904** |
| BAL | | | .642** | 0.024 | -0.036 | -.533** | -.351* | -.779** | -.740** | .586** | .835** |
| UoE | | | | 0.061 | 0.079 | -.420** | -0.279 | -.632** | -.777** | .546** | .793** |
| A-M | | | | | .640** | 0.063 | 0.097 | -0.187 | -0.094 | -0.208 | -0.001 |
| A-F | | | | | | -0.038 | -0.120 | -0.215 | 0.113 | -0.189 | -0.055 |
| I-M | | | | | | | .422** | .521** | .469** | -.498** | -.527** |
| I-F | | | | | | | | .337* | .346* | -.452** | -0.260 |
| D-M | | | | | | | | | .698** | -.590** | -.791** |
| D-F | | | | | | | | | | -.709** | -.835** |
| RES | | | | | | | | | | | .696** |
| COH | | | | | | | | | | | |

Note. EO: Emotional Openness; BAL: Balance of Positive/Negative References to Attachment Figures; UoE: Use of Examples; A-M/F: Preoccupied Anger With Respect to Mother/Father; I-M/F: Idealisation With Respect to Mother/Father; D-M/F: Dismissal With Respect to Mother/Father; RES: Resolution of Conflicts; COH: Overall Coherence. Factors of resolved anger and non-idealisation were calculated based on the reversed scores of AM, AF, IM, IF, DM, DF.

6.6 Relationship between CAI Classifications and Subscales

Multivariate tests were used to compare the children across maternal and paternal attachment classifications on all the scales of the CAI (Table 16). For maternal and paternal attachments, securely attached children scored significantly higher than insecurely attached children on all secure scales, as well as the insecure scales of idealisation with respect to their mother and dismissal with respect to their mother/father scales. All these differences had large-effect sizes. On the idealisation

with respect to their father scale, the difference between securely and insecurely attached children was not significant but had medium-effect sizes.

Table 16

MANOVA test comparing secure and insecure maternal attachment styles

| Scale/ Factor | Maternal Secure | | Mater Insecure | | F | p | Partial Eta Squared |
|---------------|-----------------|---------|----------------|---------|---------|-------|---------------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| EO | 6.1053 | 1.04853 | 3.2000 | 0.97872 | 80.099 | 0.000 | 0.684 |
| BAL | 5.1842 | 0.83683 | 3.1750 | 0.73045 | 63.992 | 0.000 | 0.634 |
| UoE | 5.4211 | 1.39705 | 3.5500 | 0.99868 | 23.337 | 0.000 | 0.387 |
| A-M | 1.3158 | 0.82007 | 1.1000 | 0.44721 | 1.055 | 0.311 | 0.028 |
| A-F | 1.6316 | 1.16479 | 1.2750 | 0.71589 | 1.342 | 0.254 | 0.035 |
| I-M | 1.7632 | 1.03237 | 3.6500 | 2.27746 | 10.902 | 0.002 | 0.228 |
| I-F | 1.9211 | 1.43627 | 3.1000 | 2.26878 | 3.714 | 0.062 | 0.091 |
| D-M | 1.3684 | 0.68399 | 5.4500 | 1.23438 | 160.710 | 0.000 | 0.813 |
| D-F | 2.8947 | 1.96906 | 5.5250 | 1.31264 | 24.327 | 0.000 | 0.397 |
| RES | 5.5 | 1.21335 | 4.3500 | 0.93330 | 11.075 | 0.002 | 0.230 |
| COH | 5.6579 | 0.89834 | 3.7750 | 0.86565 | 44.435 | 0.000 | 0.546 |

Note. EO: Emotional Openness; BAL: Balance of Positive/Negative References to Attachment Figures; UoE: Use of Examples; A-M/F: Preoccupied Anger With Respect to Mother/Father; I-M/F: Idealisation With Respect to Mother/Father; D-M/F: Dismissal With Respect to Mother/Father; RES: Resolution of Conflicts; COH: Overall Coherence.

Table 17***MANOVA test comparing secure and insecure paternal attachment styles***

| Scale/ Factor | Paternal Secure | | Paternal Insecure | | F | p | Partial Eta Squared |
|---------------|-----------------|---------|-------------------|---------|---------|-------|---------------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| EO | 6.6250 | 0.85613 | 3.7222 | 1.27350 | 51.565 | 0.000 | 0.582 |
| BAL | 5.2500 | 0.83937 | 3.6667 | 1.13510 | 18.681 | 0.000 | 0.336 |
| UoE | 6.0000 | 0.87905 | 3.7778 | 1.21950 | 32.183 | 0.000 | 0.465 |
| A-M | 1.3333 | 0.88763 | 1.1481 | 0.53376 | 0.656 | 0.423 | 0.017 |
| A-F | 1.3333 | 0.88763 | 1.5000 | 1.00957 | 0.243 | 0.625 | 0.007 |
| I-M | 1.7500 | 1.05529 | 3.1667 | 2.17945 | 4.544 | 0.040 | 0.109 |
| I-F | 1.5833 | 0.90034 | 2.9444 | 2.18532 | 4.279 | 0.046 | 0.104 |
| D-M | 1.5833 | 1.44338 | 4.2963 | 2.10886 | 16.330 | 0.000 | 0.306 |
| D-F | 1.5000 | 0.79772 | 5.4630 | 1.11740 | 122.330 | 0.000 | 0.768 |
| RES | 6.0417 | 1.09665 | 4.4074 | 0.88835 | 24.327 | 0.000 | 0.397 |
| COH | 5.9583 | 0.89082 | 4.1296 | 1.01520 | 28.935 | 0.000 | 0.439 |

Note. EO: Emotional Openness; BAL: Balance of Positive/Negative References to Attachment Figures; UoE: Use of Examples; A-M/F: Preoccupied Anger With Respect to Mother/Father; I-M/F: Idealisation With Respect to Mother/Father; D-M/F: Dismissal With Respect to Mother/Father; RES: Resolution of Conflicts; COH: Overall Coherence.

6.7 Validity

The validity analysis included assessing the concurrent validity using the attachment measure of IPPA and assessing the convergent validity using the measure of SDQ. The analysis included the correlation analysis (Table 18) and MANOVA tests comparing the secure and insecure children (Table 19).

Table 18***Correlations between CAI subscales, IPPA subscales and SDQ***

| Scale/ Factor | IPPAM Total | IPPAM Trust | IPPAM Communication | IPPAM Alienation | IPPAF Total | IPPAF Trust | IPPAF Communication | IPPAF Alienation | SDQ |
|------------------|----------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------|
| EO | .502** | .353* | .438** | 0.262 | .396* | .393* | .419** | 0.152 | -.367* |
| BAL | .317* | 0.229 | 0.185 | 0.271 | 0.179 | 0.220 | 0.191 | 0.042 | -0.255 |
| UoE | .349* | 0.268 | .389* | 0.057 | .373* | .325* | .523** | 0.082 | -.322* |
| A-M | 0.042 | -0.067 | 0.084 | 0.055 | 0.174 | 0.063 | 0.268 | 0.073 | 0.151 |
| A-F | -0.182 | -0.193 | -0.112 | -0.089 | -0.103 | -0.088 | -0.009 | -0.118 | 0.129 |
| I-M | -0.029 | 0.017 | 0.036 | -0.126 | 0.025 | 0.025 | 0.079 | -0.027 | 0.159 |
| I-F | 0.146 | 0.023 | 0.188 | 0.080 | 0.177 | 0.117 | 0.195 | 0.097 | 0.199 |
| D-M | -.383* | -0.265 | -0.296 | -0.250 | -0.251 | -0.252 | -0.252 | -0.105 | 0.289 |
| D-F | -.505** | -.472** | -.470** | -0.116 | -.432** | -.479** | -.489** | -0.114 | .450** |
| RES | .337* | .361* | .347* | -0.007 | 0.296 | 0.309 | 0.302 | 0.113 | -.413** |
| COH | .417** | .386* | .403* | 0.081 | .366* | .389* | .393* | 0.122 | -0.280 |

Note. IPPAM: Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Mother; IPPAF: Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Father. SDQ: The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

The IPPA alienation scales had no significant correlations with any scale of the CAI. The IPPA total for the mother had significant correlations with all the secure scales of the CAI and with the dismissing scales regarding the father/mother. Among these correlations, the correlations between the IPPA total for mother and emotional openness, IPPA total for mother, and dismissal regarding father had large-effect sizes. The other correlations had medium-effect sizes. IPPA trust dimensions for the mother correlated significantly with the emotional openness scale, dismissal of father scale, resolution of conflicts scale, and coherence scales with medium-effect sizes. The IPPA communication dimension for the mother correlated significantly with emotional openness scale, use of example scale, dismissal of father scale, resolution of conflicts scale, and coherence scales with medium-effect sizes.

The IPPA father scale total score, IPPA trust dimension for the father and IPPA communication dimension for father all correlated significantly with emotional openness scale, use of example scale, dismissal of father scale, resolution of

conflicts scale, and coherence scales. All the correlations had medium-effect sizes except for the correlation between IPPA communication for the father and the use of example scale which had large-effect sizes.

Concurrent validity was further assessed by MANOVA tests to compare children across CAI attachment classification on scales of IPPA total, IPPA trust scale, IPPA communication scale and IPPA alienation (Table 19). Regarding maternal attachment, children classified as securely attached had significantly higher means on IPPA total, trust and communication for the mother. The difference on the IPPA total for the mother had large-effect size, and the differences on the IPPA trust and communications dimensions for the scale had medium-effect sizes. The difference between the on the IPPA alienation scale was not significant but had a medium-effect size.

On scales of IPPA total, IPPA trust and IPPA communication for the father, the children with secure paternal attachment had significantly higher means with medium-effect sizes than children with insecure attachment. The difference on IPPA alienation for father between children with secure paternal attachment and children with insecure paternal attachment was not significant but had a medium effect size.

The convergent validity was first assessed by the correlation analysis between the SDQ and CAI subscales (Table 18). The SDQ scale had significant correlations with the secure subclass of emotional openness, use of examples, resolution of conflicts and the insecure subscale of dismissing with respect to the father. All correlations had medium-effect sizes. Correlations between the three factors and the SDQ were also computed. Only the correlation between the coherence factor and the SDQ reached a significant level with medium-effect size.

Table 19**MANOVA test comparing secure and insecure children on IPPA and SDQ**

| Factor/Measure | Secure | | Insecure | | F | p | Partial Eta Squared |
|---------------------|---------|---------|----------|---------|--------|-------|---------------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Maternal Attachment | | | | | | | |
| IPPAM Total | 90.0000 | 15.0997 | 79.1000 | 8.5711 | 10.641 | 0.002 | 0.228 |
| IPPAM Trust | 25.6316 | 5.8709 | 22.3000 | 4.9535 | 4.914 | 0.033 | 0.120 |
| IPPAM Communication | 26.0000 | 8.1445 | 21.8500 | 5.4895 | 5.098 | 0.030 | 0.124 |
| IPPAM Alienation | 38.3684 | 6.0664 | 34.9500 | 5.3260 | 3.728 | 0.061 | 0.094 |
| SDQ | 17.1053 | 7.2870 | 36.6500 | 7.0208 | 4.934 | 0.033 | 0.121 |
| Paternal Attachment | | | | | | | |
| IPPAF Total | 98.5833 | 20.1425 | 80.7037 | 13.8503 | 10.398 | 0.003 | 0.219 |
| IPPAF Trust | 29.4167 | 3.7285 | 22.7407 | 5.93940 | 12.802 | 0.001 | 0.257 |
| IPPAF Communication | 28.6667 | 5.2972 | 21.2593 | 6.9426 | 10.799 | 0.002 | 0.226 |
| IPPAF Alienation | 40.5000 | 16.0766 | 36.7037 | 6.7415 | 1.101 | 0.301 | 0.029 |
| SDQ | 14.1667 | 6.8069 | 21.2593 | 3.9864 | 16.756 | 0.000 | 0.312 |

Note. IPPAM: Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Mother; IPPAF: Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Father. SDQ: The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

The convergent validity was further assessed by comparing secure and insecure children with the measure of SDQ (Table 19). The results showed that maternal and paternal security were associated with significantly lower levels of self-reported externalising and internalising problems with medium- and large-effect sizes respectively.

Chapter 7

The results of the qualitative study and a grounded theory of children's experiences of parental migration

The qualitative study explored how the LBC experienced parental labour migration. It considered, in particular, how the LBC subjectively perceived the migration and how the children experienced changes in their families following migration, such as roles, relationships and communication. The key constructs and processes derived from the study helped develop a grounded theory of children's experiences of parental labour migration.

This chapter presents the results in two parts. First, it will describe the key constructs of the theory, illustrating them with examples from the data and interpretations with reference to the literature. Second, it will construct a coherent narrative of the grounded theory by weaving together all the key constructs and fleshing out the relationships between the constructs. The synthesis produces a theory of the LBC's agency in the rural migrant family practices with a focus on how these constructs and processes impact on the resilience of the LBC and their rural migrant families.

The theory takes a multi-level and ecological approach to the children's experiences. It illustrates the children's intrapersonal and psychological experiences, including cognitive appraisals, emotional regulation and the children's interactions within their relational and social contexts. Children's experiences are deeply contextualised in their relational and social contexts, especially in their family contexts. The family processes are contexts for the children's agency, as well as the manifestations of the children's agency.

7.1 Key constructs of the theory

The data generated two major constructs: the children's agency and children's perception of doing rural migrant families. The first construct of agency had subthemes of 'self-focused agency' and 'other-focused agency'. The second construct was comprised of three family practices: building family collaboration; making an intact family; negotiating support and constraints. Extracts from this study's interviews illustrate the main points. Each section also draws on existing literature to examine the extent to which these findings resemble or differ from what is already known.

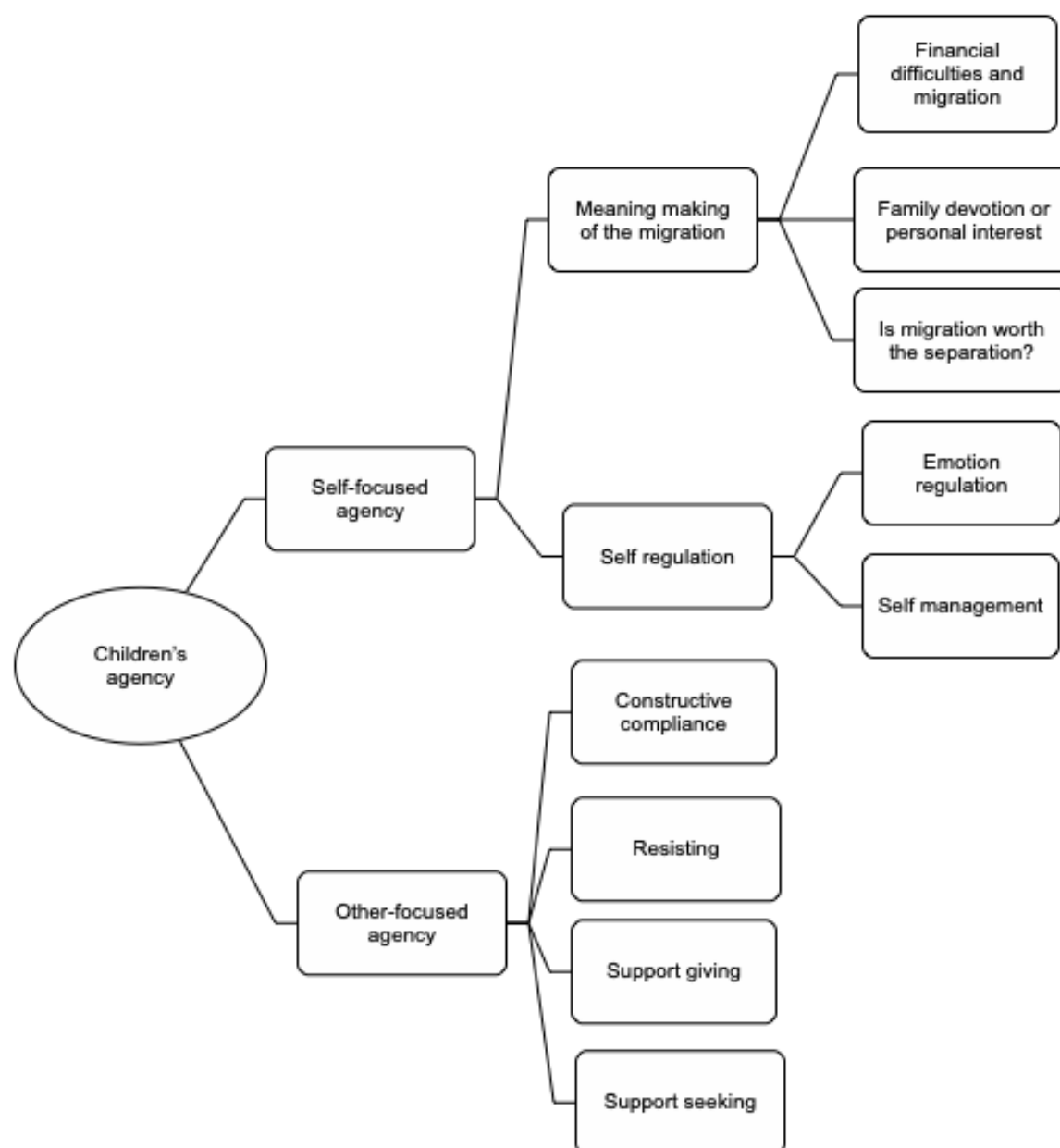
7.1.1 The first key construct: the LBC's agency

The first key construct emerged from the results was that the LBC exercised agency in their lives during parental migration (Figure 4). The concept of agency 'starts with the belief that human beings have the ability to influence their lives and environment while they are also shaped by social and individual factors' (Lasky, 2005, p. 900). To be an agent is to intentionally choose, act and influence one's functioning and everyday life circumstances (Bandura, 2018; Houen et al., 2016; Mentha et al., 2015). The current study found that children were not just passive receivers of the changes brought about by parental migration but were also conscious social actors capable of expressing their own agencies within their constrained circumstances. Though still at the age when protection and care from adults were needed on a daily basis, the LBC were capable of autonomous action, actively influencing the changes in their lives and accommodating themselves to the disruptions and adjustments that resulted from the migration. This perspective has been increasingly recognised in the studies of children in migration literature (Hoang et al., 2015; Hoang & Yeoh, 2015). For example, Asis's (2006) study of the LBC in

transnational migrant families found that children had agency in coping with their life challenges caused by parental absence due to labour migration.

Figure 4

The key construct of the children's agency



The children's agency in this grounded theory was more than the 'capacity to act' and included internal cognitive and emotional processes that influenced the behaviour directed towards themselves as well towards their environments.

Self-focused agency

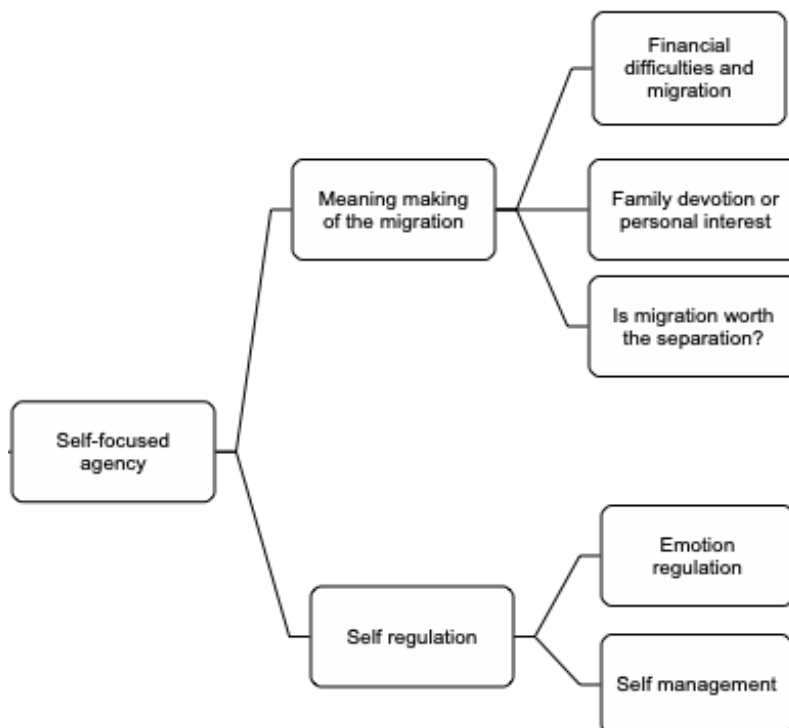
Self-focused agency (Figure 5) is associated with self-reflecting and self-regulating processes. The agency was enacted by the children towards themselves to regulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Meaning making of the migration

When faced with parental migration and its associated changes, the LBC attempted to make sense of what happened. The children engaged in a meaning-making process and constructed their own understandings of parental migration.

Figure 5

Self-focused agency



Their agency was expressed internally through their independent cognitive processing of meaning construction (De Mol & Buysse, 2008; van Nijnatten, 2010). Meaning making is a constructive coping method people use to recover from negative life events, for example children making meaning of parental divorce, parents making meaning of losing a child. A study of Javanese and Filipino LBC showed that even though they exhibited a 'diminished form of agency' (Collins & Tymko 2015) in having little control over their parents' migration decision, children from both countries were reflective of their situations and formed their own opinions of their parents' absence and care arrangements. Children's meaning making of the migration mainly contained their representation of the financial incentives of the migration and the overall value of the migration.

Financial difficulties and migration

Children began to construct a meaning of their parents' migration when first informed about it by their parents or caregivers, this may happen either before or after their parents' departure. The first step in making meaning of the migration is to understand why it happened. Adults explained to some children that their migration was propelled by financial reasons, mainly due to financial difficulties in the families.

Mostly, the LBC's knowledge of their families' financial difficulties was very vague. They lacked direct access to information about the family financial situation and seemed to lack a clear sense of exactly how important it was for parents to make money in the cities. For instance, child two stated: 'They told me they needed to go to the city to make money, our family needed money.' In response to the researcher's question about what that meant, the child said, 'I didn't know much about that, they told me our family was poor, I wasn't very clear about it.' This reply may suggest a lack of family financial disclosure from the parents. This was not

uncommon as many parents found it difficult to talk about money with their children (Romo, 2011), and often concealed important family financial information from children. For example, parents may avoid topics of family debt at all, so that children are oblivious to their family's financial issues (Romo & Vangelisti, 2014).

Another factor that contributed to the children's lack of knowledge of their family's financial situation was that though many children had been helping adults with some agricultural work, they were not directly involved in family economic activities. This was different from the study by Garabiles et al. (2017) which found that some LBC in Filipino migrant families had been helping the family economy by selling food and crops before migration. Not having a first-hand knowledge of their family's financial situation or a direct perception of the family's poverty may lead children to doubt the necessity of the labour migration. For example, child 29 stated:

I don't think migration is that necessary. I don't think our family was that poor. Maybe we are not rich, but we are not that poor. I mean the house looks a bit old. But I think we could still survive without my parents' migration.

This child's perception of the family economy being 'not that poor' might not be accurate, but nonetheless influenced their meaning making of the parental migration.

Children's perception of the financial motivations for the migration differed in form. Some children were told that their families had migrated to pay off specific debts, e.g., debts from building a family house, or a father's gambling issue. These children tended to set concrete goals for their parents' migration and see it as a temporary situation. For example, child 13 stated: 'They had some debts to pay off. They needed to work two to three years in the city to make the money. Once they have paid off the money, they will come back to be with me and my sister.' Others sensed that their parents had migrated for less specific purposes, such as migrating

for the sake of their future. These children were more inclined to see the migration as a long-term strategy. For example, child 17 stated: 'They migrated because we were having a difficult time at home and they needed to migrate to make some money, so they could support me and my sister's study, and we could both go to colleges.' Nonetheless, these children all demonstrated a future-oriented perspective of looking forward to the time when the migration would end, and their parents would return home.

Parent-child communication about money and family financial information has often been overlooked both by many parents and by researchers on family studies (Sühendan, 2014). This situation suggested a tendency to disregard the economic agency of children and not view children as economic agents. However, studies have shown that children are developmentally capable of understanding much economic information and performing many economic behaviours at a very young age (Friedline, 2015; Sutter et al., 2019). In a way, children are developmentally able to exercise certain economic agency. Even in the current study, several children expressed that they were more aware of their families' financial difficulties than their parents thought. For example, child 30's parents left home without informing him of their migration in advance, they did not explain to their child why they had to migrate. However, child 30 constructed his own understanding of the migration based on what he himself had observed:

I think it [the migration] was for the money. They didn't tell me, but I heard mum and dad arguing about money in their room and some people called seven or eight times to ask them to pay off the debts.

Communicating about money and family financial situations plays an important role in the financial socialisation of children (Jorgensen & Salva, 2010;

Romo & Vangelisti, 2014). In the current study, parent-child communication about family finance played a special role in influencing the children's understanding and acceptance of parental migration. This was most apparent in the case of child 39 who actively encouraged his father to migrate based on his comprehension of the family financial situation. The child stated:

Because he had nothing to do here in the hometown. He was just lying there whole day. Then my tuition fee was going to be due. I asked him to go out to work. I said, dad, you should go out to work, my tuition fee is going to be due. Then someone in the village asked him to go out to work. He asked me if I would let him go out, I said I would. Then he went out to work with that guy.

The child not only demonstrated a rather sophisticated awareness of the local economy and family financial situation, but also enacted his economic agency in making decisions for his father to migrate.

In the context of parental migration, children's understanding of the family financial situation was part of their process of making sense of parental migration. Parents' behaviour regarding financial socialisation for children, such as talking about money with children, may be impacted by the children's ages (Romo & Vangelisti, 2014). The current findings showed that the children in middle childhood were capable of comprehending much financial information when adults explained it to them. More importantly, in the context of labour migration, communication about the family financial situation could help the LBC make sense of the migration and attribute it to the family financial difficulties, which played an important role in the children's continuing appraisals of the migration, for instance as being an act of family devotion or for personal interest.

Family devotion or personal interest

Most children acknowledged that their parents were migrating to solve their family's economic adversities. They further regarded the migration as a practice of family devotion, a sacrifice made by their parents for the benefit of the children or the whole family. How they perceived their parents' work in the cities also contributed to constructing meaning. Many children viewed the work in the cities as hard, tiring or even dangerous. For example, child 11 stated, 'I'm always worried about them, especially my father. Once he told me that a guy whom he was working with died from falling from constructing electric lines.'

Children's understanding of their parent's work and life in the cities as being hard fostered feelings of gratefulness towards their parents. This was evident in children's narratives about how they noticed changes in their parent's physical appearance when they met for the New Year reunion. Many children noticed their parents had aged and attributed their aging to hard work in the city and felt sorrow and gratefulness towards their parents. Child 24 said that 'I felt they aged a lot, they really worked hard for the family.'

Studies on the LBC in transnational families also showed that children's construction of migration life influenced children's feelings towards their migrant parents. For example, studies in the Philippines (Parreñas, 2005) and Mexico (Dreby, 2010) highlighted children's feelings of abandonment and resentment towards migrant parents, partly arising from the children believing that their parents' migrant life was wealthy, modern and self-indulgent. However, the Vietnamese (Hong & Yeoh, 2015) and Ecuadorian children (Boccagni, 2012), as well as the children in Cape Verde (Åkesson et al., 2012) did not have such negative feelings

towards their migrant parents, mainly because they viewed their parents' lives in the destination countries as being undesirable.

If the children perceived that their parents migrated because they enjoyed life in the cities, they were more likely to develop resentment towards their parents. For example, child nine stated:

Every year they came back and said they would not go out again, but they would still go. And they were quite happy to go, the more they stayed in the city, the more they were willing to go. A few days after they came home, they would leave again.

In this case, the child believed that the parental migration was primarily motivated by their parents' self-interest. She constructed her own understanding of her parents' choice of migration from her own observation of her parents' behaviour rather than from her parents' explanation. Child nine realised the contradiction between what her parents said and what her parents did and arrived at her own conclusions.

Though being constantly told by the adults that their parents were working hard for their families in the cities, children's views of their migrant parents were not wholly dependent on the discourse from caregivers and parents. They actively constructed their own views of their parents through their observations of how parents fulfilled their roles. For example, children expressed their trust in parents who made an effort to provide parental care from a distance.

Children's perception of their parents was multifaceted. They judged not only how parents fulfilled parental duties, but also how they performed their roles in other family relationships. Some children expressed active devaluation of their migrant parents based on how they acted as spouses in the marriage or as the adult children in relation to grandparents. For example, child 13 criticised her father for being

uncaring towards grandparents 'He was always calling and asking about the old granny of the family he had previously worked for. But when we were calling him, he never asked about my grandparents' health conditions.' Negative appraisal of parents could embody strong emotions of anger and resentment. For instance, child 25 stated, 'When they were signing for the divorce, I said I would rather die than be with my father.'

Is migration worth the separation?

The third key aspect in meaning making of migration was to assess the value of the parental migration. Adults' explanations of the financial benefits of the migration did not guarantee the children's acceptance or appreciation of the migration. The children expressed their agency by reflecting on the costs and gains of migration and coming to their own judgement. The current research found that the LBC were well aware that migration was a trade-off between economic benefits and family solidarity. Based on their evaluations of the pros and cons of parental migration, they usually came to an overall judgement of the legitimacy of the migration.

Some children were supportive of the migration because they focused more on the benefits. Child 23 stated: 'I think migration is good. They can make more money and buy us new things.' Some children preferred non-migration and described migration as 'not worth it' or 'not necessary'. They came to this judgment for several reasons. First, they saw the financial benefits of migration were not enough to compensate for the family separation. For example, child 15 expressed: 'I prefer parents staying at home. I think family together is more important.' Second, they regarded that migration was not a necessity based on their family's financial situation. For example, child 15 stated: 'they said they needed money to pay back

the debts, but they paid off the debts at the fourth grade and even built the house last year. Our family has become much better off, why are they still in the city?' The child's statement also showed that children's meaning making of the migration was an ongoing process. Even when children thought migration was a necessary family economic strategy; their perception could change after they realised their family difficulties had been largely solved.

Third, they believed that there were other ways of making money besides migration. For example, child 33 stated that, 'I don't think it's necessary. Because they could stay in the village or go somewhere closer, so they can return home more often.' However, children's understanding of the availability of economic choices other than migration or the economic value of the migration was not always realistic, because they lacked access to the relevant information. Nevertheless, they were able to demonstrate their active mental agency in having independent and often rather critical judgements of the migration. It should be noted that children rarely communicated about their 'disagreement' with their migrant parents or attempted to convince their parents to change their migration plan. The 'disagreement' was mostly manifested as an internal cognitive resistance, without overt expression, to their parents' decision to migrate. Such disagreement from the children undermines the presumption that migrant families are consensual units. Family members could have individual opinions and may not necessarily agree with each other.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is the second aspect of children's self-focused personal agency and includes their emotion-related self-regulation and behavioural self-regulation or self-management. The concept of self-regulation refers to the LBC's conscious and deliberate efforts to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour.

The process of self-regulation usually aims to achieve some desirable outcomes, such as academic success, personal well-being, or emotional soothing. Self-regulation in the current research resonated with the definition in the literature that self-regulation is the voluntarily moderation of attention, emotion and executive functions for goal-directed behaviour (Blair & Ursache, 2011).

Emotion regulation

The LBC, like any other children, encounter emotional situations frequently. They might feel angry about their siblings taking away their toys or feel sad when having issues with friends. Beside these everyday situations, the parental migration itself was particularly emotionally provoking. According to attachment theory, the parents as main caregivers usually serve as key figures in helping children to deal with their distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The unavailability or at least the reduced availability of parents may push children to regulate their emotions by themselves. Children often described their experiences of 'crying alone' and 'not telling anyone of their feelings'.

Emotion regulation has been broadly understood as involving intrinsic processes, i.e., suppression, and extrinsic processes, i.e., seeking comfort from parents. In this research, emotional self-regulation refers to the children's intrinsic processes of emotional regulation strategies, including avoiding, self-containment and self-reasoning. These emotional self-regulation processes are not children's unconscious or automatic reactions to emotions, but their 'conscious, effortful and controlled regulation' (Gross & Thompson 2007) to change their emotional experiences, including the emotion-related motivational and physiological states (e.g., to reduce the intensity of the emotion), as well as how emotions are expressed behaviourally (e.g., whether to cry out) (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Such regulatory

processes are regarded as the 'truly self-regulatory process' (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012), because they clearly involve effortful control. However, sometimes it could be difficult to differentiate these processes from those that appear involuntary or automatic. For the LBC in the current research, they adopted several intrinsic self-regulating strategies including distracting, self-containment and suppression to manage their emotional reactions to parental migration.

Avoiding could take the form of avoiding external emotion-arousing situations. For example, child nine stated: 'I didn't say goodbye. I saw them packing, I was just washing the clothes. I didn't look at them, I didn't talk to them, I didn't have the courage.' Avoiding could also take the form of avoiding one's internal emotional states with distractions. The LBC used various activities to occupy their minds and distract them from feelings such as loneliness and missing their parents. These activities included going out, doing homework, reading, watching TV, playing on their phones and sleeping etc. For example, child seven stated:

Sometimes, I felt upset and lonely at school. Then I would finish my homework quickly and go out to play with my mates, I put those things behind me. And playing with them helped me put my mind away from the unhappy things.

The avoidance strategy that aims to shift attention or change scenarios rather than alter internal emotional states is known as an emotion coping strategy, which children acquire during preschool years (Flavell et al., 2001). Although a child may exert their agency by deliberately looking for distractions and express a certain awareness of their hidden emotions, such strategies may lack direct confrontation with their emotions. The avoidance emotion regulation strategy may work well in the short-term, but have limited effects in the long term, such as the statement from the

child 30: 'I don't think of them when I am at school in the daytime, because I can talk to other people and think of other stuff, but I missed them very much while going to sleep.' The child thought the feeling of missing their parents would surface when going to sleep without the distractions of daytime activities.

Self-containment refers to some children's ability to face, tolerate, control and contain their emotions. They described the processes of 'holding up the feelings', 'controlling the tears and crying inside'. For instance, when the interviewer asked child 14 what she would do when she missed her parents, she replied, 'nothing, just keep it in my heart'. Such an emotion regulating process may appear somewhat passive as the child did not aim to alter it, but it showed how children could withstand negative emotions. This process resembled the concept of 'distress tolerance', which refers to the capacity to withstand aversive emotional and physical states (Brandt et al., 2013; Simons & Gaher, 2005). It is a potentially important concept in understanding the development of psychopathology and its prevention and treatment. Studies have indicated that distress tolerance is significantly related to depressive and anxiety symptoms (Brandt et al., 2013; O'Cleirigh et al., 2007).

The capacity of 'distress tolerance' may relate to other strategies of emotion regulation. For example, children who feel unable to tolerate negative emotions may feel more motivated to escape or avoid emotional situations, thus they have fewer opportunities to acquire more constructive emotion regulation strategies and are at a higher risk of developing maladaptive regulation strategies. On the other hand, children with a greater ability to tolerate distress may be able to experience unwanted and feared sensations and/or develop a sense of self-efficacy in experiencing and managing these internal states (Leyro et al., 2010). This perspective is in line with theories and interventions aiming to modify anxiety and

other problematic emotional states by changing one's avoidance response to aversive experiential experiences (Hayes & Shenk, 2004).

Some children managed to sooth their emotions by self-reasoning, especially by focusing on the positive side of parental migration. For example, child 15 stated: 'I would comfort myself that my parents are working in the city to make money for us, they are doing it for me, and so I feel better.' This strategy is an example children's capacity to create 'metacognitive strategies' of emotional regulation that involve regulating negative emotions by altering one's thoughts (Davis et al., 2010). Such strategies reflected children's understandings of the interrelation between their thoughts and emotions, and that by changing their thoughts they could change their emotions. Developmental studies show that children as young as three years old demonstrated some understanding that thinking influences feelings, but it is not until middle childhood that children routinely adopt cognitive strategies to alter mental states (Lagattuta & Wellman, 2001; Pons et al., 2004).

Self-management

Behaviourally, the LBC also demonstrated their agencies through self-management in achieving personal goals, which was partially facilitated by the absence of parental supervision. This self-discipline included balancing study and entertainment, managing homework, monitoring the use of their mobile phone and the value of pocket money. For example, child seven stated:

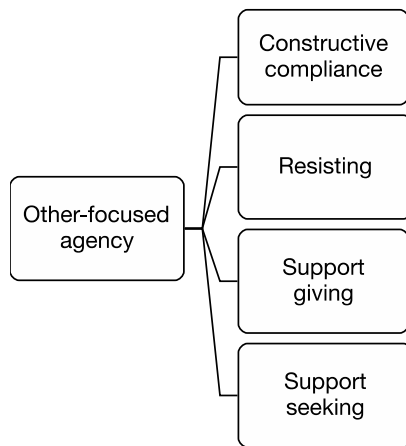
Last mid-term exam, my school ranking dropped a lot. My parents banned me from using the phone. But I knew it was not caused by the phone use. I only used it to chat with my classmates. I only used it for 30 minutes every day, and I wouldn't use it too much before exams. Then I worked really hard. I

studied every day even in my dorm and got my grades up. So, they allowed me to use the phone again.

This child displayed a considerable level of self-awareness and self-motivation. She was able to reflect on her mobile-phone use, and the reason for the drop in her academic results. Based on the reflection, she directed her behaviour and achieved the desired results. The child demonstrated self-management acts of goal setting, self-evaluation and strategic planning in academic activities, and showed the qualities of an independent, self-regulated learner, who was able to manage her behaviour efficiently and proactively in order to accomplish self-set goals (Zimmerman, 2002). The LBC's behavioural self-regulations are driven by their motivations for goal achievement and manifested as self-discipline and compliance with the strategies that promote goal accomplishment (Garrin, 2014).

Others-focused agency

Children directed their agencies towards themselves as well as to others. These forms of agency could be seen as the externalisation of the children's agency. Children exerted such agencies to interact with others and to shape their everyday lives through various strategies (Figure 6).

Figure 6**Other-focused agency***Constructive compliance*

The LBC had to confront the changes in their household structure caused by the migration. Most of these changes were arranged by adults without negotiating with children and were complied with by the children. Compliance is a common acceptable response from the children to parental or caregivers' demands (Cefai & Cooper, 2009; De Mol & Buysse, 2008; Rainio, 2008). Children's compliance with parental demands may suggest the effect of parental power, which could lead to not recognising children's agency and disregarding children's autonomy. The current study found that children's compliance may not necessarily suggest a lack of children's agency. The children could perform 'constructive' compliance, in which they used their own agency and capabilities to identify various emotions and make sense of the conflict situation in ways that reserved a mental space for their own agency (Nicolopoulou, 2008; Rainio, 2008).

The children could exert their agencies in complying with the adults' demands in various ways. A child may understand their parents' intentions and agree to comply and support the parents' decisions. For example, child 24 stated, 'they told

me they were going to migrate, I said I didn't want them to go but they said our family was poor and they needed to make money. So, I agreed.' One major parental demand the LBC had to comply with was the change of living arrangements. Sometimes the children did not comply willingly, but they could exert their agency in complying with the arrangements by creating a positive meaning of the situation. For example, child 13 who had to live with his uncle's family stated, 'I prefer living at my own home but there is no one there. My home is empty now. So, it's better I live with my uncle and auntie.'

During the process of children following their parents' orders, children still had the space to exert their agencies in making creative plans about what actions to take to achieve better results. The parental demand itself might provide children with opportunities to take autonomous actions. This was most evident in the case of child 30 who realised he was supposed to move to his grandparents' place from reading a note left by his parents. After reading the note, the child started arranging his own life. He stated:

I went to granny's place and said: grandma, I want to live with you, mum and dad asked me to do so. Then she said OK. Then I took all the useful electronic devices from home and moved to grandparents' place. And also, the rice. There was rice left at home. My parents took three bags of the rice, still there were two bags left at home. I took both bags. There were four bags of rice at my grandparents' place at first, plus the two bags I brought, there were six bags in total, enough to eat.

The child was not just passively following the order from his parents, but exercising his agency by actively negotiating, planning and arranging his life.

After moving home, the children tended to observe their new environments and learnt to adapt to them. They observed the attitudes and behaviours of their new carers, the care they could receive from them and the rules at the new place.

Children also noticed the differences between the cares received from the new carer to the care from their parents. For example, child 33 stated:

Sometimes I was naughty, I went out to play and didn't mop the floor and then I got scolded. I felt sad being scolded. Because when I was in my own home, my parents were really fond of me, and wouldn't ask me to do this and that.

Based on their observations, children would act accordingly. Child 33 went on to say, 'I tried to help my aunt with some housework, usually after dinner. At home I wouldn't do that. But now I tried to behave better.' The child was not a passive recipient of the care, but she actively sought to be accepted into her carer's family. The current study looked at the LBC's compliance from an active-agent perspective. The children actively and positively adapted to adult demands, constructing, participating and shaping their everyday lives after parental migration. This also resonated with the study by Cummings and Schermerhorn (2003) that children responded to parental power in various ways, and could demonstrate their agency by performing committed, situational or unwilling compliance.

Resisting

Besides compliance, children could respond to adult demands with 'non-compliance' or 'resistance'. Children's resistance showed their disobedience towards adults and has often been considered as problematic and deviant (Cefai & Cooper, 2009; Rainio, 2008). However, children's resistance is fundamentally an act to protect their autonomy and a struggle to have a voice and agency. More broadly, people in marginalised positions in society such as blue-collar workers, and in this

case, young children, can achieve some control over their lives and resist threats to their autonomy by creating subtle or hidden ways of resisting the prevailing norms and rules of their environment (Sevón, 2015). Children as active agents can interpret, creatively join, modify, and reject aspects of adult culture, such as rules and norms, although in conflictual situations achieving agency may be challenging for young children (Löffdahl & Hägglund, 2006; Punch, 2005).

Studies have found that children's resistance could take diverse forms. They could act contrary to parental wishes, or participate in decision-making, perhaps by suggesting alternatives or negotiating (Bjerke, 2011; Moore et al., 2011; Rainio, 2008). The current study also found that the LBC could utilise various strategies to resist parental power. For example, child 25 refused to move back to live with her paternal grandfather, as suggested by her parents. She insisted on living with her maternal grandparents because she did not like living with her paternal grandparent. She stated, 'I didn't want to live with my paternal grandfather. He never loved me. He liked my cousin more. We didn't have a good relationship.' Through rejecting, the child acted out her resentment towards her paternal grandfather, expressed her preferences and chose a living arrangement that she perceived as more desirable.

Children could resist in a very intense, overt way or in a more subtle way. Two children showed resistance differently in reacting to their parents' divorce. Child 25 stated:

My father said he must get custody of me and my brother. I said I didn't want to be with him, I would rather die to be with you. He said go ahead. Then I walked to the middle of the road and my mum pulled me back.

The child resisted intensely and openly with suicide threats.

Child three stated:

On the day they were getting the divorce, they asked me to go to the registration place with them. But I didn't go, I didn't want to go. I just stayed at home and watched TV; I didn't want to go.

This child expressed his resistance to his parents' divorce in an indirect and concealed way. He also resisted more privately at home. This was similar to the study by Kuczynski et al (2018) that children could resist in two ways, overtly and covertly. From the children's narratives, it seemed that covert or subtle resistance appeared more prevalent. Children might resist in a way that they maintained 'a pretence of compliance' (Kuczynski et al., 2018). They might comply verbally on the surface and then not really follow the order behaviourally. For example, child 17 stated: 'My grandpa moved to my uncle's place. He asked me to come to visit him often. I said I would. But I didn't go. I felt abandoned by him. So, I didn't feel like going.'

The children's various strategies of resistance provided the strongest evidence that they were active agents, interpreting, engaging in and shaping adult control. Developmental researchers have argued that childhood resistance is essentially the same as adult assertion and is a manifestation of a universal human motivation for self-determination and to protect individual freedom of action and choice (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Support giving

Children need care and support from other people on a daily basis. However, children are not passive vessels waiting for other peoples' care. In the current research some children expressed their care, concern and worry about their migrant

parents, such as child 33 who stated, 'I often think that are their work too tiring for them, are they okay in the city, what if they get sick?' Some children offered instrumental help to adults and even became temporary carers. For example, child 18 stated:

Sometimes when she (great grandma) was sick, I helped with gua sha (a traditional Chinese medicine treatment). Sometimes she asked to pour the water stuff, I also gave her some food to eat but most of the time she gave me food.

Children also provided emotional support to others. For example, child 31 stated:

My grandma cried, because she was calling my parents and she felt sad. I felt unhappy seeing her cry and I hugged her. I also gave her more company, like walking with her in the street, because I was at school from Monday to Friday, so at the weekend I spent more time with my grandma.

Underlying children's support giving actions, was their cognitive ability to understand people's thoughts and behaviours, a manifestation of reflective functioning, as well as the children's understanding of the effect of their actions on others. This was evident in children's narratives showing their consideration for their parents/caregivers in the way they tried to be more self-reliant in order to help the adults. For example, child 37 did not say anything to her mum when her mum was leaving home, she stated:

I didn't want to worry them and make them sad. Once I said something, they would become very sad. It was already difficult enough for them to leave home. They didn't want to leave us either.

The children's agency of support giving showed that children could actively engage in prosocial interactions. They have the capacity to understand others' needs and distress and provide support and help to others. The study by Eisenberg et al., (2006) found that even young children tend to respond prosocially to parental or peer distress, are willing to share objects and comfort others who are upset.

Prosocial behaviour and its underlying cognitive processes could have emotional and relational benefits for the children. These children were less likely to feel confused about their parents' behaviour and tended to perceive and act towards their parents in a positive way. Studies further showed that children's prosocial behaviour may not only impact their current life-stage, but also have positive impacts on their psychosocial development and well-being. For example, early prosocial behaviours such as cooperating, helping, sharing and consoling, contribute to children's accomplishments in social and academic domains, by decreasing depression and deviant behaviour, and in promoting academic achievement (Caprara et al., 2000). Therefore, parents, caregivers, teachers and mental health professionals could help by paying attention to and fostering the development of the LBC's prosocial behaviour.

Support seeking

Support from significant others helps children cope with normative changes and stresses and is important for children's healthy development (Helsen et al., 2000). According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), distress activates the attachment system, inducing the need for the attachment figure's support. Consequently, support seeking is viewed as an attachment-related coping strategy that helps sooth distress aroused from physical and psychological threats (Bodner et al., 2019; Vandevivere et al., 2015). This may be the main attachment-related

strategy for children in middle childhood as children beyond infancy rely less on direct physical comfort, e.g., hugging, kissing. The person whom children seek support from is regarded as serving a 'safe haven' function and is viewed as an attachment figure. The current study found that the LBC continued to seek support from migrant parents when needed. Child 35 stated: 'I felt like calling them for chat when I felt lonely at home.' The children also sought support from other people in their immediate contexts, including the parent remaining at home, caregivers, peers, teachers and neighbours.

Peers had significant weight in the LBC's emotional lives by providing companionship and comfort. The LBC not only spent time with peers at school but also made plans with friends to hang out together in the weekends. For example, child 23 stated: 'I felt lonely at home, because I couldn't hang out with friends. Sometimes, when I'm very lonely I would go out to look for my friends.' Children also attempted to elicit support from their friends by sharing their vulnerabilities. Child eight described how she expressed her feelings to her friends regarding her mother's leaving and received comfort from them:

I cried and told them about my mum. They said 'it's going to be okay. Your mum went out to work, it's not like she didn't want you, don't be too upset, if you have any problems at school in the future, just tell us, we will help you.'

The act of seeking comfort from friends when in distress showed that friends serve an attachment-related function. Children could develop peer attachments with their best friends. The development of peer attachment was most evident in the case of child 30 who actively constructed strong attachments with friends. Like many other children, child 30 compared intimate peer relationships to relationships with siblings. These friendships could be compared to self-selected family relationships. Child 30

described his experiences of having a traditional and rather romantic ceremony to officially establish brotherhood with his best mates:

We decided to become sworn brothers ... Each of us brought a burning stick and we found some dry grass and burnt it. We made a kowtow [a Chinese custom in worship of kneeling and touching the ground with the forehead] together and launched the burning stick in the water.

Through the ceremony, the child made a commitment to his best friends and established a strong emotional bond.

The support children sought could be diverse, based on their emotional, instrumental and material needs. For example, children would ask their neighbours for help with the homework and call their parents to buy study materials. When negotiating material needs with parents, children could use various strategies including exchanging materials for good behaviour, nagging, and coercion or even lying. For example, child nine stated:

They took my phone away because they were unhappy with my score at school, and they thought I spent too much time on the phone. So, I told them I would study hard and get my scores back and they had to give me the phone then.

The diverse support children sought from their social networks helped satisfy their needs, at least in the short term, and cope with their everyday demands in life.

7.1.2 The second key construct: children's perceptions of doing rural migrant families

The grounded theory also revealed children's perceptions of the family processes in the context of parental migration. These family processes took place in the everyday family lives of the LBC. Children were often not the family members

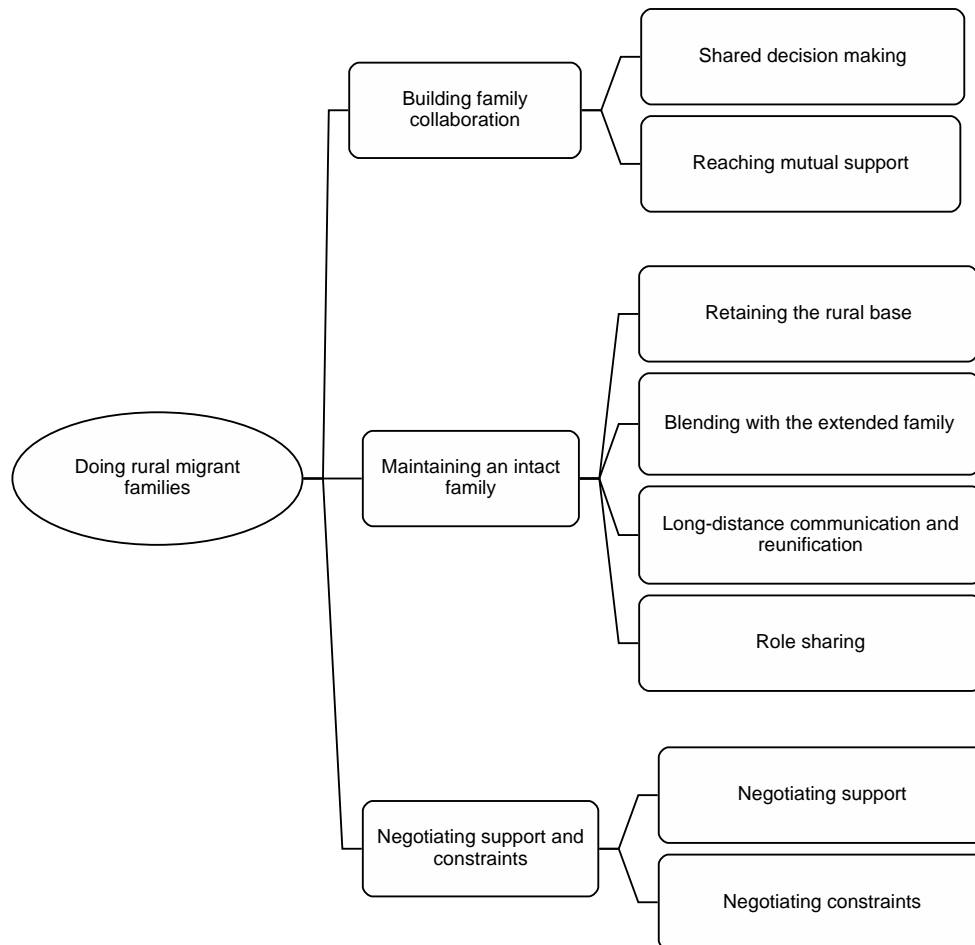
who initiated these family processes, but they intensively participated in these processes in one way or another. For example, some children heard from their grandparents that their parents had been sending money to grandparents to support the family. The children were not directly involved in this interaction as they were not the recipients of the remittances themselves and they did not witness their grandparent's receiving money in person. Nonetheless, they heard about this family process and incorporated the information into their understandings of their migrant parents' roles in the family. Sometimes, children were more directly involved in the family processes. For example, children received phone calls from their parents and would call parents by themselves. Many children established routines of engaging in long-distance communication with their parents and incorporated these routines into their perceptions of relationship configurations in their families.

The children's ideas of the family processes showed their own constructions of the concept of family. Children's perspectives on their families might be constrained by their cognitive development and access to relevant information and were often ignored by adults. Moreover, their perspectives on family might not be congruent with the perspectives of the other family members within the same household. For example, parents may see the occasional calls with their children as being sufficient in fulfilling parenting duties, while children may perceive that they are not getting emotional care from their parents. It is important to understand children's own perspectives on family, as these perspectives could greatly impact the way children cope with the changes and challenges in the families.

There is a growing trend in research exploring children's perceptions on the family. Many of these studies focus on exploring children's perceptions on the static features of the families, the family structure (Ellingsen et al., 2011; Rigg & Pryor,

2006). For example, Rigg and Pryor's (2006) study explored how children viewed different family structures, such as married couples with children, cohabiting couples, lone-parent households, and which of these were endorsed as families by children from different cultural backgrounds. This grounded theory revealed that LBC's understanding of their families was mainly based on the active ongoing family processes through which the family members negotiated family roles, maintained relationships and fulfilled family functioning. For example, Child 25 had a very negative view of his divorced father and stated that: 'I don't care about him. He used to be my father, but he is not my father anymore. He never cared about the family, and we haven't talked for over two years.' The child 'disowned' his father as his father never fulfilled his role of father. The child judged who was in the family based on the practice rather than the blood. Therefore, the second key concept of the grounded theory was about the LBC's perception of their family and was conceptualised as children's perception of doing rural migrant families.

The families of the LBC are conceptualised as rural migrant families rather than as left-behind families (Knipe et al., 2019; Paudyal & Tunprasert, 2018). The term 'left-behind family' gives the impression of excluding migrant parents from the family left behind in the rural hometown. However, from the children's perspectives, their migrant parents continued to play active roles in their rural families. Therefore, the LBC's families are called rural migrant families to include migrant parents and to differentiate them from other rural families that were not experiencing migration. The children's family perception was further conceptualised as 'doing rural migrant families' (Figure 7), because families were perceived as consisting of active processes or 'sets of practices' (Morgan, 2011) rather than discrete social institutions with clear boundaries.

Figure 7***The construct of doing rural migrant families******The first family practice: Building family collaboration***

The first family practice of doing rural migrant family as perceived by the children was building family collaboration that enabled the migration to happen and go on for years. Though it was the parents who went to work in the cities, it took the whole family, including the children's, shared efforts to make it make. Building a family collaboration included the processes of the families making shared decisions and reaching mutual support of migration.

Shared decision making

Though children were rarely involved in early decisions about the migration, through observation and family communications, they were aware that making decisions about migration was a shared collaborative process in the family. Migration was not an individual decision that could be solely decided by the parents, but it was largely made at the level of household requiring negotiations within the family. Many children observed that parents and grandparents engaged in discussions to arrange the family life after migration. For example, child 37 stated that on the day their parents were leaving, 'I heard my parents tell grandma to take good care of us and if she needed money, just call them and they would send the money home.' Children were also at least partly aware how parents and their caregivers cooperated in managing the migration. For example, child five said that, 'dad usually sent money to uncle's bank card, and uncle would get money from the card and give me pocket money'.

Decisions about migration could go through constant negotiations and renegotiations, balancing the gains of labour migration against household needs in their social-economic contexts. Also, changing situations for the left-behind family members may require migrants to terminate migration early and return to their rural hometowns. For example, child two stated: 'Mum and dad had an argument last time. Mum wanted to stay at home to take care of my younger brother until he started kindergarten, but dad didn't agree. He wanted mum to continue working in the cities.' The situation of the left-behind family members could impact the migration behaviour of the parents, and vice versa, changes in the parents' migration could impact the life of the left-behind family members. Besides terminating migration, several parents changed their jobs or migration locations, which could influence the

whole family by changing the household economy and contact with the left-behind family members. For example, child seven said, 'they planned to burn oils and sell oils nearby next year. So then, they could come home more often.'

The migration decision used to be regarded as an individual decision (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Petrov; 2007), but the current research from the children's perspective, shows that the decision is not made independent of other family members, instead, migration is a household decision. This view is reflected in the NEW Economics of Labour Migration (Abdul et al., 2020), which consider that the household is the migration unit. The proposition of migration as a collective household decision is also supported by studies on the rural-urban migration in China and international labour migration (Agesa, 2004; De Brauw & Rozelle, 2008; Tsegai, 2007).

Reaching mutual support

The second aspect of building family collaboration is to reach mutual support of the migration within the family, which is largely achieved through family communication. Children are often intensely involved in these communications. Adults told them about the motive and purpose of the migration, giving reasons such as sacrifice, devotion and family obligation, in order to gain the children's understanding and support for the parental migration. The most important migration-related reason given to the children was that their parents did not migrate for their own personal interests, but for the benefit of their children or for the whole family. For example, child 24 stated: 'I heard that they had left for the city. I was crying and hugging my grandma. My grandma said, don't cry, they were doing it for you and your elder sister.' These communications emphasised the migration as a form of

family devotion rather than child abandonment and ensured the whole family's consent and support on the matter.

Caregivers communicated with children about their parents' devotion to the family, and migrant parents also spoke to their children about their grandparents' hard work in taking care of them. These family communications reinforced children's comprehension and appreciation of the migration not only from the perspective of the parents, but also from other people supporting the migration and more importantly, from the perspective of the whole family. For example, child 33 stated: 'My mum told me to be obedient and listen to my grandma. She also asked me to help grandma whenever I could because grandma was old, and it was not easy for her to take care of us.' It fostered a sense of family collaboration in the migration and in making a thriving family; a sense of all family members needing to work together for the family's interests. Children were not only receivers of their parents' devotion and their grandparents' care, but they were also required to contribute to the family collaboration in the migration in their own way, even simply by not being naughty at home.

The family communication that emphasised the 'family interests' also entailed a sense of putting family first before individuals and making individual sacrifices for the family's interests. For rural migrant families, family interests were not the sum of individual interest. It was in the family's best interests, all things considered, that migration was the necessary choice, and everyone, including the children, needed to make certain sacrifices. For the LBC, the sacrifice was the loss of their parents' companionship, the emotional distress they had to endure and the many changes in their lives. Adults clearly explained this situation to the children, who had to accept these sacrifices for the sake of their families. For example, child nine's mother

comforted on her on the phone saying: 'I know it is not easy, but you have to tolerate it, we don't have another way.' Children internalised these beliefs and became supportive of their parents' migration by accepting and tolerating the difficulties in their lives. For example, child 37 decided to not to tell her mother about her conflicts with her grandfather. She stated, 'I didn't tell my mother; I didn't want to worry her. If she knew, she would be very sad, after all she's already working so hard in the city.'

Another belief that was communicated within the family and understood by the children was that migration was the price to pay for a better future for them and the whole family. This future perspective involved future-related expectations, for instance the end of the migration and eventual family reunion; and behaviour, for instance buying a new property, saving up money for college. Such a future time perspective is similar to the concept of 'future orientation'. Broadly speaking, future orientation involves people's thoughts and feelings about their future (Seginer, 2009; Stoddard et al., 2011) and usually 'encourages and rewards future-oriented behaviours such as planning and delaying gratification' (Ashkanasy et al., 2004). The current study shows that a future-oriented perspective is more than an individual belief, it could also be a belief that was communicated in the families between adults and children and endorsed by all the family members. For example, child 26 described the family communication involving a future perspective, 'They told me to study hard, and they would come back home when I got into a nice high school.' Through such communications, the future perspective on migration was internalised and reflected from the children's narratives. For instance, child 21 stated, 'I felt I must study hard, get into a good school and have a good job. So, in the future, my parents no longer need to work in the cities and the grandpa did not need be so

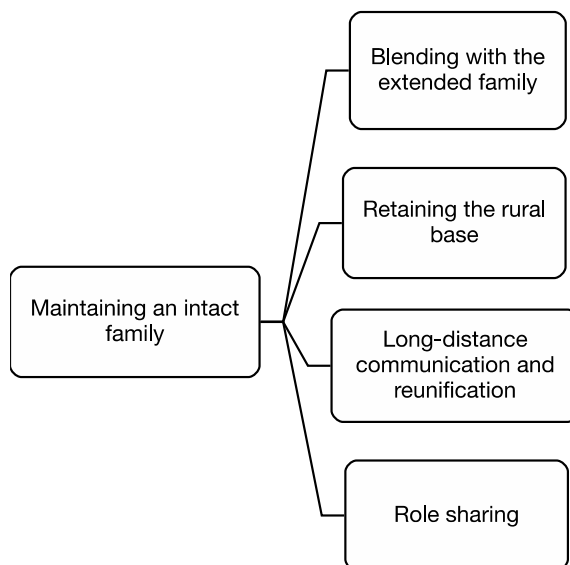
tired.' The child's determination to study hard and find a good job was not for the child's individual interest but in the whole family's interests.

The second family practice: Maintaining an intact family

The practice of maintaining an intact family (Figure 8) reflects the LBC's perceptions of the process of their rural families transforming into rural migrant families with the necessary changes and adjustments in the original family structures. Children perceived that their rural migrant families were not broken down by the physical separations caused by the migration but maintained family functioning and connection. Their families achieved this through processes of 'blending with the extended family', 'retaining the rural base', 'long-distance communication and reunification' and 'role sharing'.

Figure 8

Stretching family boundaries across distance



Blending with the extended family

The first family structure change the LBC experienced was in their care arrangements or living arrangements in order to avoid the 'care drain' after their parents left home. Over two-thirds of the LBC remained in their own homes after migration. These children had been living in extended families before migration. After migration, the remaining adults at home, such as grandparents and older siblings, became the main caregivers of the LBC in the rural hometown. Less than one-third of the LBC left their original parental households to live with their grandparents or other relatives. Some of these children moved because there were no other adult caregivers available at home. For example, child 25 explained: 'After my parents went out to work, just me and my older brother were left at home. So, my parents sent me to our maternal grandparents' home.' For others, even when there were adults living in the households, they were not always able to provide childcare for the LBC for various reasons, such as the declining health of the adults, or other children living in the household needing childcare.

The movement of children increased the interactions between the migrant parents, children and their surrogate caregivers, it strengthened their relationships and created a new blended household. For example, when asked who she considered to be her family members, child 24 stated: 'my dad, mum, my grandma, me and my cousin sister', this cousin was also a left-behind child and had been living with the grandma before child 24 moved in. Some of the children moved into their grandparents' places which were located close to their own homes. For these children, their original nuclear families had always been in constant social, emotional and financial interaction with the extended family members before the migration. The grandparent-led households and the parent-led households were not two completely

independent households with clear boundaries, but rather operated as an extended family despite the fact that they were living in different houses. LBC moving into grandparents' homes, which were right next to their own houses, may not be viewed as moving into new households, but rather a reorganisation of living arrangements within an extended family. The adjustments of the children's care arrangements showed the flexibility of the structures in Chinese families, which could include people not residing under the same roof. Apart from leaving the LBC to their grandparents or relatives, the scattering of family members needing care-arrangements to different households further exemplified the flexibility of rural households. For example, two siblings may be sent to paternal and maternal grandparents' places respectively, and an elderly grandfather may go to live with a child's uncle.

Such adjustments and reorganisation in household structure are ingrained in the long-term family norms in Chinese culture. The roles and functions of family members in Chinese culture are different from those in western families. In China, it is the norm for the extended family to provide care for young children and elderly parents throughout the family life cycle (Falkingham et al., 2019). Many Chinese families believe that grandparents are obligated to help take care of their grandchildren when their adult children are at work (Chen et al., 2011), while at the same time, adult children are obligated to provide care to their aging parents (Korinek et al., 2011).

It has been argued that modernisation, urbanisation and migration may have lessened such family cohesion from the traditions of the past, but the current study shows that migration has not undermined family cohesion within extended families (Zimmer & Kwong, 2003). This shows the uniqueness of Chinese nuclear families. In

classic family studies, family structure is understood as a fixed characteristic with different family structure types exclusive to each other. However, the structure of contemporary Chinese families is fluid and dynamic. Nuclear families have not completely grown out of the parental family but are anchored in extended family networks (Xu & Xia, 2014). A nuclear family separated from the parent family at one point may join it again later, such as in the case of young couple returning to live with parents again once a child is born, or when an elderly parent falls sick. Family structures go through transformations multiple times in order to fulfil the needs of the family at different stages of the family life cycle. In traditional Chinese family culture, especially in rural China, the concept of family or home is often broader than the nuclear family and includes the extended family and the home village (Fan & Wang, 2008). Families are viewed as a kinship group, usually living in one household and functioning as a large, self-sustaining unit, with members taking responsibility for increasing the resources of their extended families, and the extended families providing support to the nuclear families (Wang, 2021; Xin et al., 2021). For many rural migrant families, the labour migration often meant that the 'nuclear families' relied on support from their extended families, while at the same time the migrant parents constantly contributed to the extended families by sending money back to the grandparents.

Retaining rural bases

The children's sense of their families not being dissolved by the migration of their parents or split into two separate rural and urban households was supported by their perception of their parents' migration pattern. Also, they did not see their parents' migration as a step on the path of bringing the whole family to the city and developing into an urban family. The children perceived that their families were still

based in rural areas as their parents only went to the cities to make money and did not intend to settle down in the cities. Migrant parents did not really leave the household completely but rather circulated between the city as a place of work and the rural hometown as the family home. In the children's narratives, they only referred the home in the rural hometown as 'the home'. They usually called the places in the cities where their parents were living as the 'the rent place', 'the dorm' or the 'their living place'. When asked about whether they were going to move to the cities to be with their parents in the future, many children gave the definite answer of 'no'. For example, child 18 replied, 'No, they are only making money there. Our home is here. They are working for the home here.'

The children's perceptions of the non-permanent nature of parental migration corresponded with the findings about migration patterns of rural migrants in China. Studies found that the majority of migrants from rural China did not intend to settle down permanently in the cities (Ai et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2011). Previously, it had usually been thought that the majority of rural labourers did not settle down in the cities because the household registration system prevented them from settling. The institutional system's restriction was indeed one important legal impediment to permanent urban settlement. Yet some migrants did not have a strong desire to settle in the cities, even if they were given the chance to do so. The relaxation of household registration rules in several cities has confirmed that the majority migrants did not choose to obtain urban hukou even when they could, and still wished to return home eventually (Huang, 2008). The migrants still regarded themselves as part of their rural households.

Temporary and circular migration has become very common in countries where labour markets are insecure and where there is a large rural base (Potts,

2011; Todes et al., 2010), such as India, China, Africa and Vietnam (Chen & Fan, 2018; Deshingkar, 2005; Keshri & Bhagat, 2012). The concept of 'security' was used as a framework to understand rural migrants' circular mobility behaviour. Retaining the home of origin in rural hometowns represents a 'sense of security, identity and history and a preferred place for retirement' (Posel, 2004, p. 286) and serves as a safety net in times of economic or health-related crisis (Williams et al., 2008). Uncertainty in the formal urban labour market and growing competition within the informal sector also worked as an incentive for migrant workers to keep significant ties to the rural land (Williams et al., 2008). This is the case with the urban labour market in China, where migrant jobs in cities are often insecure and mostly demand a young, manual workforce. When migrant workers become old, they usually have to return to their rural hometowns. The countryside is the migrants' social security, providing them with a support system consisting of elderly parents, spouses, children, other relatives and rural villagers (Fan & Wang, 2008). Keeping the family in the place of origin, means that migrants and the left-behind family members are able to maintain connections. Though the current research did not explore the perspectives of the migrant parents, the LBC certainly acknowledged their migrant parents' continuing contributions and commitments to the rural homes and still viewed their parents as viable members of the rural households. This is further exemplified in the following section of 'role sharing' on the children's perceptions of their parents' roles in the families.

The sense of households not being fragmented by the migration may be observed from the Chinese term for left-behind children (留守儿童), which has different connotations compared to the English term. The English term 'left-behind children' was developed from a 'migrant centred' perspective. The status of being

left-behind was defined in relation to those who moved away, i.e., the migrants. The underlying assumption was that children should not be left in the hometown but move to the cities together with their parents. The city was seen as the goal, while the hometown was perceived as the place the migrants put behind them. However, the word ‘留守’ literally means ‘to stay and to guard’ in Chinese. The Chinese word puts the hometown in the central position, implying that the hometown was the base to which migrants would eventually return. The city was not the destination for the migrant families.

Long-distance communication and reunification

Two main strategies were used by rural migrant families to stay connected and transcend geographical separations, long-distance communications and visits. Migrant families depend heavily on ICT to maintain relationships at a distance, including phone calls, video calls and Wechat (the Chinese version of WhatsApp). Through these communications, the migrant parents and left-behind families maintained constant interaction. The children could hear and see their parents and engage in synchronised interactions with them. Though not living together and lacking face-to-face interaction in person, the communication via ICT blurred the distinction between in-person and virtual interaction in parent-child relationships and enabled the partial presence of migrant parents.

Contact with parents varied in terms of means and frequency. Some children reported having regular and frequent phone calls with their parents, they managed to establish a routine of contacting their parents. Although contact frequency ranged from daily to nearly no contact at all, the majority of children reported having weekly contact with their migrant parents.

Long-distance communication increased the familiarity between migrant parents and their children and involvement in each other's lives. Children kept their parents updated about their lives and also were told about life in the city by their parents. For example, child 26 stated: 'My parents sent us some videos of their lives in the cities. They showed us what kind of jobs they were doing, how they were doing them, and the place where they were living.' Through communication, they were able to exchange information, such as what was happening at home; affection, for instance children telling parents how much they missed them; and assistance, for instance children asking parents for advice on the phone.

These findings are consistent with the literature on transnational families, which solidarity, belonging and relatedness may not dissolve in cross-border families. Communication through ICT could be crucial for transnational families to keep relationships alive, especially for those who had experienced separation over many years (Acedera & Yeoh, 2019; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Waruwu, 2021). For example, studies showed that migrant mothers used creative ways to maintain communication with their children as a means of 'being there' and to 'achieve a resemblance of intimate family life' (Parreñas, 2005, p. 256). They established communication routines through phone calls, texts, emails, social media updates, voice recordings and sending photographs.

Children experienced three types of reunifications with migrant parents, at the Chinese New Year, summer school holidays and temporary visits from parents (e.g., when grandparents fell ill, or parents needed to attend a funeral). The Chinese New Year was the most common and important family reunion for most rural migrant families. When the researcher was interviewing the LBC for the first time, which took place a couple months before the New Year, some children told the researcher that

they were looking forward to the New Year reunion with the parents during the holiday.

Also known as the Spring Festival, this homecoming of migrant workers has been described in the media as 'the biggest human migration on earth', with millions of migrant workers travelling back to celebrate in rural hometowns annually ('What does the biggest human migration on earth look like on a map?', 2015). The Spring Festival homecoming is different from other types of travel due to its ritualised forms and cultural meaning (Li, 2017). The journey is often filled with suffering and endurance, such as a long train ride and the difficulty in getting tickets. Indeed child 25 recalled her mother's long journey back home:

She was working in Tibet [to the west of China]. She had to take an overnight bus to the city to take the flight. She needed to transfer flights in Kunming before she landed in Baoshao. She called me the night she arrived in Baoshao and decided to stay there overnight because she was too tired. Then she arrived home the next day.

The Spring Festival homecoming is more than a trip, it is a collective response to family separations induced by the massive internal labour migration and the collective pursuit of 'home'. The place the migrants return to contain a sense of family togetherness and belonging that is missing both in the children's life and the migrants' lives in the cities (Li, 2018). For example, child 20 said, 'I felt so excited to see them [in the holiday], very, very happy. I felt I had been looking forward to this moment for a long time. I felt our family was complete.'

The New Year holiday was also a time for parents and children to rekindle their attachment and to compensate for the lack of intimacy during the migration. Almost all children who had their parents back at New Year mentioned that their

parents brought gifts for them. The gifts might be toys, study materials, bikes, watches or nutritious food that parents bought in the cities. These gifts represented parental care and love for their children and displayed the economic benefits of the migration, justifying the long-term family separation during the rest of the year. For example, child one stated, 'I got a lot of new clothes, too many for me to wear. I felt so happy and very moved.'

For the LBC, the most important memory of the Spring Festival reunion is the time spent with their parents. Many children described having a holiday trip with their parents to other cities. Parents took children to the zoo, parks or shopping malls for recreation and bonding. Bonding with children did not necessarily require gifts or special activities. Child 12 stated the most memorable family activity during the New Year reunion was that her mum cooked her favourite food in person, her father cooked some fish and the whole family ate together. Time spent together as a family has the symbolic power of strengthening family bonds (Tubbs et al., 2005).

The reunion provided the relational benefit of updating each other after separation. For example, child 18 noticed that: 'They looked trendier now. Their skin got fairer. My dad even learnt a new accent. He showed it to us, it was very amusing.' The 'updating' could also make children and parents understand and appreciate each other's efforts and sacrifices. For example, many children noticed their parents looked older, and felt it was because of their hard work in the cities. Despite access to ICT, some children preferred to only share some private feelings to their parents in person during the reunion. For example, child one stated: 'I told it [how grandpa was treating her unfairly] to my mum when she was back. I told her in person. She said, "poor child, you suffered a lot. This is the last year of me working in the city. Next year after I come back, it will be better".'

In addition to bonding with family members, the migrant parents also connected with the local community during the reunion. They would visit relatives, invite friends over for meals and participate in communal activities. For example, child 30 stated, 'We went to someone's home. They killed a big pig and invited a lot of people in the village.' Families also used this time for important family events, such as holding their older children's weddings. By attending and holding these community events, the families were able to present themselves as cohesive and prosperous family units and could increase children's family identity. When the parents were not at home, the LBC either missed the chance of going to community events or going alone. For example, child nine stated: 'Every time a family had a wedding reception, all my classmates would go there with their entire families, but I could only go there alone. My grandparents were too old to take me.' When their parents were at home, children had more opportunities to participate in community activities and strengthen their ties to the local community.

These Spring Festival activities and their family meanings have created a Spring Festival ritual for rural migrant families. Baxter and Braithwaite (2006, p. 263) defined a family ritual as 'a voluntary, recurring, patterned communication event', jointly performed by family members that 'pays homage to what they regard as sacred, thereby producing and reproducing a family's identity and its web of social relations'. Bonding within families and attending community events as family units constructed the internal identities of the rural migrant families and demonstrated their identity in public (Li, 2018). It has been argued that the importance of many traditional Chinese festivals is declining in the modern world, however, for rural migrant families, the spatial dispersion of family members in daily life may have intensified the symbolic relevance of some family rituals.

Role sharing

Migratory separation impeded the fulfilment of family obligations and called for other family members to pitch in and fill the gaps left by the migrant parents. The rural migrant families went through a process of role restructuring wherein all members shared the essential family roles.

In terms of the financial provider, the migrant parents continued playing the role of breadwinner for their family. They contributed to their rural family financially by sending money or materials, children usually only knew about this indirectly through their caregivers. For example, child 37 stated, 'My parents told my grandparents to take care of us [me and my sister] well and tell them if we ever needed money, my parents would send it back.' There were various ways that migrant parents sent money to their families. They might transfer the money through the bank or give the cash to adult carers in person during a reunion. They might send money back regularly or only when requested. In addition to sending money back, migrant parents would send materials back, such as clothes, dietary supplements, study equipment etc. The study of Filipino worker families also found that migrant mothers attempted to 'micromanage their families across geographical distances' by supervising and monitoring the household budget and the financial expenditures of the family (Parreñas, 2005, p. 326).

The LBC observed that their grandparents contributed to the family economy by managing the family budget and working on the land. Even before the migration, grandparents were part of the main household labour force. They engaged in various household chores, agricultural work and other domestic duties. Children described their grandparents planting various vegetables on the land, grazing cows, feeding livestock, cutting grass on the land and gathering wood from the mountains. This

observation resonated with the finding by Jacka (2014) that despite their old age, left-behind older people in rural China were active and able workers, making a significant contribution to the family, contrary to the stereotypical image of the elderly as being total 'dependants'. Uncles and aunts who took the role of surrogate carers of the LBC, would also participate in other economic activities, such as selling goods besides agricultural work.

The financial contribution from the migration did not reduce the grandparents' work. Actually, the grandparents' work tended to increase after the labour migration of their adult children. Child 35 stated, 'I tried to help my grandparents on the land. They're old now, but they needed to do more work on the land after my parents left.' In some cases, when migrant parents failed to contribute financially, the surrogate carers needed to provide for the children financially. Child 25 stated: 'Last term, it was my grandparents who paid for my tuition fee. I felt very sour.'

Migrant parents who could not help with housework while living in the cities would resume their familiar roles during the New Year reunion. Some work, such as land work that required more intense labour, would be put aside for the migrators to finish when they returned home. Many children recalled their parents doing agricultural work or repairing their home throughout the entire holiday. In some cases, migrant parents would engage in seasonal migration by taking extended visits home to attend to necessary agricultural work, such as spring seeding. Some work was done during the New Year holiday by migrants not only because the work could not be handled by older carers during the year, but also because the work was costly, and they needed to save money. For example, child nine stated: 'My parents stayed one month. They were building the pigsties and an extra storage house. They were working on it the whole New Year.'

The migrant parents' work in the rural hometown exemplified their migration pattern of 'circular migration' between rural and urban areas. This further supported the view that parental migration was not an individual decision but a household strategy as the household aimed to allocate its labour resources between the rural and the urban area so as to maximize household utility (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2008).

Another important role in the family was childcare. Surrogate carers took over childcare tasks including providing meals, ensuring children's safety and health, preparing children for boarding, sending children to school and picking them up from the school. For example, child 31 described weekly school preparations: 'On Sunday, she went to buy snacks for me and then came home to find the clothes I needed to take to school.'

The surrogate carers also engaged in parenting, such as supervising children's study and disciplining children for behavioural issues. The carers disciplined children using parenting strategies including, lecturing, scolding, rewarding or rejecting children's requests, and the threat of, or actual physical punishment. For example, child 30 stated:

She would beat us a bit when we weren't listening to her and gave us some pocket money to buy some stuff if we were obedient. Sometimes, before she left to farm the land, she would also leave me some money.

Migrant parents did not quit from their parental roles but practised long-distance parenting. Similar to parents who were living with their children, migrant parents cared about children's health, safety, school performances, behaviour and emotional needs. For example, child 24 stated:

My mum asked me if I had enough money, I said I had. And then she asked me if I needed to put on more clothes when the weather was getting colder.

And she also asked me if I was getting into any trouble at school, did anyone bully me?

Parents most frequently checked whether children were behaving well or listening to adults at home. For example, child 25 mentioned that she was scolded by her mum for not listening to her grandfather. Sometimes parents would offer direct help by sending things from the cities to their children or by tutoring them over the phone.

Migrant parents and surrogate carers both took part in parenting. Parents and carers might cooperate by performing different roles for children. Some children mentioned that their grandparents were unable to help with their study because their grandparents were uneducated. Therefore, they still needed to turn to their parents for help with homework. For example, child 35 explained: 'I called my dad for help with my homework, because my grandma had only attended school for one year, she couldn't help me with it.'

The grandparents and parents also co-parented in disciplining children. Many children heard their carers saying that, 'if you don't behave well, I'm going to tell your parents and let them scold you.' Child 25 described the experience of her grandparents asking their adult migrant children for help to discipline her older brother. Eventually the migrant parents decided to let their son quit school and took him to the city where they were living. Co-parenting in China was very similar to the experiences of the LBC in the Philippines, in that parenting was a communal activity, involving the non-migrant parent, the migrant parent and the relatives altogether (Graham et al., 2012). Adults could arrange for the care of children and elders in

their families and leave to work in the cities, by using practices of 'child fostering' or 'outsourcing care'. The care arrangements also strengthened the migrants' connections with the social networks while living far away (Leinaweaver, 2010).

The third family practice: Negotiating support and constraints

The third family practice of 'negotiating support and constraints' (Figure 7) refers to the processes of rural migrant families interacting with their social contexts by actively drawing on the supports available to the families and overcoming the constraints faced by the families. It showed that family processes did not take place in a social vacuum. They interacted intimately with other social entities, such as school, the neighbourhood, local kinship networks, the larger community, and workplaces (Haynes & Dermott, 2011).

Negotiating support

The support from their social networks not only helped the rural families going through a prolonged migration phase, but also played an important role in enabling the initial migration. Many children recalled their parents' talking about family debts, of the money borrowed from relatives or local villagers. Though these debts might have compelled the parents to migrate, the act of borrowing and lending money indicated the parents' reliance on financial support from their local communities. Also, it was common for many migrant parents to rely on local villagers to find jobs in the cities, and they often worked and lived with the villagers in the cities. For example, child nine described, 'my parents were living in the factory dorms with bunk beds, together with people from the same village.' Child eight also explained that 'my father wanted to go to Guizhou, one of his brothers in the family was working there'. These employment networks were also revealed when children mentioned that their uncles or older siblings joining their migrant parents in the cities and started working

with their migrant parents. Studies of transnational migration show that extended kinship networks continue to play a role in migration decisions (Levitt, 2011; Vertovec, 2003). Accounts of Central American transnational families show that spouses, parents and other relatives often pooled financial resources or took out loans to raise the money needed to migrate themselves or to send one family member to the US, with the expectation of receiving remittances later (Loucky et al., 2000).

When some needs could not be fulfilled within the families, many rural families actively introduced resources from the external environment. During migration, the LBC frequently mentioned their family's receiving assistance from relatives (e.g., cousins or aunts), neighbours, local villagers, and the schools. The support the children and the families received was multidimensional encompassing instrumental assistance, resources, information sharing, emotional and psychological support (Lopez & Salas, 2006). Due to their proximity, children and rural families frequently sought help from their neighbours. Child 22 stated: 'My grandfather couldn't take me and my sister to the school, so he went to our neighbour's place and asked the neighbour to take us to the school.'

Children were aware that parents and teachers communicated with each other and cooperated in school matters. Child 14 described how her mother helped her to deal with a bully through the teacher, 'I told my mum about it, and she comforted me, then she called the teacher to ask the teacher to help me.' Parents could contact their children at school via the teachers, this was particularly important for young children without their own mobile phones. Child 10 state: 'My mum called Teacher Li and asked her to let me have a video call with mum at night using Mrs. Li's mobile phone.'

Negotiating constraints

As with other socially disadvantaged groups, rural migrant families were always experiencing constraints. From the moment when children learnt that their parents had to leave home to make money for the family, for instance by saving money for the future or paying off debts, they learnt that parental migration was a strategy to overcome the familial constraint of financial difficulties. Some children had a more sophisticated understanding of the economic factors associated with the migration, including the macroeconomic constraint rural-urban divisions, local economy underdevelopment, as well as the household registration policies that partly compelled their parents to leave them behind in the rural hometowns. In the current study Child 3 was a returned migrant child. He stated,

I was living in Shanghai with my parents for my primary school. Before I started my middle school, I moved back here because I did not have the hukou of Shanghai and could not attend the high school there.

This child's case was similar to the other LBC, because it showed that the situation was restricting for the migrant families; they could not opt out of the living strategy of migration or become recognised as urban residents regarding their access to educational resources and other social resources. The child's parents managed their way between family togetherness and the constraints on their child's education.

The children also perceived many intra-familial restrictions on their efforts to attain better lives, such as the role drain in the family, the ruptures in family relationships, unforeseen events in the family, the contradictory interests of different family members, and the restrictions of schools and workplaces. Though non-

migrant families experienced constraints in their daily lives as well, the labour migration amplified and created many more constraints for the rural migrant families.

As illustrated in the section on 'role sharing', children actively participated in family duties. Therefore, they noticed that despite role sharing and reassignment, their families still experienced many difficulties. For instance, the absence of migrant parents reduced the household labour force and impacted the household economy. For instance, child 36 stated: 'We used to run a small store in the village. Because my parents are not at home now. No one helps to fill up the stock in the store. The store doesn't have much business now.'

Though the migrant parents migrated for financial purposes, not all families benefited from the migration financially. Their remittances home may be unreliable. For example, child 24 stated: 'Their work in the cities did not make the family better off. Only when we are really running out of money, they would send back 3000-4000CNY home.' (Approximately 330-440 GBP). Child 13 and a few other families has lost contact with their migrant fathers for years and had not received any money from them. Some researchers have proposed that not all migrant families or LBC benefited from the migrants' remittances, which could be due to a variety of factors, including migration related debts, the paucity of remittances, inappropriate use of the remittance or the reduction in agricultural income after the migration. As a result, the migrant families could have even harder lives than pre-migration (Pan & Wang, 2018; Simth-Estelle & Gruksin, 2003).

Labour migration not only challenged parent-child relationships, but also impacted other family relationships. Migratory separation could take place between migrant parents as well. Even if both parents migrated, they did not necessarily migrate to the same city, and if they were living in the same city, they might not live

together. Child eight told the story of his father having an affair with a colleague, while his mother was living and working in another city. She commented that 'I felt very sad, I felt he should stop doing that with that woman. It was very unfair to my mum.' Although split migration (migrating couples not living together) may lead to marital problems, it could work in reverse too. For example, child 25 stated, 'Dad went to Guangdong, mum went to Tibet. They did not go to the same place because they did not get along with each other.' Many of the LBC told stories of marital violence, parental arguments in the family and expressed their own views on these conflicts. For example, child 25 explained: 'They didn't get along. My mum could not stand my dad. They were arguing whole day. Dad would beat my mum. I felt very bad for her. She had bruises on her body whole day.' Studies have also shown that children start to develop an understanding of the nature of marital conflict from a very young age (Jenkins & Buccion, 2000; Johnsen et al., 2018). The current study shows that the LBC, especially older LBC, were keenly aware of the marital conflicts in their family without being told by their parents. They made sense of the marital conflicts and also chose to take sides in conflicts between fathers and mothers. Moreover, the marital conflicts, from small arguments to more serious conflicts such as infidelity or marital violence, were all perceived by children as unpleasant and stressful. For example, child 30 stated:

I was watching TV and heard them arguing in their room. They were arguing about money. I felt very bad and worried. I felt if they argued too much they would split and divorce. I went to their room and told them to stop arguing, but they didn't hear me, because my voice was not loud enough.

The rural migrant families could encounter unexpected events such as the illness and death of the family members. Child 22 reported that his mother died from

an accident while she was working on a construction site in the city. Child 30 experienced the death of her grandparents after parental migration.

The structure of boarding schools restricted family communication by applying a restriction on the children's interactions with parents and carers. The schools had strict rules and schedules. Boarding students arrived at school on Sunday afternoon and left for home on Friday afternoon every week during school terms. Students did not have access to telephones at school. Also, the schools banned mobile phones on campus, which further contributed to the time restriction on parent-child contact. In addition to restricting parent-child phone contact, many children reported that their parents left home for the cities or returned home from the cities on school days. As a result, the children missed out on the opportunities to say goodbye to their parents or to greet them on their arrival. For instance, child 36 stated, 'I didn't say goodbye to him. I got home on Friday and grandma told me he had left.' In some cases, when parents came back for a short stay, usually due to an emergency, the children could totally miss the opportunity to see their parents, because they were boarding. Child six stated: 'Once, when I got home on Friday, my grandma told me they were back home during the week and then left. I was very disappointed that I didn't get to see them.'

Similar to school, parents' workplaces often had rules and schedules that restricted parent-child contact and visits. Many children stated that they did not know when it was appropriate for them to contact their parents as they did not know if their parents were busy working. Child 15 further stated that her parents could not come home at the New Year because they were still working and could not get leave.

The LBC not only perceived the multiple constraints faced by their families, but also how their families negotiated these disadvantages. Although the labour

migration created constraints, on the other hand it provided the rural migrant families with increased income, information and resources that made it possible for them to have more choices, particularly regarding how to live their current lives and how to aspire to a better future.

Financially, some children witnessed how their families benefited from the migration, debts were paid off and the family livelihood improved. For example, child 28 stated: 'I can feel that our home has become better. We got new stuff in the house, the food, the clothing, all became better.' Many children stated that housing in the rural hometown improved after labour migration. They mentioned having their original house improved or owning new properties in the rural hometown or in the nearby city. Child 32 stated: 'We started building a new house after my parents made some money, we haven't finished the new house. In the future, I will also make money and add another floor to the house.' Building a new house represents social status for Chinese rural households, it also has a special meaning representing the solidarity of a family ('The condition of house building in poverty-stricken villages: working decades for a house', 2016; Murphy, 2002).

The improvement in the family economy has been confirmed in many migrant studies that explored the effects of remittances on the household economy or on poverty reduction. Studies on Chinese families (Feng, 2017; Yao et al., 2015) and families in other countries (Adams & Page, 2005; Abduvaliev & Bustillo, 2020; Anyanwu & Erhijakpor, 2010) have found that the money could improve household investments and increase spending on daily food consumption, housing, health care and education.

Parental migration gave the LBC more opportunities to be exposed to urban lives. They received gifts from the cities and some of them could visit their parents

during school holidays. Child 15 stated that his parents invited him over in holiday to 'open their eyes and have a look at the big city'. Therefore, a holiday in the city was for family reunification and for educational and parenting purposes. Parental migration also paved the way for children's future labour migration. Several children reported that they would start living and working with their parents after they finished junior-middle school education (approximately at the age of 14 or 15). Some children mentioned their older siblings had already joined their parents in the cities, the media describes them as the 'second generation of migrant workers'. The parents and children both gained livelihood choices from labour migration.

Contrary to the common perception that parental migration only had negative impacts on parent-child relationships that should be overcome, in some cases, the migration could have a positive impact on the relationship from changes in migrant parents' personalities, behaviour and parenting skill. For example, child 34 mentioned his father quit gambling after migration, which used to be a big stress for the whole family. Parenting changes were noticed by the LBC, with several children reporting that their parents started paying more attention to their studies by providing more supervision and monitoring. They also became less authoritative in their parenting. Child 35 stated: 'My dad used to beat me and my sister a lot, now he's willing to sit down and talk to us.' The improvement in parenting helped improve the relationship quality of the parent-child relationship and could further benefit the well-being of the children.

Parents and children accommodated the restrictions from schools and workplaces by arranging their phone calls to fit around these schedules. Children mostly received calls from their parents at the weekend. When children were away boarding on the day of parents left for the cities, some parents went to the school to

say goodbye to their children and have a proper farewell with them. For instance, child 25 described this: 'My mum came to school to see me and told me she was leaving on that day. She also told me to keep well at home and listen to my grandparents.' Other parents and children attempted to resist and overcome the restrictions of the school schedule and rules. Some parents bought their children watch-phones for more convenient contact. For instance, child 33 stated: 'Sometimes at school, after night study sessions, I use my watch-phone to call them, about every other day or every three days.'

These actions, which were explored from the children's perspectives, illustrate how families adjusted their family practices to accommodate and overcome familial and social constraints. These changes may be big, such as ending migration, or small, such as making phone calls during the weekend. Nonetheless, these changes and adjustments spoke to the flexibility of the family practices and the fluid and transitional nature of doing rural migrant families that moved beyond the model of migrant parents making money in the cities, while grandparents and children stayed in the rural hometowns waiting for their remittances. When the original family arrangements no longer provided a practical way to meet the essential needs of the family members, the families generated creative pathways for the future.

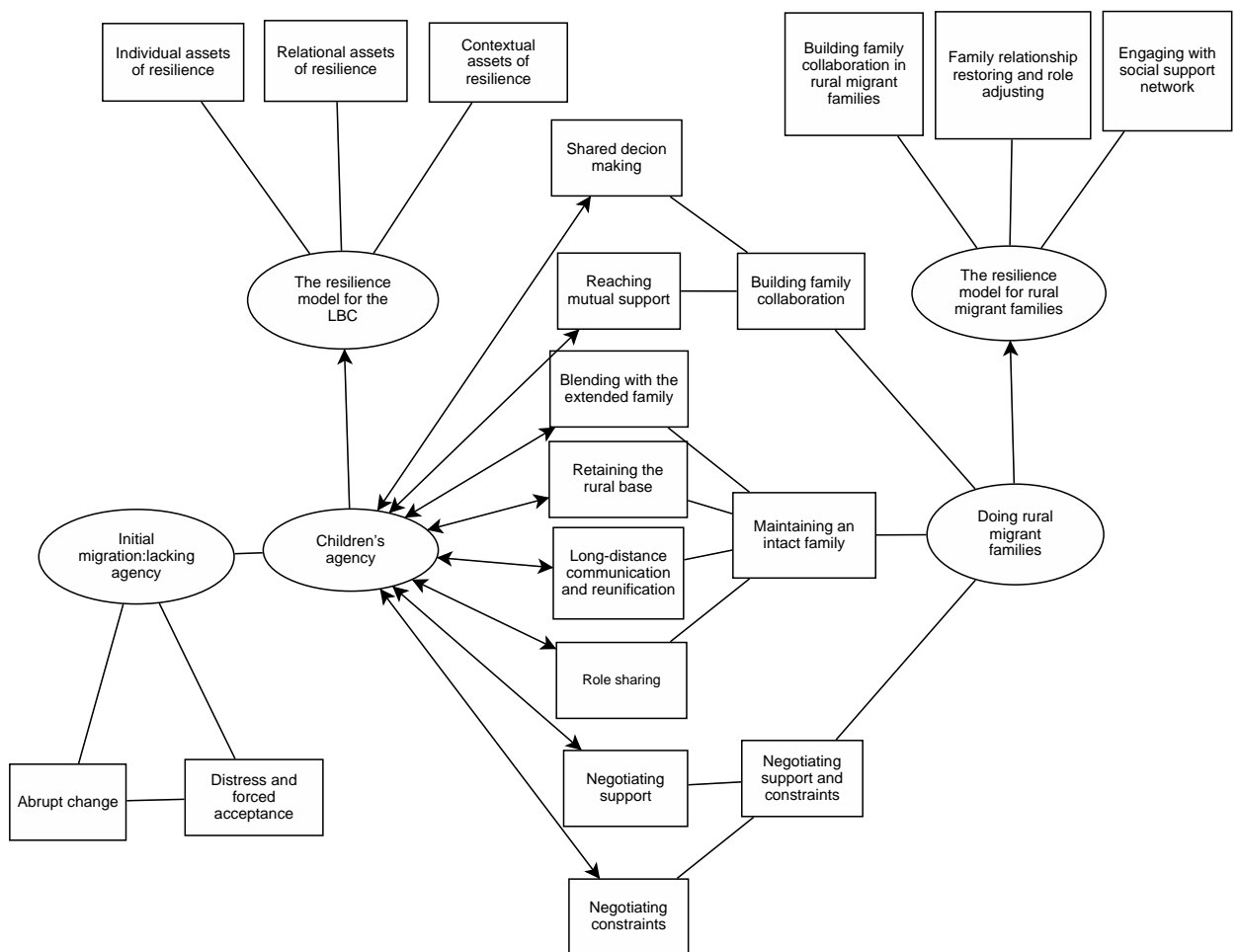
7.2 A grounded theory of LBC's experiences of parental migration

The key constructs from the results were interrelated. The family practices were both the contexts for the LBC's agency, as well as the manifestations of the LBC's agency. The key constructs were intertwined to create a coherent theory of the LBC's experiences of parental migration centring on the children's agency in doing rural migrant families (Figure 10). The grounded theory started with the children's experiences of their parents' first departure for migration, followed by the

children’s expression of their agencies in the family practices of doing rural migrant families, which illustrated the relationships between the two key constructs. Finally, the grounded theory formed resilience models for the LBC and rural migrant families informed by the key constructs of the grounded theory.

Figure 9

A grounded theory of the LBC’s experiences of the parental migration



7.2.1 Initial migration: lacking agency

Although one of the key constructs of the grounded theory is the LBC’s agency, their experiences of their parent’s initial migration was characterised as ‘lacking agency’. Their agencies were not expressed but rather suppressed in the

family's pre-migration process, such as making the decision about migration and preparing for the upcoming life changes after migration.

Abrupt change in life

Many children's stories of parental migration started abruptly with them waking up one day to notice their parents were not home. For example, child 18 stated, 'I didn't know [about the migration] at all. I noticed they were not at home on the first day and I asked other people, they told me they were going to work in the city to make money.' Not only were they not informed in advance of the migration plan, but after they discovered their parents had left, children were told lies about the migration. For example, participant seven stated: 'My grandpa told me they went to the city to buy milk for me, because I liked milk then. And they were going to come back in a few days.'

Due to the lack of prior communication about the migration, the LBC experienced the early migration as an abrupt life change. Children's agencies were suppressed because they were not actively involved in the decision making or preparation stage of the migration. Parents made the decision, and the children were put in a passive role, as they were the last to be informed or even not informed at all, suggesting the generational power imbalance regarding the family's decision making about migration.

Not having prior communication with children regarding migration was not unique to the LBC in China. Studies in other countries (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Dreby 2007) also showed that children were largely ignored in the decision-making process of the migration. Hoang and Yeoh's (2015) research in Vietnam found that children were often told about their parents' departure at the last minute. The adults employed a lie-telling strategy to comfort the children at the moment of the migrant

parents' departure. Even children migrating together with their parents, depended on the decisions made by their parents (Jørgensen, 2017).

Some children were told of the migration shortly before their parents left home, often they were merely informed about the final decision. Children's lack of involvement in the initial plans for migration led children to feel ill-prepared for their upcoming life changes, accompanied with feelings of being powerless and helpless. For example, child 17 stated:

They told me about it. I didn't know what to do, it's hard to explain it, just felt that time that if they left, I would be alone at home and didn't know what to do. I felt I just felt I didn't know how long it would take them to come back, if indeed they would come back home.

Some families had more open and elaborate communication with their children about the upcoming migration. This communication usually involved more than just informing children about the news of the migration, parents explained the reasons for the migration or gave their children advice about their lives without them at home. For example, child 33 with secure maternal and paternal attachment styles stated that:

Yes, they told me before they left. They called my nickname and told me that they were going out to work, it was probably going to take years. I need to listen to my grandma's words and be behave well at home.

Some of the children's parents communicated with them about the migration in a way that went beyond only mentioning the motivations for migration by asking the children's permission for migration. For example, child one stated: 'Mum asked me if I agreed or not. I didn't agree. Then my mum said our family was poor and we really needed the money. So, I agreed and then she left.' The way the parent asked for the

child's permission may be more of an attempt to gain the child's acceptance and support, rather than to actively include the child in the decision-making process about the family migration. The child was not seen as being equal to the parents in making the initial decision about the migration. Nevertheless, the communication style of asking for a child's permission did increase the child's involvement in the preparation for migration and their sense of control. Some studies have also supported the idea that there was some potential for children to be involved in family migration decision making, but the children seldom had any direct influence on decisions guiding their whole family (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2016; Ryan & Sales, 2011).

Distress and forced acceptance

Separation caused mental distress in children. The way parents left without informing children about their departure seemed to intensify children's emotional distress. They reported feelings of shock and confusion when they found out about their parents' migration.

Some children were aware of the migration before their parents left. However, many of these children chose to avoid seeing them leave in person. Child 32 stated: 'I didn't say goodbye, I knew they were packing and leaving, but I didn't look at them, I didn't say anything. I was watching TV at the time.' This avoidance was more a way of dealing with difficult emotions rather than being indifferent to their parents' leaving. Several children did see their parents leave in person. Some reported a strong need to protest. For instance, child 26 reported, 'I was crying, begging them not to go, my grandma had to force me to leave.'

After their parents migrated, many of children displayed emotions and behaviour very similar to depressive symptoms. They had strong feelings of sadness, emptiness, loneliness, anxiety, lack of interest and boredom. Sadness and

loneliness were the two most frequently mentioned emotional experiences. They described their sadness with the words, pain, upset, feeling bad, feeling like crying. Some children described loneliness as a lack of companionship. Child four stated, 'I feel so lonely, no one is here with me. I'm always alone.' Some children described loneliness by using metaphors of houses and home spaces. For example, child 17 stated: 'I felt the house was so quiet, the whole world was so quiet, too quiet.'

In addition to depressive symptoms, many children reported separation anxiety after migration. Children reported feeling scared of ghosts, darkness, going to the toilet alone at night or sleeping alone. For instance, child 28 stated: 'The week they left, I was very scared, always thinking about ghosts in my mind. So, I slept together with someone in the same dorm the night my parents left.' The child was able to sleep by himself before the migration but afterwards experienced a strong sense of fear that compelled him to seek company from other people. These irrational fears were not experienced by the children as common fears in life but were new experiences that emerged after their parents left, indicating children's sense of vulnerability and a lack of security.

Despite the fact children did not lose parents permanently like those going through parental death, many children still reported a strong sense of loss after parental migration. For example, child one described: 'I felt I lost something precious.'

Generally, the emotional experiences of the LBC in rural China resonated with the findings of the LBC in other countries. Children reported loneliness, vulnerability and insecurity while being separated from their parents (Pottinger, 2005).

Emotional distress occurred over a period of time and most children showed emotional recovery after different periods of time. They stated that weeks or months

after their parents' departure, they started 'feeling less sad', 'stopped crying' or 'don't think about parents that much'. By the time they were interviewed for the current research, many of them claimed they had become 'used to it' or were 'no longer feeling anything'. This emotional change pattern overlapped with the emotional sequence of 'protest-despair-detachment', which was observed by Bowlby (1980) among children who went through less prolonged separations.

Though the calming of intense emotional responses was common for children experiencing brief separations, the stress from extended separation could exhaust children's brains and bodies, putting them on disadvantageous developmental trajectories (Hodel et al., 2015; Koss et al., 2014). Unlike routine separations such as going to preschool for the day, when children were certain that they would see their parents again, prolonged separations might damage children's attachment to their parents and augment the risk of developing a host of mental and physical health problems.

Moreover, for many children the separation distress could be evoked repeatedly when parents left home again after the New Year reunions. Some children missed the day their parents left for the city due to the school schedule. But the fact that their parents were leaving preoccupied them. For example, child 21 stated: 'I knew that my parents were leaving today, I kept thinking of it, I couldn't focus on the class, then my tears fell.'

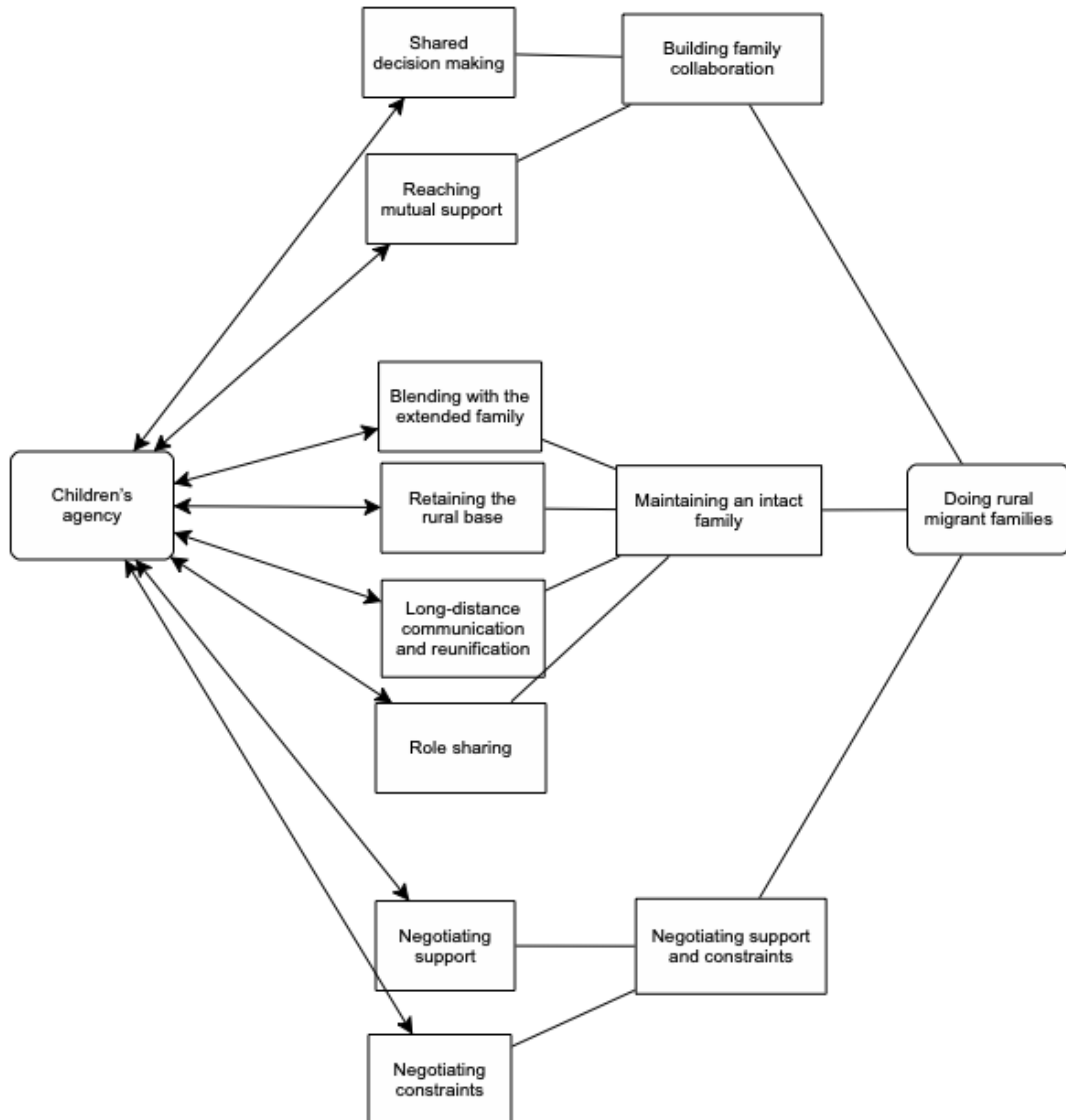
The fact that during the interviews many children burst into tears when they were talking about the early experiences of migration may suggest that their feelings had been suppressed and they had never truly recovered from them. Their claim of 'being used to it' might indicate a forced acceptance of the migration. For example, child nine said they were:

Already used to it, I wouldn't cry every time we have a phone call like before. Now we chat and laugh every time. A call could last one or two hours. I guess I've grown up, anyway I'm used to it. Anyway, in fifth or sixth grade, when people asked me, I always said I was used to it. Crying won't change anything.

Underlying the acceptance and adaptation, children expressed a deep and hidden sense of lacking agency in the situation, because they were not able to influence or change their life circumstances.

7.2.2 Children's agency in doing rural migrant families

This section illustrates the interrelation between the two key constructs, i.e., children's agency and children's perception of doing rural migrant families. It shows how children manifest their agencies in the family practices of doing rural migrant families and how these family practices impacted their agencies (Figure 10). The previous section (8.1.1) described the different forms of children's agency, such as meaning making of the migration, emotion regulation, support seeking. The following section will treat children's agency as a whole when describing how the agency is enacted in each family practice, as children always used a combination of forms of agency in a family practice. For example, children expressed their various forms of agencies in the 'maintaining an intact family' practice. They demonstrated their 'support giving' agency in expressing care and concern for their parents and 'resisting' by acting out with parents. They also used 'emotion regulation' agency in managing their affectionate or affectless responses to their experiences with parents.

Figure 10**Children's agency in doing rural migrant family*****Children's agency in building family collaboration***

Children expressed their agencies in the practice of 'building family collaboration' through their active engagement in 'shared decision making' and 'reaching mutual support'.

Children's agency in shared decision making

Although children have often been described as being the central reason for migration, both in the current research and in the literature (Khoo et al., 2008;

Mazanti, 2007), it seems that the child's voice in their family's decision about migration is often overlooked. However, most studies exploring migration decision making were solely conducted from the perspective of adult family members and only focused on the adults' agency (e.g., Bailey & Boyle, 2004; Smith & Bailey, 2006; Withers & Clark, 2006).

The current research found that migration decision making was an ongoing and complex process. The extent to which the children's voices were recognised varied between different households and at different stages of the migration. Some children had more elaborate discussions with their parents about the migration. Children themselves cared about whether they were told about the migration plan. For example, when child 11's father told her of his forthcoming migration, she stated that: 'I felt good. I mean at least he told me about it. That's much better. Because many parents just leave directly without telling.' More importantly, despite the children's lack of involvement in the initial stage of migration decision making, children managed to exert certain agency in decisions regarding their families' continuing migration.

Some children directly voiced their opinions about the migration. For example, child 26 stated: 'I always ask them to come back home and not stay there. About once every week. They told me they would come back when I start the senior middle school.' Sometimes, a child's opinion could influence their parents' decision to migrate. Child one influenced her mum's migration decision by telling her about the conflicts with her grandfather at home. Child 39 who was left out of the decision making about his mother's migration, later suggested that his father should migrate also.

The LBC's different levels of involvement in migration decision making, from not being informed of the migration at all to suggesting the father should migrate, illustrate the 'ladder of children's participation' (Bushin, 2009). Bushin (2009) developed a children-in-families approach illustrating the different levels of children's involvement in family migration decision making from the lowest level of 'parents decide, others notify child' to the highest level of 'child initiates the decision, discusses with parent(s)'. Findings in the current research generally fit this model, with most of the children at the lower end of involvement in the initial decision making. Nonetheless, the current research found that several children were able to exercise their agencies and exert some influence on their parents during the continuation of the migration.

Overlooking the children's autonomy in decision making should be viewed in the wider family-oriented culture in China. In China, preserving family harmony has a high priority over individual preference (Cheung et al., 2019; Grace et al., 2012) . When it comes to making important decisions, the family often becomes the decision-making unit. For example, studies found different levels of family involvement in making medical decisions between the US and China. In the US, family involvement in medical decisions is only necessary when the patient is considered to be incapable. In China, the physicians will first discuss treatment plans with the family representatives before consulting the patient (Chan, 2004). Even in making medical decisions, family members generally have authority over the patient, and the whole family's well-being is the priority (Lin et al., 2012). The concept of autonomy extends beyond the individual to include the family in the collective culture. These cultural contexts may play a role in why children were often excluded

by the adult family members in the migration decision making, even though they were deeply impacted by the decision.

Children's agency in reaching mutual support

Children's narratives showed that though adults tended to exclude the LBC from the migration decision-making, they made an effort to gain support and acceptance from the children mainly through family communication. The children were keenly aware of the effects of their support of the parental migration in building family collaboration, as well as the importance of other family members' support. For example, child 35 stated: 'I felt sad watching my younger sister crying. She kept crying and asking for mum [when her parents were leaving after New Year], mum and dad might not be able to go.' And child seven explained that 'I didn't tell them that I missed them and wanted them back. If I told them, they might come back and not work there.' The child decided not to share his feelings with his parents due to the concern that it would interrupt his parents' work. This reinforced the concept that agency was as much about inactivity (inaction) as activity (action), as long as children made conscious and autonomous decisions, such as the constructive compliance form of agency. While action is readily acknowledged as agency, inaction is likely to be ignored as a valid form of agency on its own. This is mainly because inaction typically suggests dormancy, thus conflicting with the impression of potent effort often associated with agency (Adefehinti & Arts, 2018). It should, however, be recognised that inaction may also entail conscious choice and may not necessarily be the direct opposite of action as semantics, or an indecisive act as socially constructs have made it appear. Essentially, action and inaction are both valid options for expressing agency since inaction involves decision-making too and is an action in itself.

In the process of reaching mutual support of the migration, children could be active agents in the process, for instance by showing supportive attitudes towards the migration and displaying supportive behaviour. Children's self-agency in meaning making was a vital factor in support, because children usually became supportive of the migration after they made a positive meaning of the migration. However, it should be noted that children's supportive attitude and its underlying positive meaning making did not develop independently. They were unavoidably influenced by adults through the family communication processes. Though children had the capacity to make sense of their life experiences, they were at least partly dependent on adults to give meaning to the migration, resulting from the asymmetrical power relationship children have with their parents, caregivers and their different level of access to information and resources.

Children's stories all showed that their meaning making of migration stemmed from their communication with adults. Their personal meaning was at least partly shaped by the collective meaning constructed by their family, and their generational position in their family meant they had an unequal voice. For example, when children explained that parental migration was caused by financial difficulties, many of them recalled what adults had told them. These children did not know whether their families were really poor or whether the choice of migration was financially necessary. This spoke to the 'hermeneutic injustice' argued by Fricker (2007), which took place when individuals and groups who had less power to shape collective conceptual resources were unable to understand and frame their experiences within existing interpretive resources. Due to the children's positions in the family, they often lacked sufficient interpretative resources to make their own meaning of their experiences, free from the frameworks imposed by the collective family meaning.

Nonetheless, children's agency in joining the family collaboration in migration should not be denied. Their supportive stance usually started with the explanations given by adults, and further developed to incorporate their own reflections on themselves, others and life during the parental migration.

The children's agency in maintaining an intact family

In the family practice of 'maintaining an intact family', children perceived that their families stretched boundaries across geographical distance through various strategies to connect migrant parents with families left behind in rural areas. Children participated and expressed their agency in these processes, contributing to keeping their families connected and functioning.

Children experienced 'blending with extended family' through the changes in their care and living arrangements. The previous section (in 8.1.1 'other-focused agency') has demonstrated that children did not just passively accept their care arrangements. They might comply with the arrangements actively and adapt to the new environment constructively, or they might resist the unwanted arrangements. Though the arrangements were largely decided by the adults, children managed to exercise some 'constrained' agency in coming to terms with the care reconfigurations after migration. Hoang et al., (2015) observed that the LBC in south-east Asia were able to express their agency through various strategies to respond to the shift in family structures brought about by parental migration. Children also experienced 'retaining the rural base' when they constructed meaning of their parents' migration pattern. Furthermore, they made the meaning of the city where their parents were staying as the working place and the rural hometown as the home. The relationships between children's agencies and the above two processes have already been illustrated. Finally, children also actively participated and exerted

control in 'long-distance communication and reunification' and 'role sharing', showing that they were active and influential agents in the parent-child relationship and in the family functioning. The following sections specifically focus on how children express their agency in communication with parents as they negotiate long-distance communication through ICT, non-verbal communication and affective engagement with parents; and how children exercise their agency in role sharing process within the family.

Children's agency in long-distance communication and reunification

The children incorporated communication with their parents into their routines. The current study found that many children established routines of weekly contact with their parents. However, there were limits to the extent to which children could exercise their agency freely in communicating with their parents, due to their varying access to communication devices (also see Ansell, 2009; Parreñas, 2014; Vertovec, 2004) and limited means of directly initiating contact with their parents (similar to the findings from Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Parreñas, 2014).

A typical phone call took place when the parents made the call to the carer and then the carer passed the phone to the child. Children often had difficulty in initiating contact themselves, as they commonly reported that they had to wait for their parents to call them. When their parents failed to contact them, there was little they could do about it. The limited control of contact was more common among younger children who did not own mobile phones or even know their parents' contact numbers. For example, when asked what he could do when he wanted to talk to his parents, child ten said there was 'nothing I could do, just suck it up'. Other factors that prevented children from initiating contact with their parents were economic

reasons (phone call fees) or they did not know an appropriate time to contact their parents.

Despite being in a relatively passive position or lacking control in initiating parent-child contact, some children were able to express their desire to contact their parents and act on it by writing down their parents' phone numbers, asking their carers to make contact on their behalf, asking their parents to call back more often, or even asking for a mobile phone. Some older children who already had their own mobile phones had more autonomy in their communication with their parents. They usually had their parents as contacts on social media, such as WeChat, and were able to initiate contact freely.

Children's agency in initiating contact was also manifested in the willingness of children to maintain contact. Some children actively engaged in frequent communication with their parents. For example, child 35 said, 'when I felt sad or bored, I would call them'. Some children's lack of communication with parents did not mean they lacked agency, but rather expressed their agency in an 'inactive' way. These children may have been acting out of emotional alienation, as demonstrated by their reluctance to communicate with their parents even if they owned mobile phones. Child 22 mentioned that during his long holiday, despite the fact that he was using his mobile to play online games all day, he did not initiate contact his parents at all. He simply explained that he 'forgot about it'. Child 30 was very straightforward and stated, 'I didn't like calling them.' Such aloof reactions of children with respect to contacting their parents and some children's active evasion of their parents' calls could suggest estrangement in the parent-child relationship and children's response to it.

The LBC's reluctance to engage in parental contact was also found in other studies. For example, the study by Lam and Yeoh (2018) found that children whose parents left when they were very young, often felt alienated from their migrant parents and were reluctant to converse with them. In Tolstokorova's (2010) exploration of transnational mothering based in the Ukraine, the researcher found that young children often withdrew from contact with their migrant mothers, perhaps due to the children's inability to understand the necessity of the parental migration. Children's active withdrawal from contact expressed their agency regarding emotional estrangement or even resentment towards their migrant parents.

Children's agency was further shown when some children controlled the content of conversations. What they shared or did not share with their parents demonstrated their agency in negotiating their long-distance relationship with their parents through ICT and the levels of involvement their migrant parents had in their lives. Some children were keener to share their lives with parents and learn about their parents' lives. During phone calls, they elicited conversations, for instance about their parents' lives in the cities, asking for parents' help or complaining to parents. On the other hand, some children controlled the conversation by refusing to elaborate when parents asked about their daily life experiences, withholding information or expression and not initiating conversations. When asked about recent phone calls with parents, child 20 stated they were 'nothing, just a few words'. They were not interested in sharing their lives with parents or knowing about their parents' lives. They often expressed an unfamiliarity with their parents' work and life in the cities. For example, child 34 responded to interview questions 'What do your parents do in the city?' with: 'I don't know.' When asked where they were living, he said, 'I

don't know, never asked them'. A further question, 'How come?' elicited, 'I didn't want to know.'

Withholding information did not always mean emotional alienation, sometimes children tried to avoid burdening or worrying their parents. For example, child 35 stated: 'When I was calling them, I felt like crying, felt like asking them to come back home.' The researcher asked: 'Did you tell them that?' and the child replied, 'No, I didn't say it, I didn't want to make them sad.' This withholding is also a way of withholding emotional expression, largely associated with children's emotion-related self-regulation. From the family communication perspective, it also constituted non-verbal communication. Traditionally, utterance or face-to-face conversation is viewed as the most important or legitimate form of communication. Nonetheless, it has been argued that all forms of communication that make the social world meaningful, including non-verbal communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002) and mediated communication (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) should also be valued.

Non-verbal and mediated communications played particularly important roles in the family communication of rural migrant families. For example, child 21 described how he understood his mum's inner struggle through a photo. He stated:

I knew mum didn't want to leave, she missed me and my sister, and she cried.

I went to school on the day she left, I didn't see them leave, but I saw it from the photo. My sister was playing with the mobile phone, and she accidentally took some photos. In the holiday, I saw the photos from the phone. I knew it was the day they were leaving, because there were suitcases lying around.

[Researcher asked: "How did you feel?"] I felt like crying. ["Did you tell anyone about it?"] No, I didn't.

In the child's narrative, the parents did not communicate with him verbally about their feelings of leaving home. The child understood their inner struggle through the photo and did not share his own feelings with his parents either. Without explicit verbal communication, there was an emotional and non-verbal communication happening between the migrant parents and the child.

In rural migrant families, the LBC described many instances of non-verbal communication without explicitly sharing their gratitude to their parents, such as when children felt grateful for their parents' hard work after observing their parents' grey hair and facial wrinkles after migration. These non-verbal communications may seem one-directional and lack confrontation with the other people. Nonetheless, how the children felt about their parents would eventually have an influence on how the children interacted with their parents and further influenced the emotional atmosphere in the entire family.

Withholding emotional expression or overt emotional communication appeared similar to the emotion-regulation strategies of emotional inhibition and avoidance, which are often regarded as dysfunctional (Traue & Deighton, 2016). The current research found that withholding information or emotional expression, as a common feature of non-verbal communication, might not necessarily be negative in some contexts, especially when it involved positive meaning-making and emotions, e.g., gratitude and care, it might even promote relationships (Armenta et al., 2017; Sauter, 2017; Stellar et al., 2017). For example, some children who had the experience of parents leaving homes for migration without saying goodbye, also learnt to avoid the farewell themselves. They did so with the conscious awareness that both their parents and they themselves were avoiding a distressing situation. Without explicit verbal communication, there was a 'mutually' negotiated way of

dealing with the emotionally distressing moment. Underlying the mutual avoidance, there was an understanding of each other's distress. For example, child 33 stated, 'No, I didn't see them leave. They knew if I saw it, I would cry and not let them go.'

Many theories on family communication, such as the framework of discourse-dependent families, have a bias towards verbal communications (Galvin, 2006). But the current study recognises the value of non-verbal communication in families, which opens possibilities for theorising the construction of the family through symbolic and performative communication that may or may not be linguistic (Baxter, 2014).

The availability of ICT has paved the way to 'to produce intimacy and to nurture the family' (Parreñas, 2014, p. 439). However, children's relationships with their parents varied in the degree to which they maintained intimacy with their parents. For some children, the geographical distances did not diminish the psychological bond between them and their migrant parents. They tended to be very affectionate in their communication with parents. For example, child two stated: 'I said mum I really missed you, and I wanted you to be here with me.'

Not all children were willing to engage with their parents in fostering long-distance intimacy. Many of these children's descriptions of phone call contents and New Year reunion lacked emotional quality. Contrary to the assumption that as the New Year reunion only happened annually and should be valued and appreciated by the children, some children showed indifference to the reunion. When asked about their activities during their recent reunion, they simply replied they had, 'no memories, no impressions'. When asked how they felt about the recent separations from or reunions with parents, they appeared not to be emotionally impacted by their

parental migration and stated they had 'no feelings' towards the separation or reunion with parents.

This suggested that children's emotional estrangement to migrant parents during the migration would extend to the reunion period. The research by Hoang and Yeoh (2012) in Vietnam found that some children were apathetic about their migrant parents, and even felt fearful of them during return visits. The joy of having parents back home could be obscured by resentment over the unresolved estrangement and tensions in the parent-child relationship during migration. The impact of migratory separations on parent-child relationships could be long-term and might not easily recover even after family reunification in the host countries (Hernandez, 2009).

Children's affective or apathetic engagements with their migrant parents suggested their agency in negotiating intimacy over distance in the parent-child relationships.

Children's agency in role sharing

Along with the change in family structures, the family tasks were reassigned and roles within families to fulfil the essential functioning of the families (Gamburd, 2000; Hugo, 2002; Parreñas, 2005). Apart from exerting agency in parent-child relationships, children also had agency in fulfilling family roles, and keeping the family functioning and together, similar findings were found by Asis (2006).

Like their adult carers, children also played the dual role of farmworker and homemaker. It was very common for children to work on the land during weekends, by grazing cows, picking crops and watering plants. Children also helped with other family economic activities, for example, child 36 mentioned that he was responsible running the family shop at the weekend.

Children would help with childcare in the family by engaging in self-care and taking care of younger siblings. Increased self-care compensated for the absence of parental care. For instance, younger children reported they began to sleep alone only after their parents left. Increased self-care was most obvious in the case of child 17 (at the age of 12) who was living by himself without any adult carers. After his parents left, the child initially lived with his grandfather and later started to live alone after his grandfather moved into his uncle's place. Every day, the child got up and prepared himself for school. He bought breakfast in the food stall outside the school campus and after spending the day at school, where he ate two free meals in the canteen, he went back home about at nine o'clock at night. During the weekends, he might visit his grandfather and ask him to call his parents. Otherwise, he would stay at home doing housework or hanging out with friends. Although this self-care arrangement would raise a lot of concern regarding the child's safety and well-being, the child demonstrated strong autonomy and capacity in taking care of himself. He was able to establish a daily routine and live an independent and autonomous life.

For children with siblings, it was common for older children to take care of their younger siblings. Many transnational studies have found that the eldest children, especially the eldest daughter, may bear heavier burdens after their mothers migrated, as they were required to take over the maternal role for their siblings and manage the whole household (Parreñas, 2005). As the children in the current study were only in middle childhood (age range 8–12), they were not assigned to the role of surrogate carers, but they reported that they often baby-sat their younger siblings, helped them with homework and sometimes provided food for them. For example, child 18 stated: 'At the weekend, I was at home taking care of

my younger brother. He was going to start school next year, so I decided to teach him some Pinyin to prepare for school.'

In addition to assisting carers with housework and agricultural work, children could provide intellectual support. This happened in cases when children helped their illiterate grandparents to read documents and taught them to use mobile phones. For example, child 30 stated: 'My grandma asked the uncle next door to get her an electronic cooker with the instruction manual inside. My grandmother didn't know how to read, so I read the instruction manual for her. Then she knew.'

The LBC's participation in family productivity again reinforced that children were not merely passive receivers of care, but also were influential agents in the family and actively shaped the migration outcomes. This perspective resonated with findings from other disadvantaged families, e.g., refugee families (Bergnehr, 2019) and low-income families (Cheang & Goh, 2019), that children had the capacity to act on behalf of themselves and to contribute positively to their families' well-being.

Children's agency in negotiating support and constraints

In the familial context, children played an active role in the 'negotiating support and constraints' family practice. The children were aware of their own supportive needs and their families' needs and actively used supportive resources to take care of their own well-being as well as their family members'. The LBC also had their own perspectives on the constraints in their lives within the context of parental migration and actively negotiated the experienced constraints to have more choices and a better life.

Children's agency in negotiating support

The children were able to perceive their own supportive needs as well as identify their family members' supportive needs and acted accordingly. For example,

child 31 stated: 'I saw grandma crying. I felt she was very lonely. My parents were in the city, I stayed at school during the week, she's lonely. I hope aunt will visit my home more often.'

The children exercised their agency to seek support on their own behalf and on behalf of their family. For instance, child 30 explained: 'My parents left grandma a mobile phone for contact. My grandma didn't know how to use it. I went to Zhang's place and asked his dad to teach my grandma how to use it.'

Children's support-seeking behaviour was not an automatic response activated when a problem or crisis arose. They would strategically reach out to purposively select supportive resources. For example, child 26 stated:

At the weekend, when I didn't know how to do my homework, I would ask help from a neighbour sister. She went to college, and she is also teaching at the primary school. So, I always asked her for help with my homework.

Children's agency in support seeking was also implied in the children's reflections on their subjective support-seeking experiences. For example, child 20 stated:

When my aunt and uncle [the surrogate caregivers] went out. I was supposed to go the neighbour's place to eat. Sometimes I would go, sometimes I would not. I didn't like going to eat in other people's homes, I felt awkward to ask if I could eat there and sometimes, I didn't know how to chat with them.

In this case, the caregivers relied on their neighbour's social support to fill in the temporary childcare duty, while the child expressed their agency when they reflected on the arrangement.

Children's agency in negotiating constraints

Within the context of the constraints experienced by rural migrant families, the LBC had their own perceptions and experiences of the multiple intra-familial and extra-familial constraints.

Within their families, children experienced the constraints mainly from reduced parental functioning and ruptures in the family relationships. The reduced parental functioning was caused by the absence of the migrant parents and the inability of the carers. The children's sense of reduced parental functioning was associated with limitations of the carers including their old age, low education level and lack of intimacy with the children. For example, child nine stated: 'Grandparents were too old, they could not pay enough attention to me.'

By comparing their life before and after migration, many children noticed the differences in their lives that they associated with reduced parental function. Many children felt a loss of emotional care after their parents left. For example, child ten stated: 'Before, when I came back home, my parents would ask me how my day was. Not anymore after they left.' Some children described similar experiences of missing emotional intimacy after parent migration, due to the changes in the home atmosphere. Children described their home atmosphere as being cold, cheerless, not warm, empty, too quiet or even dead. For example, child eight stated:

I felt the home has become cheerless and boring. My dad liked making jokes and chatting with us. He also liked to invite his friends over to play cards and have meals together at the weekend. It felt warmer before. Now I just watched some TV at night with my grandpa and my brother and had nothing else to do.

Many children described that without parents their life had become boring and not fun. In addition to missing the companionship of their parents, it was parents who

often organised various activities to help children explore the world, for instance they took children out to visit new places, discover new things and played games with them. These functions were compromised after parental migration and reduced the richness of the children's life experiences. For example, child seven stated: 'Before in the afternoon, my mum would go out with me to the shops. Now I could only stay at home.'

In terms of family relationships, many children did not establish good relationships with their carers. In some children's narratives, their relationships were characterised by emotional distance and conflicts. When asked whether children chatted with their grandparents at home, many children reported, 'No, not much chatting' or 'we don't talk to each other much.' Children moving into new places tended to compare their new homes to their old homes, or to their other life situations before the move. A few children used the traditional Chinese idioms of 'living under other people's roofs' to describe their sense of feeling inferior or an outsider living in another person's home. They felt they were more self-conscious and less able to express their feelings freely or act by themselves in the new places.

Some children had rather conflictual relationships with their carers. Six children reported their unresolved conflicts with their grandparents. Moreover, all the conflicts they described were related with grandparents' favouring certain grandchildren. Some children were very clear about the reasons why they were 'discriminated' against at home, for example, because they were girls, step-grandchildren or they were older than the other children. For example, child one stated:

When my parents were not at home, my grandpa targeted me more. Because I was not his real granddaughter. And he only had one real grandson. One

day I wanted to go to my aunt's place. He told me not to ever come back again. After I came back from aunt's place, he told me to leave. I went into my own room, closed the door and started crying on my bed.

Children used their personal agency when facing these constraints or barriers. They devised multiple strategies to negate or reduce the negative impacts of the constraints they experienced; a process referred to as negotiation (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001).

When faced with conflictual relationships with caregivers, the children used many negotiation strategies of resistance, including distancing from the caregivers, bringing their parents into the conflicts to ally with them and direct confrontation. For example, child 11 confronted her grandparents. She stated:

Every time they bought something; they always hid it. I only saw some left-over apple skins and peach skins. After I saw them, I asked them directly why they had eaten this stuff. They said these were given by others. Once, when I was cooking the rice, I went to their room, and I saw a bag of peaches underneath the closet. I said I would have one.

She also involved her parents in conflicts with her grandparents and put up a fight of 'hunger strike'. She explained:

I once told my mother about it when having a video call with her, telling her they [grandparents] wouldn't believe me, blaming me for taking something. My parents said, on one side is my own kid, on the other side are my own parents, they didn't know whom to believe. Then I shut myself in the room for two days after that. They didn't call me for meals anyway, and I didn't talk to them for two or three days.

When faced with the time constraints of schools on parent-child contact, many children learnt to accommodate the school schedules by having weekend contact or asking their teacher to help contact parents at school. To deal with the school constraints on their mobile-phone use, they either secretly brought their phones to school or used alternative options such as a watch-phone for contacting parents. This suggested that children were versatile and were willing to break the rules imposed by the institutions and risk punishment if caught.

The children experienced many constraints directly caused by the migration however, parental migration also brought resources to the families that could encourage the children's exercise of agency. The resources included income that could support children's study, parental absence that gave children more independence and less parental control, and opportunities to be more exposed to urban lives that might guide children's future career choices.

Many children benefited from the money made from the migration directly. They not only received gifts from their parents but also asked for money or specific gifts themselves, e.g., mobile phones, bikes, etc. Some would use 'coercive' strategies to force their parents to give them money, for instance by lying or threatening to not study. For example, child five stated, 'My first mobile phone got stuck when I was playing with an online game. So, I told my dad it got broken and I needed another phone.'

The literature has shown that some children, especially older children, tended to develop a materialistic, money-oriented view of the world and a tendency to belittle the value of family relationships (Bernardo et al., 2018; Reyes, 2007). An overemphasis on the economic gains of the migration could push children to decide to become migrants themselves in the future, which could have a negative impact on

their overall motivation to study (Kandel & Kao, 2001). The current research did find that a few children emphasised material benefits over family relationships and, more often, found that many children expressed a developed economic agency after migration. The increase in economic agency may be a normative change for children as they grow up, or the parental migration itself may facilitate this development. For example, when children heard adults explaining the financial motivations for the migration, many of them began to understand the concepts of 'debt', 'poverty' and the 'income difference between the cities and the hometowns'. After migration, some children began to appreciate their parents' hard work in the cities, and learnt it was not easy to make money and support a family. As a result, they became more aware of the value of money, were careful when spending money and even consciously saved up money to ease the economic burden of the families. For example, child 25 criticised her brother for wasting money earned by their mother, by saying, 'He took his girlfriend to see a movie at the weekend. I felt he was wasting mum's money; he didn't care how tiring it was for mum to make money in the city.' Children also developed economic agency after migration, as some of them started to participate in family economic activities. For example, child 36 started help running the family shop at the weekend and stated that, 'the shop sells groceries and snacks. The income dropped after my parents migrated as we didn't have enough stock, and no one could help with it.'

The absence of their parents provided children with more freedom and autonomy both due to reduced parental control over their behaviour and the growing family responsibilities assigned to the children. For example, child 11 complained about being nagged by parents during the New Year holiday:

It was nice they were home, but they nagged me a lot. Sometimes they urged me to do this and that. I was feeling naughty, wanted to watch TV and did not want to do homework. When I was already doing homework, they still kept asking me to do homework, so I got very annoyed. When they were not home, no one would nag me.

In addition, LBC had more opportunity to make autonomous decisions about performing certain roles, including making decisions about how to take care of their younger siblings or making decisions about balancing household chores and homework. Assuming more family roles after parental migration might assign a more adult-like position in the family to children with more chances to exercise their agency, like the situation of a child-led household

The parents' work in the cities also influenced the children's future perspectives. Having perceived parents' hard work in the cities and the social-economic constraints that rural households faced, many children developed a determination to study hard and learn vocational skills to have a better future themselves and change the socio-economic status of the family. For example, child 12 stated 'I want to keep studying. I don't want to begin work too early. Working in the factory is too tiring. I often saw my parents sweating a lot, they must be working very hard.' These children exercised their agency in a projective and future-oriented way. They distanced themselves from the constraints in their current lives and put their efforts into creating a future for their families through studying or working hard. The LBC had the chance to restructure their own families' living conditions, and more broadly, to reshape rural-urban divisions and even lead to changes in Chinese society. This reflected the bidirectional relationship between agency and structure.

Children's agency was constrained by the social structure but also served to reconfigure it.

7.2.3 The resilience of the LBC and rural migrant families

Despite having little say in the family migration decision making and experiencing emotional distress in the immediate aftermath of their parents' departure, over time most of the LBC demonstrated considerable strength in coping with parental migration. This is illustrated by the LBC's emotional adjustment, positive meaning making, and the way children adapted to the long-distance parent-child relationship and carried on stable daily routines with the usual activities of schooling, household duties and play. These findings resonated with the findings in other areas where the LBC's socialisation, such as education and the acquirement of core values, spirituality and responsibilities, was not disrupted by parental migration, see reports by the Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia (CHAMPSEA) (Graham & Yeo, 2013; Lam & Yeoh, 2018).

Children's perception of their families also showed that the rural migrant families could have a positive adaptation to the migration, as they managed to maintain cohesive and functioning families that fulfilled the essential needs of each member. Sometimes the families could even have improved family functioning through the benefits gained from the migration.

The positive adaptation to the migration displayed by the LBC and the rural migrant families demonstrated their resilience in the context of labour migration. Their resilience was reflected as an active and ongoing process not as a static state, the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes counteracted the disruptions to the 'homeostatic processes' of the individual and the families and led to regaining new equilibrium even at a higher level of functioning.

Due to the multi-faceted and nuanced nature of resilience, the definition of resilience has been inconsistent in the literature or even criticised as being vague (Happer et al., 2017). Generally, there were three models of resilience – resilience as traits, outcomes, and processes – each of which was empirically supported. For example, Stratta et al., (2015, p. 56) defined resilience as ‘unexpected positive outcomes despite high risk of maladjustment when one is exposed to any type of trauma’. The positive outcome could be understood as ‘absence of psychopathology’ (Peltonen et al., 2014, p. 234). Some scholars conceptualised resilience as a stable and innate trait that predicted individual well-being (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Oshri et al., 2016). Viewing resilience as outcomes or traits has limited implications for understanding how individuals respond to different stressors in different contexts and undermines the potential for change in resilience. Some researchers proposed that instead of viewing resilience as a stable trait or endpoint result, resilience should be conceptualised as a dynamic and cyclical process. Resilience is a set of social and intrapersonal processes including a ‘cluster of positive resources upon which youth can draw as they strive to achieve positive outcomes’ (Sanders et al., 2015, p. 42). The notion of resilience from the viewpoint of process is very similar to the ability to cope (Stratta et al., 2015).

The current grounded theory revealed the resilient processes for the LBC and their families. To be resilient, the LBC and their families did not have to be invulnerable to risks, but by following certain coping process and engaging with both internal and external protective resources, the children and their families could regain the ‘equilibrium’ that was once disrupted.

There is a trend in the research on the LBC to gradually move from a deficit framework to a strength framework (Chai et al., 2018). Some research shifted from

focusing on the developmental disadvantages to the positive development of the LBC and started to explore the resilience exhibited by the LBC and which factors promoted their resilience (Ai & Hu, 2016; Dong et al., 2018; Xiao et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2020). Studies exploring the resilience of the LBC have mostly focused on the psychological resilience of the children and used established measures to assess resilience. For example, the study by Xiao et al.'s (2019) used the Resilience Scale for Chinese Adolescents (RSCA; Hu & Gan, 2008) to assess the psychological resilience of the LBC. These studies have provided valuable insights into the resilience of the LBC. However, a customised resilience model developed from the LBC's subjective experiences of parental migration is still needed as it could have revealed more information regarding the LBC's resilience and had strong implications for practices aimed to foster the LBC's positive adaptation. Moreover, the previous studies on the LBC's resilience usually adopted the trait model of resilience rather than exploring resilience from the dynamic process perspective.

The existing literature on the resilience of LBC has all focused on individual resilience factors that enable them to develop optimally, they focused on the intrapsychic resilient traits. There has been a lack of focus on the resilience of the whole rural migrant family. However, the current research indicates that the family as a functional unit or social system has the capacity to reorganise itself to regain its homeostatic processing. Therefore, the current research also constructed a resilience model for the rural migrant families.

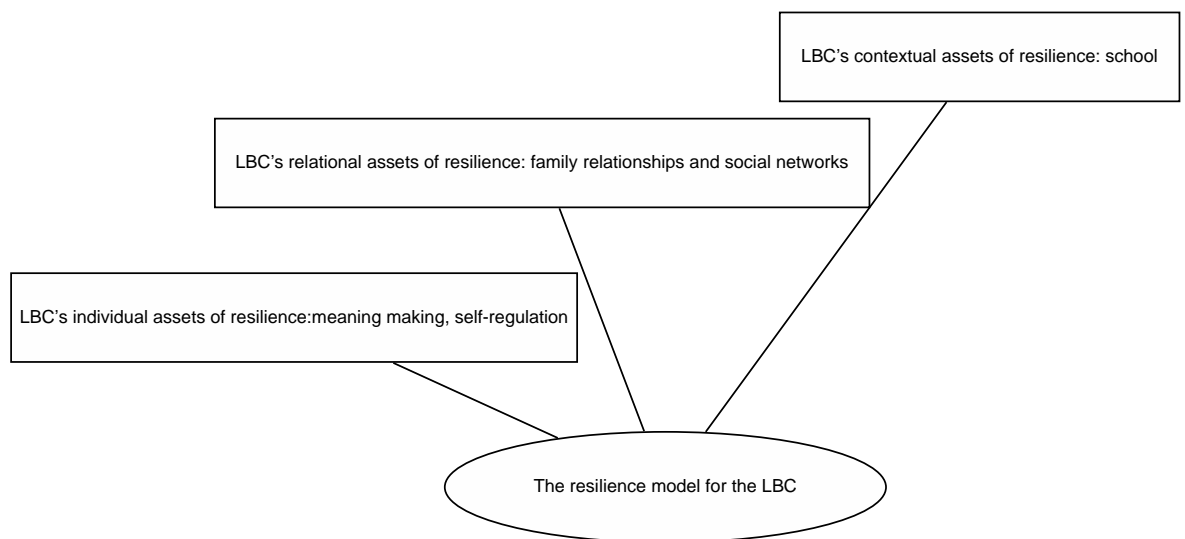
The resilience model for the LBC

For the LBC's positive adaptation to the parental migration, the grounded theory revealed a resilience model (Figure 11) comprising intrapersonal aspects of self-agency, relational resources in families, the extra-familial social networks and

the contextual resources of family economy, school institution and communities. These resilience elements correspond to what Liebenberg and Joubert (2020) summarised as individual assets, relational resources and contextual resources of resilience. Individual assets are predominantly linked to the individual's internal protective factors, such as competence and self-efficacy. Located outside the individual, relational resources include family, peer groups, significant others; while, contextual resources include, for example, health and education systems, and community cohesion (Liebenberg & Joubert, 2020). These key elements guide the resilience processes for individuals in the context of chronic or daily stresses and achieve positive outcomes.

Figure 11

The resilience model for the LBC



LBC's individual assets of resilience

For the LBC, exercising their self-focused agency was their central 'individual asset' in their resilience process (Masten & Tellegen, 2012). The meaning making and self-

regulation, were essential for children's adjustment to parental migration. Meaning making or cognitive appraisals have always been recognised a key element in stress-coping, because whether a situation is stressful or traumatic is subject to personal interpretation. Studies have shown that how people cope with stress, especially traumatic experiences, depend heavily on how they made meaning of these experiences (Emam & Al-Bahrani, 2014; Lichtenthal et al., 2010). Research on military families also showed that spouses adapted well to military deployment when they were able to 'make meaning' of the situation, for example, wives who believed the deployment was important for their family or country (Hammer et al., 2006). LBC with positive appraisals of the migration tended to have a reduced sense of abandonment and more positive perceptions towards parents, such as gratitude, which could bring further relational benefits.

The second aspect of the children's personal agency is their self-regulation, including both emotional self-regulation and behavioural self-regulation or self-management. Meaning making itself played an important role in the emotional regulation process. The meaning the child attached to the migration could influence the way the child reacted to it emotionally. The act of comforting children or children self-comforting by emphasising the positive motivation for the migration, illustrates a common and effective cognitive emotion regulation strategy, which is reframing an event to change its emotional consequences. Emotion regulation strategy through cognitive reconstruction has been linked to a decrease in negative emotional responses (Mathews et al., 2016).

Children's various strategies regulating their emotions were important for their mental well-being because the migration was often emotionally distressing as were most adversities. Therefore, a resilience towards parental migration must have an

emotional component. Troy and Mauss (2011) suggested a connection between emotion regulation and resilience, claiming that those with high emotion regulation ability positively associated with the outcome of resilience after adversity, relative to those with low emotion regulation ability. All emotion regulation strategies the LBC adopted worked to soothe their emotional distress to some level. However, evidence from the literature on attachment theories, emotion regulation and psychopathology claim that emotion regulation characterised by self-reflection and emotional openness is more likely to have long-term positive impacts on mental health. Adaptive emotion regulation strategy could significantly reduce the risks of negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety (Carthy et al., 2010; Schafer et al., 2017) and increase the psychological resilience of vulnerable children, i.e., refugee children (Gürle, 2018), children with ADHD (Beauchaine, 2013), maltreated children (Curtis & Cicchetti, 2007), as well as LBC in China (Zhao et al., 2020).

Though living without parental supervision, many LBC demonstrated their behavioural self-regulation through self-management acts of self-discipline. These qualities significantly contribute to children's academic achievement (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2003) and are among the most important protective factors for young people living in adversity (Coyle, 2011). Self-regulation as a resilience factor was also significantly related to sport strategies, health-promoting behaviour and coping skills, potentially promoting children's psycho-social development and their overall resilience in life (Artuch-Garde et al., 2017; Loviagina, 2020; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

LBC's relational assets of resilience

Besides the individual resilience assets of personal agency, children's resilience in migration depended heavily on the relational resources from family

relationships and the social networks. Family played an essential role in fostering individual resilience. Factors such as warm family relationships and positive home environments could predict children's resilience (Bowes et al., 2010; Zakeri et al., 2010). For the LBC, through the processes of family relationship restoring and role adjustment, the LBC's various psychological, physical and social needs were met, including the need for protection, security, food, companionship and guidance. Resilient children usually had close relationships with migrant parents or carers, and experienced active parental engagement. The grounded theory highlighted the migrant parents' continuing roles in their rural families. Migrant parents' continuing participation was essential to their rural family's functioning and the sustainment of family ties. The 'inability' of surrogate carers in certain aspects of childcare further emphasised that it was essential for migrant parents to continue to be a part of their children's lives.

Carers played an important role in children's adjustment to migration. Children's intimate and cohesive relationships with them could buffer the negative effects of the migration, whereas children's conflictual relationships with them could exacerbate the stress of parental migration. This was supported by the study by Xiao et al. (2019) that children's psychological resilience was positively impacted by having close relationships with people residing in the same household and having several close friends.

Research on children experiencing life difficulties such as the death of parent, found that adults' care and companionship during difficult times had the most significantly positive effect on children's growth and development (Herdiana et al., 2017; O'Hara et al., 2019). When parents were not available, children highlighted the support they received from non-parental figures, such as grandparents, older siblings

and cousins. The study by Chai and colleagues (2018) also confirmed that neighbourhood social cohesion and trusting relationships with caregivers could positively predict left-behind children's subjective well-being.

Positive peer relationships also contributed to children's resilience, especially for children with difficult backgrounds (Haddow et al., 2020). The role of social interactions with peers at school was acknowledged by many LBC. They frequently expressed that they felt less lonely at school, and they appreciated the companionship of their friends. Many children could name several 'best friends', with whom they formed intimate relationship bonds. Peer relationships helped children adapt to boarding school and helped them to fill the emotional void left by parental migration. Studies have shown that peer support helped LBC reduce their feelings of loneliness and provided practical assistance for them during study (Ling et al., 2016; Mei et al., 2018). Besides regular peer relationships, many LBC particularly emphasised their relationships with best friends. The relationship with best friends shows the importance of attachment relationships, for instance children turned to best friends in distress. Developmentally, peer attachment has been recognised as an important resilience factor for promoting positive social adjustment (Schoeps et al., 2020).

In addition to peer relationships, teacher-child relationships were an important factor impacting children's school experiences and psycho-social development. Especially for those children lacking supportive relationships at home, their relationship with the teachers could foster the development of the child's self-esteem and predict their well-being after traumatic experiences (Ducy & Stough, 2018). Teachers could provide support to children experiencing adversities by listening to them empathically and validating their feelings (Alisic, 2012; Macksoud, 1993).

LBC's contextual assets of resilience

School has been increasingly recognised as an important source of external protection for children (Panter-Brick et al., 2011). Brackenreed (2010) posited that schools should encourage children to build positive relationships with adults and should make sure that teachers do not worsen the situation by erroneous practices. Children from disadvantaged families are more likely to demonstrate resilient characteristics if they have good relationships with peers and attended schools with a good academic record and caring teachers (Turliuc et al., 2013).

For the LBC, school offered more than social interactions with adults and peers, though the structure of the school constrained children's lives in some ways, it provided children with routine, stability, food and educational resources. All the LBC were able to get access to free education, free meals each day in school canteens and free boarding accommodation. Several LBC commented that the food at school was better than the food at home. During the field work in the current research, the interview room was called the 'home for the left-behind children', a space usually reserved for after-school activities for the left-behind children, indicating the school community's support for them. School-related factors including after-school activities and supportive school environments were also recognised as relevant resilience factors for the children by Eriksson et al., (2010).

The education resources in the schools were also vital for the children's development. Children who excelled at study showed qualities such as confidence and self-determination and felt more accepting and grateful regarding their parents' migration. This was because parents often stated their migration motivation was to support children's education, such as paying for their future college tuition fees. In contrast, children who failed at school might feel they were not fulfilling their parents'

efforts, or their parents' migration was not meaningful for them because they would not go to college. Studies have confirmed that children who experienced a crisis, found that educational activities were an important source of social support and could mitigate the effects of trauma on them (Berridge, 2017; Ellenbogen et al., 2014). Furthermore, success in school activities is an important protective factor for the children, enhancing their well-being and promoting their psychosocial development (Panter-Brick, et al., 2011).

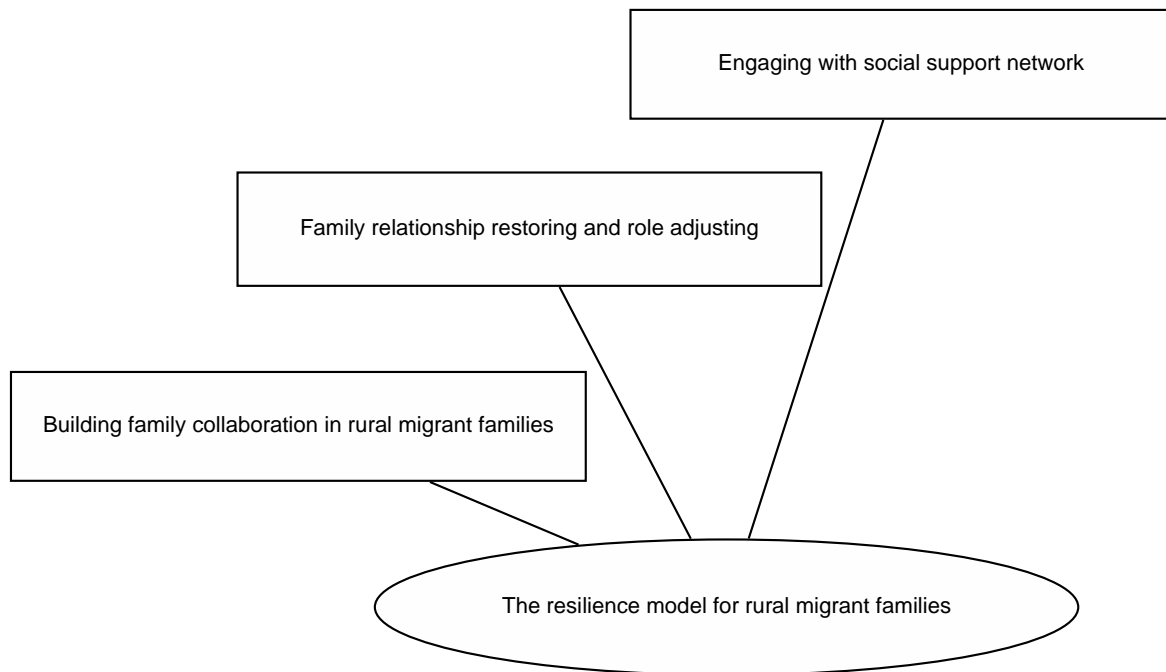
The resilience model for rural migrant families

The children's resilient coping was embedded in the way the whole family coped with migration. Individual resilience was the basis for the collective resilience of the family. Individual members participated in family processes to maintain the family as a functioning unit, while the family system itself fostered the individual's resilience in the midst of difficulties by providing important familial resources. Empirical studies have shown that family resilience is positively related to individuals' resilience under adverse situations (Aivalioti & Pezirkianidis, 2020; Finklestein et al., 2020).

Though the current research was only conducted from the children's perspectives, the findings of the family processes perceived by the children have implications for the resilience of the families as a whole (Figure 12). Successful engagement in these family practices could lead to rural migrant families' positive adaptation to the migration. The resilience model for the rural migrant families consisted of the following resilience elements: 'building family collaboration in rural migrant families'; family self-organisation processes 'family relationship restoring and role adjusting'; and 'engaging with social support network'.

Figure 12

The resilience model for rural migrant families



Building family collaboration in rural migrant families

Family collaboration was crucial for rural families' coping with migration. Without family collaboration, the labour migration would not be possible in the first place. If the family collaboration failed during the migration, the labour migration may have to be terminated prematurely.

Family collaboration is similar to the concept of 'family alliance', which refers to family members' shared sense of purpose, their agreement on the nature of the family's difficulties, the goals of their work to deal with the difficulties and the value they place on working together as a family (Friedlander et al., 2018). The quality of the family alliance was predictive of family outcomes in coping with stress or receiving family therapy (Favez et al., 2012; Friedlander et al., 2006; Galdiolo & Roskam, 2015).

For the rural migrant families, building and sustaining a strong family collaboration was key to their resilience in the context of migration. To build a strong family collaboration, the children alongside the whole family co-constructed the meaning of the migration, e.g., financial benefits. The sense of family collaboration fostered the family's joint efforts in devoting themselves to the migration as part of their daily lives. A similar phenomenon was observed in transnational families. Studies on Latino families experiencing migratory separations have pointed out the important protective effects of the cultural value of 'familismo or familism' (Falicov, 2007), which emphasises dependence, commitment and loyalty to the family (Calzada et al., 2012). Holding onto their cultural values about *familismo* helped them to go through migration as a family unit. Similar to the Latino culture, Chinese culture is a collective culture giving priority to family bonds and responsibilities. The family bonds are reciprocal and beneficial for all members. The family collaboration was not always directly centred around migrators' work. The family members left behind in the rural hometowns collaborated to live their lives with the physical absence of the migrant parents. As seen in this study, The LBC contributed to beneficial relationships by helping caregivers with farm work and household chores. The LBC met their caregivers' social and practical needs while the caregivers' adult children were absent and some children accepted that they may need to take a caring role for their caregivers in the future (Chen et al., 2011).

The future-oriented perspective of migration is the belief that the labour migration contributed to the family's future betterment. It was an important belief communicated within the family to achieve collaboration. This belief had implications for their resilience, because the children and the rural migrant families' perspective of their future orientation helped them endure family separations and hold a positive

vision of a hopeful and purposeful future. Growing empirical evidence associates future orientation with children's psychological adjustment and behaviour outcomes (Jackman & MacPhee, 2017). It acted as a significant protective factor to foster the development of vulnerable children and adolescents, predicting social adaptation, life satisfaction, and academic success (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2011; Robbins & Bryan, 2004; Snyder et al., 2000; Su et al., 2017).

Previous studies tended to see future orientation as an individual factor. However, the current study shows that the family unit could take a future-oriented perspective collectively and validate it through family communications, such as by parents and caregivers talking to children about the future benefits. This perspective was essential to the success of changes in the household structure caused by the migration.

Family relationship restoring and role adjusting

Studies have shown that practices of caregiving from a distance, such as communications through ICT or cooperating with local kin for childcare, could generate a sense of co-presence through separation (Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012), and that various forms of communication and remitting can create intimacy during separation (Parreñas, 2005) or virtual intimacies (Wilding, 2006).

The New Year holiday reunion was another way for the separated family members in the migrant families to reassume co-presence. The Chinese New Year holiday is a family celebration with a long cultural history, but rural-urban migration has attached new forms of activities and meanings to the New Year family reunion. These ritualised New Year activities helped strengthen family solidarity and family identities for the migrant families. Furthermore, the New Year reunion offered the

migrant families the opportunity to reaffirm ties with their kinship families and the local community, by visiting relatives and organising or attending community events. Studies of transnational families had similar findings that in the migratory context, the performance of rituals could be a way through which migrants re-established social and symbolic communion across national borders, enhanced their sense of belonging to the homeland and displayed social status for the family (Gardner, 2002; Kim, 2019; Sutton, 2004).

Roles in a family form one determinant of a family's level of functioning. Family roles always embody certain expectations from the family or social contexts regarding how they should be fulfilled. Renegotiating roles was important for families experiencing separation or the absence of certain members, because this may disrupt daily family functioning if the family relies on the absent members to make decisions or solve problems.

The rural families mostly engaged in role sharing. They did not assign roles to specific members exclusively, but rather shared roles flexibly. Family roles were fulfilled by many members, by grandparents and children working on the land, or by parents and grandparents parenting together. Sharing roles prevented role strain when members became overwhelmed by the duties and responsibilities of enacting roles that were not traditionally theirs, sharing also reduced the possibility of the loss of family functions (Garabiles et al., 2017). For example, some rural families assigned the role of child discipline solely to migrant parents and the surrogate carers only felt responsible for nurturing the children and did not engage actively in other parenting practices.

The role sharing practice also showed that instead of keeping migrant parents outside family boundaries, the rural families stretched their boundaries to retain the

migrant parents as viable family members. They reassigned their roles to help rural migrant families cope with the structural changes that may otherwise cause 'boundary ambiguity' (Boss, 2007).

Boundary ambiguity refers to a state in which family members are uncertain about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles within the family system (Carroll et al., 2007). If a family member is perceived as psychologically present, but is, in fact, physically absent for a long time, the family boundary is ambiguous. The reverse situation of physical presence with psychological absence also creates boundary ambiguity. Families that do not resolve the issue of boundary ambiguity are likely to experience high levels of stress and family dysfunction.

The position of migrant parents in the rural migrant families contained a dichotomy between psychological presence and physical absence. However, many rural migrant families managed to tolerate the status of parents without boundary ambiguity in the families. The boundaries of the rural migrant families were not closed off completely to exclude the migrant parents, for instance children still expressed a strong attachment to their parents and grandparents and asked parents for help with decisions. The boundaries did not remain so completely open as to rely on migrant parents playing the same roles as they did before migration, so grandparents could start taking more responsibility and children became more independent. The rural migrant family boundaries were flexible enough to maintain the relationship with migrant parents and function semi-independently, without the physical presence of the migrators.

Studies of military families have also shown that they kept their absent members psychologically present during deployment by keeping family boundaries only partially closed in terms of reassigning household responsibilities. These

families tended to manage the stress of deployment and reunion well (Drummet et al., 2004). However, families that kept their boundaries completely open during the deployment adjusted poorly to the deployment, whereas families that closed their boundaries completely adjusted well during deployment but struggled upon reunion. Therefore, flexibility in role renegotiation and fluidity in family boundaries were important resilience factors for the rural migrant families.

Engaging with social support network

Another important family resilience process involves engaging with the support from social networks comprising extended families, kinship networks and local communities. The presence of a support system has been recognised as a significant factor in the prevention of family functional problems and a significant predictor of successful family coping (Silberberg, 2001). Families who received support from the community are able to bear trauma and adversity (Walsh, 2006). Previous literature on social support and migration focused on the migrant families and their social ties in the country they settled in and their home countries (Boccagni, 2015; Wen & Hanley, 2015; Wu et al., 2014). Social support could promote migrants and migrant families' well-being and facilitate their socio-cultural adaptation (Ryan et al., 2008; Wen & Hanley, 2015).

Less attention has been paid to families such as the rural migrant families in China who were less inclined to settle in migration destinations and were largely based in towns. For the rural migrant families, the presence of social support was particularly important, because the LBC and the rural migrant families needed people from their social networks to take over childcare roles. A study has found that one of the conditions that would force the migrant parents to terminate their migration is a failure in the support network providing necessary care duties for the left-behind

family members (Lv, 2011). An additional study also found that increased availability of extended family support could extend periods of labour separation (Schapiro et al., 2013).

The social networks of the migrant families existed across regions or even countries and helped migrant families at every step of the migration from the initial stage of enabling migration, by recommending jobs for the migrators, or taking over care of the children, to the prolonged migration phase, by helping the left-behind households with chores. Much of the family practice of rural migrant families across distances relied on migrant networks and the exchange of resources between social ties. The level of disruption in the family due to migration depends on the amount of social support received (Ju, 2018; Wang & Gao, 2015).

Chapter 8

Integration

The last stage of data integration aimed to integrate the qualitative and quantitative findings. Both the quantitative study and the qualitative study revealed some aspects of the relationship between migrant parents and children in the context of labour migration. The quantitative study identified the features of the LBC's internal representation regarding parents as attachment figures. The qualitative study explored the children's experiences more broadly and showed in detail how children manifested their agencies in relation to various family processes regarding relationship interactions and family role adjustment.

The first aim of integration was to use the qualitative results to help contextualise and enrich the quantitative findings (Bryman, 2004; Mason 2006), and increase validity when interpreting the quantitative data (Bazeley, 2002; Orgard, 2005). The quantitative findings showed that the LBC exhibited two major attachment styles, the secure attachment style and the dismissing attachment style. The findings also showed the difference between the paternal and maternal attachment distribution among the LBC, and the gender differences in the distribution of maternal attachment. These findings were supported, expanded and illustrated with the quotes from the qualitative approach.

The second aim of the integration was to conduct a thorough examination of the attachment styles of the participants in qualitative categories in order to identify if there is an over-representation of a particular attachment style in a specific category.

A small category or code, such as a code developed from the interview segments of two interviewees, could not demonstrate a clear pattern of attachment styles, so the examination only used codes or categories that were developed from

more than five interviewees' transcripts. As a result, a total of 230 categories and codes of the attachment styles of interviewees were examined. The analysis found many categories exhibited over-representations of paternal and maternal dismissing attachment styles (Table 20) and the maternal secure attachment style (Table 21). Some of the categories involved the parent-child interactions within the context of the migration, while others focused on the children's emotional responses and perceptions of the migration. These findings yielded a more comprehensive understanding of the LBC's attachment and their experiences of separating from their attachment figures.

8.1 The co-existence of secure and dismissing attachment styles

The quantitative analysis showed that some LBC maintained a secure attachment style with their migrant parents, while others exhibited dismissing attachment styles towards them. The qualitative findings revealed that the LBC differed in how they engaged with their parents affectively. Some children maintained emotional intimacy with their parents, while others became estranged from their parents emotionally (see section 8.2.2 Children's agency in long-distance communication and reunification).

The typology of the LBC's relational experiences resonated with the typology of the LBC's attachment styles. According to the attachment theory, attachment styles differed in their underlying mental representations of parents regarding the nature of their responsiveness. Securely attached children experience responsive caregiving and perceive their caregiver as helpful and available in times of need. Children who repeatedly failed to receive assistance from their caregiver at times of distress developed the dismissing attachment style and perceive their caregiver as rejecting or inconsistently available (Sroufe, 2005).

The children who maintained intimacy with parents expressed their perceptions of parents being emotionally available and a source of emotional security that corresponded with the secure mental representations of attachment figures. For example, child 29 with secure maternal and paternal attachment styles expressed her trust in her parents' availability. She stated that: 'They always called, they never missed it.' Some children stated how they reached out to their parents for emotional support. For example, child 33 with secure maternal and paternal attachment stated that: 'Sometimes I am in a bad mood, if I have some difficulties, I will call them after the night study session.' Moreover, many children expressed their overall attitude of valuing their parental relationship. For example, child 14 who had secure maternal and paternal attachment styles explained: 'My parents asked me what I wanted as gifts that they could buy me in the cities. I said I didn't want anything, I just wanted them to be back and to be with me.'

On the other hand, children who experienced relational estrangement with their migrant parents expressed their perceptions of parents being unavailable both psychologically and physically, corresponding with the dismissing mental representations of attachment figures. For example, child 20 who had dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles said that he was unable to reach his migrant mother: 'I haven't contacted my mum for many years. I don't feel like it and I don't know how. I didn't have her number. She always changed her number when she changed places.' Child 14, who had dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, stated that: 'I didn't say anything to them when they left ... After they left, I cried once, I didn't tell them about it.' Furthermore, some children expressed active devaluing of their parents. They would deny the emotional importance of their parents to them by describing their parents as 'strangers' (child

16 with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles) or even actively disparaging their parents 'I would rather die to be with you [the father]' (child 25 who had a secure maternal attachment style and dismissing paternal attachment style).

Both the results showed that physical migratory separations within the families did not necessarily lead to breaking the parent-child bond, and it was possible to maintain secure parental attachments or positive parent-child relationships.

8.2 The difference between paternal and maternal attachment

The quantitative analysis showed a significantly higher percentage of dismissing attachment patterns in paternal attachment compared to maternal attachment. In the grounded theory analysis, some children discussed their experiences with migrant fathers and mothers separately and revealed the differences between father-child interactions and mother-child interactions, which could shed light on the differences in the paternal attachment and maternal attachment distributions.

The findings revealed that children had more interactions with migrant mothers than fathers. They received more calls from mothers and talked to mothers for longer on the phone. For example, child 31 stated: 'I definitely talked to my mum more, like this week my mum called me like three times and my dad called me once.' Not only did mothers initiate more phone calls to their children, but children themselves also made more calls to their mothers than their fathers. Child 10 explained: 'I called mum more. When I felt upset, I liked to call her and talk to her.'

Mothers and fathers differed in the way they interacted with the children. During phone calls, migrant mothers paid more attention to the details of the children's lives, such as whether the children were wearing enough clothes in the winter, whether they were sick, whether the older child was taking care of the

younger ones. Fathers spent more time lecturing children or instructing children to behave well or study hard. Migrant mothers were more likely to keep in contact with the children's teachers or ask other people to help with the children than the migrant fathers. For example, child 6 said that: 'Mum asked me about everything. She asked me what I ate at school, if I liked the food, if I found the winter jacket in the wardrobe.' It seemed that mothers took more responsibility in nurturing their children.

Children were more likely to express feelings and affection towards their mothers. Child 33's narrative showed the difference between his mother and his father in dealing with his emotions. He stated: 'I said to my mum, mum I miss you.' In response to the question 'What did your mum say?' he continued, 'She said, I know, I miss you too.' The child also stated: 'I cried, and dad said don't cry, be strong, and don't over think.' Compared to the mothers, fathers' communication with children involved more lecturing children and responding to children's material requests.

In the children's narratives about the New Year, the mothers would perform tasks that fitted their traditional gender roles, e.g., cooking, laundry, bathing the child, etc. The migrant fathers often took children out to play in the mountains. For instance, child 18 described the scene: 'As soon as my mum arrived, she dropped off the luggage and started cooking the dinner.' Fathers were more likely to engage in household tasks that required more intense labour and fitted their traditional gender roles, e.g., working on farmland, repairing the house, etc. For example, child 32 stated: 'Dad is still at home. He is rebuilding the house. Because the house doesn't look good. A very old tile-roofed house. He started rebuilding it.'

Moreover, in the children's narratives of their parental marital problems including arguments and fights between parents, marital violence and divorces, children commonly expressed sympathy for their mothers. For example, child 8

expressed her own opinion of her dad's marital affair by saying: 'I think he should stop. He made mum very sad. He should not do it.' And child 27 expressed her opinion of her dad's violent behaviour towards her mum, 'I saw him hitting my mum when he was drunk. He grabbed her hair. I felt it was shameful for a man to hit a woman.' In the case of child 10 who remained in his father's custody after the parental divorce, he still expressed positive appraisals of his mother even against his father's will. He stated:

I told my dad, I said dad, mum asked me to go to grandma's place. Dad didn't agree. Because they got divorced and he said mum was an outsider and asked me to not go with her. But I wanted to go. I think she is still my mum after the divorce. I didn't agree with my dad. Then I started to cry.

8.3 Gender differences of attachment

The quantitative approach found that boys exhibited less maternal secure attachment than girls. The qualitative research did not find direct evidence of girls being more secure, but found some boys made statements in relation to emotional inhibition. For example, child 12, a boy with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, described his feelings when his parents were leaving, 'I felt like crying, but I thought it was embarrassing to cry out loud, and so I didn't really cry.' Child 22, a boy with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles stated, 'I didn't cry [on the first night of boarding], crying would make me lose face. [Interviewer: How come?] Because I'm a boy.' Such narratives illustrate how internalised gender stereotypes encouraged boys to suppress their expression of vulnerabilities, which may foster the adoption of deactivating strategies and the development of dismissing attachment in boys.

Children's gender may interplay with parenting practices and contribute to the differences in their parental attachment. Gender stereotypes might inform parenting practice in gendered ways. For example, child 10, a boy with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, said, 'my dad kept lecturing me, telling me not to cry'. The interviewer asked what he said, and the boy replied, 'He said something like "stop crying, act like a boy, it's so humiliating".' With such communication, parents dealt with the children's emotion in a way that reinforced the gender-stereotypical expectations of emotional expression. This culture that encourages male emotional independence and discourages their emotional vulnerabilities may have an impact on boys' development of dismissing attachment styles.

8.4 Parent-child interactions and attachment styles

The data integration results (Table 20 and Table 21) revealed that many categories relating to the parent-child interactions were associated with a particular attachment style. The results may shed light on how secure or dismissing attachments styles develop in the context of parental migration.

8.4.1 Little parent-child communication and the dismissing attachment styles

The parent-child communication before parents left home, including how parents communicated with children about the upcoming migration before the first migration, or how parents communicated with children about the upcoming departure after their reunion at New Year, was associated with the children's attachment styles. It should be noted that parent-child communication was a dyadic process and reciprocally dependent. For instance, the experiences of 'limited communication about the reunion' could both involve children not asking parents for information about the reunion and parents not informing children about their reunion schedules.

Table 20**The over-representation of dismissing attachment styles**

| Categories | Descriptions | N | S/M | D/M | S/P | D/P |
|--|--|----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1 Little communication of separation before migration | Parents had little communication with children about the first migration and separation after New Year | 19 | 5 | 14 | 3 | 16 |
| Subcategory: no prior communication of migration | Parents did not communicate with children about the upcoming migration | 13 | 2 | 11 | 2 | 11 |
| Subcategory: simple announcement of migration | Parents told the children about the migration at the last minute without an explanation | 6 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| Subcategory: leaving home without informing children-post-new-year | After New Year, parents left without telling their children and children did not see their parents off | 14 | 3 | 11 | 2 | 12 |
| 2 Little communication about the reunion | Parents and children had little communication about their reunion at the New Year | 17 | 4 | 13 | 2 | 15 |
| Subcategory: little communication with parents during the reunion | During the New Year, children had very little communication with their parents | 7 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| Subcategory: no communication of the reunion schedule | Parents did not tell children about their New Year plans | 16 | 4 | 12 | 1 | 15 |
| Subcategory: not saying anything at the reunion moment | Children reported not talking with their parents when they met | 11 | 2 | 9 | 1 | 10 |
| 3 Little communication during migration | Limited parent-child communication during migration | 22 | 5 | 17 | 1 | 21 |
| Subcategory: little phone communication during migration | Children had limited phone calls with their migrant parents | 13 | 3 | 10 | 1 | 12 |
| Subcategory: not knowing parents' lives in the city | Children did not know about the life and work of their parents in the cities | 14 | 2 | 12 | 1 | 13 |
| Subcategory: parents not knowing about me | Children stated that parents did not know about their lives, feelings and thoughts | 7 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 6 |
| 4 Indifference to migratory separations and reunions | Children showed little emotional reactions to separations and reunions from parents due to migration | 16 | 3 | 13 | 1 | 15 |
| Subcategory: indifference to reunions | Children lacked emotional reactions to reunions with parents | 13 | 3 | 10 | 1 | 12 |
| Subcategory: indifference to separations | Children lacked emotional reactions to their parents' departure | 8 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 8 |
| Subcategory: no feelings towards phone calls | Children lacked emotional reactions to receiving or not receiving phone calls from their parents | 7 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 6 |
| Subcategory: not missing migrant parents | Children reported not missing their parents | 8 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 8 |
| 5 Indifference to boarding separations | Children appeared not being emotionally impacted by going to boarding school | 11 | 2 | 9 | 1 | 10 |
| Subcategory: no feelings to weekly boarding | Children reported few emotional responses to weekly boarding | 6 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 6 |
| Subcategory: no difficulties when starting boarding | Children reported not feeling things were difficult when they just started boarding school | 8 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 6 |
| 6 Relational disconnection with surrogate carers | Children described their relationships with their carers as conflictual or emotionally distant | 14 | 3 | 11 | 3 | 11 |

Note. N: number of participants coded in the category. S/M: secure maternal attachment. D/M: dismissing maternal attachment. S/P: secure paternal attachment. D/P: dismissing paternal attachment.

Little communication of separation before migration

The category of 'little communication of separation before migration (the first category in Table 20)' included subcategories of 'no prior communication of migration', 'simple announcement of migration', and 'leaving home without informing children-post-new-year' all showed over-representations of the paternal and maternal dismissing attachment styles.

Some parents did not have any communication with their children about the migration the first time it occurred. The children were not informed about the migration, they often felt shocked when they realised that their parents had left. Such experiences formed the sub-category of 'no prior communication of migration' and were found to be associated with dismissing attachment styles. For example, child 22 had dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles and described the scene: 'I didn't know about it at all. I saw their motorbike in front of the door and they were putting bags on the motorbike. I had a look at them, and I thought they were going to work on the land but then they did not come back for their lunch. I asked my grandparents about them, and they told they left home to work in the city.'

Some parents did tell their children of the upcoming migration before they first migrated. They communicated with their children by simply announcing the news of the migration, usually one day before leaving home or on the day of leaving, without further explanation. Some children recalled that though their parents informed them about the migration, they did not really understand about it at that time. For example, child 23 stated: 'They told me before leaving. She told me they were going to work in the cities. That's it.' Such experiences formed the category of 'simple announcement of migration' with an over-representation of the dismissing attachment styles.

After reunion at New Year, some parents left home for the cities without informing children of their departure in advance. Child 19 had dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles and said: 'They didn't tell me, I found out myself. I noticed they were not home, and I went to ask my grandmother. She told me they left.' Such experiences formed the category of 'leaving home without informing children-post-new-year' and was found to be associated with dismissing attachment styles.

Little communication about the reunion

New Year was an important moment for the migrant parents and the children, the only time of the year for them to be together. However, for some children, they did not really engage in much communication with their parents both before and during the family reunion.

The category 'little communication about the reunion (the second category in Table 20)' including its subcategories of 'no communication of the reunion schedule', 'not saying anything at the reunion moment' and 'little communication with parents during the reunion' all showed an over-representation of the paternal and maternal dismissing attachment styles.

Some children recalled that they did not have communication with their parents regarding the reunion schedules. They commonly reported that they were not told in advance whether their parents were coming home for the New Year, when they would arrive, why they were not coming home, how long they would stay, etc. For example, when child 34 with dismissing maternal and paternal attachment styles was asked: 'Did you know whether they were coming home for the New Year?' they replied, 'No, I didn't know'. The interviewer continued, 'Have they told you or have you asked them?' and child 34 responded, 'No, they didn't say. I didn't want to ask

either'. Such experiences formed the category of the 'no communication of the reunion schedule' with an over-representation of the dismissing attachment styles.

At the moment of reunion, when children finally saw their parents in person. Many children recalled their experiences of the reunion moment as 'no talking and basically silent'. Such experiences formed the category of the 'not saying anything at the reunion moment' with an over-representation of the dismissing attachment styles. The interviewer asked child 20 who had dismissing maternal and paternal attachment styles, 'What did you do when you saw her arriving at home?' The child replied that they, 'Didn't do anything'. The interviewer continued: 'Did you say anything to her?' Child 20 responded negatively, 'Didn't say anything at all.'

Some children recalled that they did not have much communication with their parents when they were at home over the New Year. For example, child 39, with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, stated: 'At the New Year, we didn't talk much. They were busy preparing for my brother's wedding. I asked them, "What did you get for brother's girlfriend?" They said, "none of your business, you are just a little kid".' Such experiences formed the category of the 'little communication with parents during the reunion' with an over-representation of the dismissing attachment styles.

Little communication during migration

Communication using ICT is the most important means for migrant parents and children to stay in contact during migration. However, many children experienced low-quantity and low-quality communication with their parents. These experiences were found to be associated with the dismissing attachment styles.

The category of 'little communication during migration (the third category in Table 20)' including its subcategories of 'little phone communication during

migration', 'not knowing about parents' lives in the city' and 'parents not knowing about me' all showed an over-representation of the dismissing attachment styles.

Some children had little phone call communication with their parents, such as short phone conversations, few calls, etc. For example, child 15, with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, stated: 'They only called when they had something to do. I did pick up the phone, but we only talked a few words, then they would ask me to pass the phone to grandpa.' Some children had so little contact with their migrant parents that they almost lost the contact with them completely. Child 22 had the dismissing maternal and paternal attachment and described contact with his father: 'He only came home once for mum's funeral. Before the funeral, he hadn't been home for four or five years. He never called.' When the interviewer asked, 'Do you know how to contact him?' the child replied, 'I don't know'. Such experiences formed the category of 'little phone communication during migration' with an over-representation of the dismissing attachment styles. It should be noted that for some children, the limited communication only took place between them and one parent, and they were still able to maintain a secure attachment with the other parent.

The category of 'not knowing about parents' lives in the city' was a category about children lacking information about their parents' work and life conditions and was found to be associated with the dismissing attachment styles. For example, child one, with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, did not know which city her parents were living in or what jobs they were doing.

The category of 'parents not knowing about me' described children's perception that their parents. For example, when asked if his parents knew about his injury last week, child 16, with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, stated, 'they didn't know. They were living there. They didn't know things about me.'

8.4.2 Parent-child communication and the secure maternal attachment style

The maternal secure attachment was found to be over-represented in categories showing children having communication with parents regarding the migration decision before the first migration, children having a proper farewell with their parents at first migration and then maintaining long-distance communication with their parents.

Communication of the early migration

The category of the 'communication of the early migration (the first category in Table 21)' including its subcategories 'communication with children about the migration' and 'proper farewell' showed an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style.

Some parents dealt with the first-time migratory separation in a different way, in that they had prior communication with their children about the migration, this was associated with maternal secure attachment styles in children. The communication usually involved more than just informing children of the migration, parents also explained the reasons for the migration or gave children advice about their lives without parents at home. Child 29 had secure maternal and paternal attachment styles and stated that: 'Yes, they told me before they left. They told me that they were going out to make money for me. I should study hard, and they would support my study in the future and build a new room here.' Such experiences formed the category of 'communication with children about the migration'.

Table 21**The over-representation of the maternal secure attachment style**

| Categories | Descriptions | N | S/M | D/M | S/P | D/P |
|--|---|----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1 Communication of the early migration | Parents communicated with children about the migration | 17 | 14 | 3 | 8 | 9 |
| Subcategory: communication with children about the migration | Parents informed children of the migration in advance and explained the reasons | 13 | 11 | 2 | 7 | 6 |
| Subcategory: proper farewell | Children saw parents off and say goodbye | 11 | 9 | 2 | 5 | 6 |
| 2 Familiarity with parents | Children knew parents' work and lives in the cities | 24 | 17 | 7 | 10 | 14 |
| 3 Affective interactions between parents and children | Children expressed difficult feelings to parents and received reciprocal responses from their parents | 15 | 12 | 3 | 8 | 7 |
| 4 Migrating for the family | Children perceived that parental migration was for the whole family | 14 | 12 | 2 | 7 | 7 |
| 5 Appreciation for parents' hard work | Children expressed appreciation of parents' hard work in the cities | 13 | 11 | 2 | 7 | 6 |
| 6 Being considerate to parents | Children understood their parents' decision to migrate and their struggle and dilemmas | 18 | 14 | 4 | 9 | 9 |
| Subcategory: care for parents | Children expressed worry and concern for their parents | 6 | 6 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| Subcategory: understanding parents' mental states | Children understood their parents' feelings and behaviour in relation to migration | 13 | 10 | 3 | 8 | 5 |
| Subcategory: less burden for parents | Children tried to reduce the burden for their parents | 11 | 9 | 2 | 7 | 4 |
| 7 Parents' family roles unfulfilled after migration | Children perceived that many family roles that used to be performed by parents were unfulfilled after migration | 18 | 14 | 4 | 10 | 8 |
| Subcategory: change in the home atmosphere | Children noticed that their home atmosphere become less alive and less warm without their parents | 15 | 12 | 3 | 8 | 7 |
| Subcategory: reduction in the family labour supply | Children noticed that the migration led to the reduction in the family labour supply | 6 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| 8 Less emotional care after migration | Children felt they received less emotional care after migration | 13 | 11 | 2 | 7 | 6 |
| 9 Emotions triggered by peers' family interactions | Children had their feelings of loss triggered by seeing their peers interacting with their parents | 12 | 10 | 2 | 7 | 5 |
| 10 Physical expression of affection | Children's physical expression of affection at the moments of separation and reunion | 9 | 9 | 0 | 4 | 5 |
| 11 Missing parents when starting boarding | Children missed parents when they just started boarding. | 7 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| 12 Emotional reactions to weekly boarding | Children expressed emotional responses to weekly boarding | 11 | 10 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 13 Close relationships with surrogate carers | Children expressed care and closeness towards grandparents | 13 | 10 | 3 | 5 | 8 |

Note. N: number of participants coded in the category. S/M: secure maternal attachment. D/M: dismissing maternal attachment. S/P: secure paternal attachment. D/P: dismissing paternal attachment.

Another subcategory labelled a 'proper farewell' was also related to the way parents dealt with migratory separations and was found to be associated with the maternal secure attachment style. The category was about children's experiences of having a proper farewell with their parents when they were leaving for the cities for the first time. They usually had the chances to see their parents off and say goodbye to them. Child 11, with secure maternal and paternal attachment styles, described the farewell: 'On the day my dad left, I was still sleeping, and he came to my room, to wake me up and told me that he was leaving to work in the city. He told me to take care of myself and listen to my grandparents.'

Communication during migration

Two categories 'familiarity with the parents (the second category in Table 21)' and 'affective interactions between parents and children (the third category in Table 21)' showing the quality of the parent-child communication during migration, had over-representations of the secure maternal attachment style.

Some children showed a fair understanding of their parents' work and lives in the cities. They knew where their parents were living, what kind of places they were living in and what jobs they were doing. For example, child 26, with the secure maternal attachment style, stated:

They are in Shenzhen. They are both working in the same factory and living in the factory dorm. The room is for two people and very messy. Sometimes I saw a bit of their living place when we were having a video call.

These statements expressed children's familiarity with their parents and formed the category 'familiarity with the parents' and had an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment.

Some children engaged in emotional communication with their parents during the migration. They shared their feelings with their parents and usually received emotional reciprocity from their parents. Such experiences formed the category 'affective interactions between parents and children' and was found to be associated with the maternal attachment style. Child 24, with secure maternal and paternal attachment styles, described a conversation: 'I cried on the phone, I told them I was sad and missed them a lot.' When the interviewer asked, 'How did they respond?' the child replied, 'they said, they knew. But they left home only to work for us, not for anything else. My sister and I should study hard and cheer up.'

8.5 Emotional experiences and attachment styles

The data integration results (shown in Table 20 and Table 21) revealed that children's attachment styles were associated with their emotional responses to the separations (including migratory separations and separations caused by boarding) and reunions. The separation experiences evoked different emotional responses in children. Many children displayed various intense emotions while others appeared not to be emotionally impacted by them. The integration showed that the experiences of emotional indifference to separation and reunion were more related with the dismissing attachment styles. On the other hand, the maternal secure attachment style was found to be particularly associated with certain emotional experiences regarding migratory and boarding separations.

8.5.1 Emotional indifference and the dismissing attachment styles

The data integration showed that the categories of 'indifference to migratory separations and reunions (the fourth category in Table 20)' and 'indifference to boarding separations (the fifth category in Table 20)' that captured the children's emotional indifference had over-presentations of the dismissing attachment styles.

Overall, the dismissing attachment styles were associated with children downplaying the emotional impact of family separations and reunions on them. Children's indifferent reactions, though appearing overtly less distressed, could be a signal for detachment in the parent-child bond. Moreover, these LBC often provided emotionally impoverished narratives in the interviews and often used the phrase 'no feelings'.

Indifference to migratory separations and reunions

The category of 'indifference to migratory separations and reunions' as well as its subcategories of 'indifference to separations', 'indifference to reunions', 'no feelings towards phone calls' and 'not missing migrant parents' all showed over-representations of interviewees with both paternal and maternal dismissing attachment styles.

The subcategory of 'indifference to separations' was about the experiences of some children lacking emotional responses to parents' leaving home for the cities (either for the first migration or after reunion at New Year). For instance, when the interviewer asked, 'How did you feel when your grandma told you your parents left to work in the cities?' child 12, who had dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, replied that they had, 'no feelings'. Similar responses were observed among some children when describing their reunion experiences with their migrant parents. For example, when the interviewer asked child 12 how they felt when they saw them, the child repeated, 'no feelings'. Such experiences formed the subcategory of 'indifference to reunions', which was about children's lack of emotional experiences towards reunions with their parents. In addition to reporting no feelings towards reuniting with their parents in person, some children expressed lack of emotional reactions to or not feeling interested in contacting their parents through phone calls.

In response to the question, 'How did you feel when you were calling your parents?', child four, who had dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, replied that they had 'no feelings'. Such experiences formed the category 'no feelings towards phone calls'.

During long-term separations from parents, eight children stated that they did not miss their parents. For example, child 22 said: 'I did not think of them.' These children all had the dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles. The experiences formed the subcategory of 'not missing migrant parents'.

Indifference to boarding separations

The category 'indifference to boarding separations (the fifth category in Table 20)' had over-representations of both the paternal and maternal dismissing attachment styles. The category included two subcategories also showing over-representations of both the paternal and maternal dismissing attachment styles. The children in the sub-category of 'no feelings to weekly boarding' commonly reported 'no feelings' when leaving home for boarding school on Sunday or returning back home on Friday. The sub-category of 'no difficulties when starting boarding' was about the children not experiencing difficulties or missing their families when they just started boarding at the schools. For example, when child 16, who had both dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, was asked, 'How did you feel when you just started boarding?' they replied, 'Not many feelings. No problems for me.' In response to, 'Did you miss home?' they said, 'Not really'.

8.5.2 Emotional experiences and the secure maternal attachment style

Children with the secure maternal attachment style were over-represented in categories that showed they experienced emotions in relation to separations caused by parental migration and weekly boarding. These children's emotional reactions to

separations causing them distress, but this in itself may be a sign of parent-child secure attachment. Meanwhile this finding also suggested that securely attached children were more likely to express their emotions openly.

Migration-related emotional experiences

Some children described their experience of having their migration-related emotions triggered when they saw their peers interacting with their parents. Such experiences formed the code of 'emotions triggered by peers' family interactions (the ninth category in Table 21)' and was found to be associated with secure attachment styles. For example, child 27, who had both secure maternal and paternal attachment styles, stated that: 'I felt really happy when my parents came home. When they were not home, I felt sad when I saw other parents picking up [my friends from school].'

Separation and reunion moments with parents were the most emotional occasions for many children. Some children expressed their affection physically, with hugs and kisses. Such experiences formed the category of 'physical expression of affection (the tenth category in Table 21)'. For example, child 24, who had both secure maternal and paternal attachment styles, stated: 'I felt shocked seeing them arriving home. I hugged them immediately and started crying.'

Boarding-related emotional experiences

Contrary to the emotional indifference to boarding separations found in some children with dismissing attachment styles, other children exhibited emotional responses. The category of 'missing parents when starting boarding (the eleventh category in Table 21)' was about the children's emotional experiences when they just started boarding. This category was found to be associated with the secure maternal

attachment style, as in, child 14 who stated: 'I felt very, very sad, I felt missing my parents so much.'

The category of 'emotional reactions to weekly boarding (the twelfth category in Table 21)' was about some children's acknowledgement of their emotional reactions to leaving home for boarding school on Sunday and arriving home from the school on Friday. Child 31, with secure maternal attachment, stated: 'Sunday afternoon, I went to the neighbour's house and got into the rental car for the school. I felt sad and I missed home and my grandparents a lot on my way to the school.'

8.6 Perceptions of parental migration and the secure maternal attachment style

In addition to emotional experiences, several categories relating to children's perceptions of their migrant parents and the act of labour migration were also found to have an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style.

8.6.1 The impact of parental migration

As well as acknowledging the emotional impact of parental migration, many children also realised the impact migration had on their everyday life. The two categories of 'parents' family roles unfulfilled after migration (the seventh category in Table 21)' and 'less emotional care after migration (the eighth category in the Table 21)' were about children's acknowledgement of the impact of migration on their lives in relation to family roles. Admitting that parental absence had caused an important impact suggested that children recognised their parents' roles in their families. These two categories showed over-representations of the maternal secure attachment style.

Parents' family roles unfulfilled after migration

Parents played many important family roles, such as working on the family land and mediating family conflicts. After the migration, children perceived that these

family roles were often left unfulfilled. Such perceptions formed the category of 'parents' family roles unfulfilled after migration' showing an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style. The category has two subcategories of 'change in home atmosphere' and 'reduction in family labour supply'.

Many children described the impact of migration on their lives through changes in the atmosphere at home. For example, child 8, with the secure maternal style, stated:

I felt different at home. Before when my parents were at home, they liked to make jokes. It was more fun. My dad didn't allow my sister and I to get into a fight. After he left, we always got into fights. My mum liked to make big dinners, inviting my cousins to come over. It's different now.

The child's description implied the important role the parents played in binding the family together before the migration. Such experiences formed the subcategory of 'change in home atmosphere' with an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style.

Some children noticed that the parental migration led to a reduction in the family labour supply. Child 35 had the secure maternal attachment style and noticed that 'After parents left, just grandma and I staying at home. My grandma could not handle all the work on the family land.' Such experiences formed the subcategory 'reduction in family labour supply' with an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style.

Less emotional care after migration

For many children, the emotional care and support they used to receive from their parents were no longer available to them. They often described their sense of reduced emotional care by comparing their current lives to their lives before

migration or by comparing parental care to care from the surrogate carers. Such experiences formed the code of 'less emotional care after migration' with an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style. For example, child 17 had secure maternal style and stated: 'I felt the biggest difference was I don't have people to talk to, especially when I felt bad. No one would ask me about my day anymore.'

8.6.2 Positive regard for the migration and the parents

Three categories of 'migrating for the family (the fourth category in Table 21)', 'appreciation for parents' hard work (the fifth category in Table 21)', and 'being considerate to parents' (the sixth category in Table 21) showed children's positive regard for the parental migration and their parents. These categories had an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment.

Migrating for the family

The children exercised their self-agency in making sense of the migration. Some children emphasised the financial motivations for the migration while others emphasised that the migration was for the benefit of the whole family. The latter category was named as 'migrating for the family' and was associated with the maternal secure attachment style. For example, child 36 with secure maternal attachment stated that: 'They were working hard to support me and my sister's study.'

Appreciation for parents' hard work

The category 'appreciation for parents' hard work' captured children's perceptions of their parents' work in the city as tiring and as being an act of a devotion to the family. The children expressed appreciation and gratitude to their parents for their hard work. For example, child 35, who had secure maternal

attachment, visited his parents' workplace in the holiday and explained: 'I felt they were working so hard and their work was so tiring. They were doing it all for us. And my mum had lost so much weight because of the hard work.'

Being considerate to parents

The subcategories of 'care for parents', 'understanding parents' mental states' and 'less burden for parents' all showed the children's consideration towards their parents and formed the category of 'being considerate to parents'. These categories all showed an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment.

The LBC not only expressed their desire for parental care but also showed they cared for their parents. Some children described how they were concerned about their parents during migration. They would express their care by stating how much they worried about their parents' health and safety in the cities. Child 33 had the secure maternal attachment style and said: 'They were going to be away for a long time. What if they got sick or injured in the city? I had to consider that.' Such experiences formed the subcategory of 'care for parents' with an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style.

Children also expressed their care for their parents by showing their understanding of their parents' mental states and behaviour. They understood the dilemma their parents faced when choosing between leaving them behind and making money for the family. Child 25 had the secure maternal attachment style and the dismissing paternal attachment style and stated: 'I cried after she left. I didn't cry in front of her because that would make her cry too. I knew she didn't want to leave me either, but she had no choice.' They further showed their understanding of their parents' mindsets in situations such as not getting phone calls from parents or parents not coming back home for New Year. Child 31 had the secure maternal

attachment style and on learning that her mum was not coming back home for New Year, she stated: 'I wasn't upset with her really, because I understood her. She would be very busy and working the whole time during the New Year. She couldn't risk losing her job.' Such experiences formed the subcategory of 'understanding parents' mental states' with an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style.

Because they understood their parents, many children tried in their own way to reduce their parents' burdens. For example, child 11, with the secure maternal style, explained that: 'I didn't tell them about my feelings. I didn't want to worry them and burden them. After all, working is already so tiring for them.' Such experiences formed the subcategory of 'less burden for parents' with an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment style.

8.7 Relationship with surrogate carers and attachment styles

In addition to children's interactions with their parents, children's attachment styles were over-represented in categories associated with their experiences with surrogate carers. Dismissing attachment styles were found to be over-represented in the category of 'relational disconnection with surrogate carers (the sixth category in Table 20)'. The category was about children either having conflictual or emotionally distant relationships with their grandparents. For example, child 13, with dismissing paternal and maternal attachment styles, stated: 'My grandparents were not fair to me. They favoured my younger brother. When we were quarrelling, my grandma only hit me. And my younger brother always got more pocket money from them than I did.'

On the other hand, the category of 'close relationships with surrogate carers (the thirteenth category in Table 21)' captured children's affection for their surrogate

carers and their sense of closeness to them. This category had an over-representation of the secure maternal attachment. Child 26 had secure maternal and paternal attachment styles and described how:

In the sixth grade, my grandma got sick and was checked into the hospital. I wanted to stay in the hospital and take care of my grandma, but my grandpa didn't let me stay. I felt really bad because grandma was sick, and I cried.

In summary, the integration of data showed that the qualitative findings validated the quantitative findings regarding the types of the parent-child relationships, and the difference between the father-child attachment and the mother-child attachment. The qualitative findings also supplemented the quantitative findings with evidence from the children's narratives showing the differences in the experiences of the children with different attachment styles.

Chapter 9

Discussion

This discussion centres on the two research questions. The first research question investigates the LBC's parent-child attachment. The second research question focuses on the LBC's experiences of parental migration.

The following sections of this discussion reflect on the limitations of the research before proposing future areas of research. Subsequently, the chapter explores the research findings in light of their implications for practice and policies. The chapter ends with a section summarising the contributions made by the current research and its key conclusions.

9.1 The LBC's attachment

The discussion on the LBC's attachment is based on the results from the quantitative study and the data integration. The reliability and validity of the CAI are first discussed. The distribution of the LBC's attachment styles is then discussed in relation to the literature and other samples of children. The findings on the relationships between LBC's attachment and factors such as gender, emotion, parent-child interaction and surrogate carer-child relationship are linked to the literature to provide potential explanations for these findings as well as to discuss how these findings could implicate our understanding of the attachment construct.

9.1.1 The reliability and validity of the CAI

Overall, the current study supported the validity of the CAI albeit in a small sample. The high interrater reliability showed that trained coders could adequately use the CAI with a Chinese sample. The 79% concordance between maternal and paternal attachment classifications found in our clinical sample was lower than the concordance reported by most of the previous studies (e.g., Privizzini, 2017;

Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008; Venta et al., 2014), but close to the 81.4% reported by Baumel et al. (2016) in the clinical sample. As the majority of the previous studies reported very high concordance between paternal and maternal attachment, some researchers suggested integrating the paternal and maternal attachment findings and only using a single index of security to represent the overall parental attachment security (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008). However, the lower concordance reported by the current research and the research by Baumel et al. (2016) suggests that it may be necessary to continue to use two separate scales for attachment figures.

The lower concordance might be explained by the characteristics of the samples. For instance, the study by Baumel et al. (2016) also reported a concordance rate of 45.5% for a group of children experiencing alienation with their father. It was possible that despite that the current sample related to cases where both their parents migrated at the same time, there were noticeable differences between the father-child relationship and the mother-child relationship for the LBC. Moreover, both the study by the Baumel and colleagues, and the current study were conducted with small sample sizes, which might be another factor contributing to the low concordances.

The CAI classifications demonstrated the expected relationship with the CAI scales, with the secure attachment style scoring higher on secure scales than the insecure style, and lower on insecure scales than the insecure style. The subscales also showed the expected pattern of associations between the secure scales and the insecure scales. This evidence showed that the current sample was able to reflect the theoretical relations between CAI scales and classifications described by the measurement's authors (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008) and partly supported the construct validity of the CAI.

While demonstrating the convergent validity of the CAI in general, the preoccupied anger scales and idealisation scales did not have any significant correlation with the IPPA scales. There may be many reasons for this result, for example, preoccupied anger scales are usually indicative of preoccupied attachment styles which were not found in the current samples. The absence of the correlation could also be caused by the difference in relation to attachment between the self-report measure and the CAI. Generally, the findings showed moderate to high associations between the CAI and the self-report measure of attachment, suggesting the narrative- and self-report-based attachment measures may be assessed differently, although there are overlapping constructs, which must be recognised in clinical and research settings.

The lack of relationship between the CAI and alienation scale of the IPPA was also reported in Venta et al.'s (2014) study using the CAI for adolescents. Venta and colleagues attributed the lack of correlation to the adolescents' developmental transitions toward independence. Though the subjects in the current sample had not reached their adolescence, they demonstrated a great deal of independence from their parents due to their social contexts, which could contribute to the low correlation between the alienation scale and the CAI. Predictive validity of the CAI was supported by the association between the measurement of the children's current functioning with the SDQ and their attachment classifications. The results fit the proposition in attachment literature that attachment insecurity is linked to increased risks for psychopathology.

9.1.2 The high prevalence of the dismissing attachment styles

Previous studies conducted in China showed that young Chinese children's distribution of maternal attachment styles also fitted the normality hypothesis with the

secure style being the most prevalent attachment style (e.g., Archer et al., 2015; Shi, et al., 2017; Yue, et al., 2010). The prevalence of the maternal secure style (48.7%) in the current study was lower than those reported in the Chinese samples and those reported among community samples with the CAI in other countries (Borelli et al., 2016; Fearon, et al., 2014; Roder et al., 2015; Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008; Zachrisson et al., 2011). The current study's lower prevalence of the maternal secure attachment style could suggest a heightened risk for developing insecure attachment in the context of parental migration.

As this has been the first study to examine the distribution of the paternal attachment style of children in China, it has been unable to compare the current findings of the predominance of the paternal dismissing attachment to other samples in China. However, previous studies using CAI with community samples in other countries showed that paternal attachment's primary attachment style was the secure style (Borelli et al., 2016; Fearon, et al., 2014; Roder et al., 2015; Zachrisson et al., 2011). The current study suggested that in the context of labour migration, the LBC's father-child attachment was characterised by low attachment security and high avoidance, similar to the children in foster care (Joseph et al., 2014; Zaccagnino et al., 2015) and clinical services (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008). Parental migration could be an important risk factor for developing dismissing paternal attachment.

The current research findings of the LBC's attachment style distribution resonated and complemented the results of the meta-analysis, that in the context of parental migration the LBC's attachment security was lowered and their attachment representations were characterised by the dismissing style rather than other types of insecure attachment representations. Though the parents still interacted with their children after migration, the LBC's attachment representations showed that many

children did not have the expectation that their migrant parents were a reliable source of security for them in distress, which has been associated with negative developmental outcomes.

9.1.3 The under-representations of the preoccupied and disorganised attachment styles

No cases of preoccupied or disorganised attachment styles were found in the current research. As there was no prior research on the distribution of attachment styles on the LBC, it was not possible to compare the current findings to other samples of LBC. The under-presentation of preoccupied or disorganized attachment styles may reflect the actual situation of the LBC or be related to the issues of sample size, cultural adaption of the measure, the methodological issues, and the sensitivity of the measure in identifying these two patterns.

First, it might be caused by the small sample size of the current research. Previous research has shown that preoccupation attachment appears to be less common in middle childhood. For example, the studies by Main and Cassidy (1988), Wartner et al. (1994), Zeanah et al. (2005) were also unable to identify children with ambivalent attachment styles using behavioural measurements. Therefore, it might take a larger sample to identify cases of preoccupied or disorganised attachment styles.

Second, the attachment distribution in the current research (high avoidance and no cases of preoccupied or disorganised attachment styles) may indicate the impact of the LBC's interactions with their caregivers. According to attachment theory, the quality of the attachment is largely dependent on the quality of the caregiving that children receive (Benoit, 2004). There is substantial evidence to

support maternal responsiveness and sensitivity as the best predictor of secure attachment (Brenning, et al., 2012; George et al., 2010; O'Hara et al., 2019). As for the insecure attachment styles, while the relationship between maltreatment and insecure attachment is embedded in Bowlby's attachment theory and supported empirically (Erozkan, 2016), there are still some gaps in the exact antecedents of a particular insecure attachment style.

Parents of children who have an avoidant attachment are often hypothesised as unresponsive and rejecting (Brenning et al., 2012; Karavasilis et al., 2003; Yunger et al., 2005). The meta-analysis by Koehn & Kerns (2017) found that parents of children with more avoidant attachment styles were less responsive and used fewer behavioural control strategies. Parents of children classified as having an ambivalent, preoccupied or anxious attachment are hypothesised to be inconsistent in providing warmth and support and are non-contingently responsive to children's distress cues, or they may act in an 'involving way', such as expecting the child to worry about the caregiver's own needs (Benoit, 2004; Brenning et al., 2012; Yunger et al., 2005). The study by Karavasilis et al. (2003) found that children who perceived their parents as more warmly engaged but discouraging of their psychological autonomy were more likely to be preoccupied in their attachment to their mothers. For the disorganised attachment, studies have identified some precursors including children's exposure to 'frightening, frightened, dissociated, sexualised or otherwise atypical' parental behaviour during parent-child interactions (Benoit, 2004; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2016). It is possible that the preoccupied and disorganised attachment styles are more closely associated with negative parental acts of commission, e.g., frightening or abusive behaviour, whereas the dismissing attachment styles are associated with parental acts of omission, such as neglect.

The current research found that the LBC experienced extensive parental absence and could only interact with their parents through phone calls that were hardly frequent. It is reasonable to assume that the migrant parents engaged much less with their children than parents living with their children. It was hard for the parents to meet their children's needs effectively. Furthermore, there seemed to be a consistency in the parents' unavailability for their children, regarding the means through which parents engaged with children, the frequency of the parent-child interactions (e.g., weekly phone calls and yearly home visits) and in some cases, the content of the parent-child interactions (e.g., similar and repetitive phone conversations). Taken together, these factors meant that the LBC were more likely to develop the dismissing attachment style rather than other types of insecure attachment.

Third, the low presentation of the preoccupied attachment classification was in line with previous studies using the CAI (Joseph et al., 2014; Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008; Zachrisson et al., 2011). It is notable that the attachment distribution reported in CAI studies showed a constant preference for the dismissing attachment style among the insecure patterns and an under-representation of the preoccupied pattern (Privizzini, 2017). This finding could indicate some difficulties in identifying preoccupation with the CAI measurement. According to the coding and classification manual of the CAI, one key marker for assigning a preoccupied classification to children is when children show signs of preoccupied anger towards one or both parents, with high scores on the subscale of preoccupied anger (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008). However, emotional expression, including an anger response, may be impacted by social-cultural backgrounds. Chinese culture is believed to value emotional moderation and discourage individual expression (Russell & Yik, 1996).

For example, the study by Soto et al. (2005) showed that Chinese Americans reported experiencing significantly less emotion than Mexican Americans when responding to aversive stimuli. The study by Novin et al. (2011) showed that Chinese children were more likely to react tolerantly to an aggressor than their Dutch peers. Therefore, social-cultural norms may have an influence on children's emotional expression, further influencing the rating of 'preoccupied anger' when using the CAI. In addition to the impacts from Chinese culture in general, the social context of the LBC may exert a unique influence on the children's experience of anger towards parents. LBC commonly attributed parents' unavailability to their migration and the financial incentives of the labour migration. They generally expressed an understanding and acceptance of their parents' choice and even appreciated their hard work in the cities. LBC's positive regard for their parents constituted as part of the mental representations of their parents, might explain why LBC rarely displayed anger towards their parents and received a low rating on the scale of preoccupied anger.

Researchers have also warned that anger might be a rare finding for the children with preoccupied attachment. Children may manifest a preoccupied state of mind differently from adults, instead of expressing unresolved anger, they could communicate negativity, repetitive themes, and depressive mood even in non-verbal behaviour. The problem is that these children might currently be miscoded as secure because in interviews they give extensive examples, relatively coherent descriptions and express emotional openness (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008). To overcome this limitation, there was a proposal to add a further scale to the CAI coding system which depicts anxious preoccupied communicative patterns, also extending and further detailing relevant non-verbal behaviour (Venta et al., 2014).

Similarly, the fact that that no cases of disorganised attachment have been found might raise doubts about the CAI's sensitivity in identifying disorganised attachment. The procedure in the CAI for assigning a disorganised attachment classification was different than those for assigning other attachment classifications. For assigning a main attachment classification, the interview narrative of the CAI must be compatible with the specific ratings for the most important scales and fit the main classification descriptions. In contrast, for assigning a disorganised attachment classification, the scale scores were irrelevant. The coder needs to look for atypical or disorganised behaviour indicating the child's segregated attachment system.

Main and Solomon (1990) used the term disorganised to capture bizarre and contradictory infant behaviours observed in the Strange Situation procedure. Researchers have seen a transformation from disorganised behaviour observed in infants to controlling behaviours observed in childhood and adolescence characterised by control and role reversal with parents (Main & Hesse, 1990; Obsuth et al., 2014). Lyons-Ruth and colleagues (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999; Obsuth et al., 2014) have described controlling-punitive and controlling-caregiving behaviours in both children and adolescents. Controlling-punitive behaviour is manifested by children who seek to control their parent through mean, defiant, or humiliating behaviour. Controlling-caregiving behaviour is manifested by children who attempt to 'parent' their caregiver by guiding the caregiver, giving emotional support or providing encouragement (Lyons-Ruth, 1996).

Consistent with the literature, the CAI manual described the most common behavioural manifestations of disorganisation as controlling-punitive behaviour and controlling-caregiving behaviour. In addition to these two types of controlling behaviour, the CAI also summarised three types of atypical and/or disorganised

behaviour including a) disorganised, dysregulated, dissociated or controlling behaviour only seen in response to attachment related questions; b) organised controlling behaviours not specific to attachment; c) any other behaviour, atypical or strange behaviour reflecting more pervasive disorganisation and not specific to attachment. The CAI manual also listed examples of atypical/disorganised behaviour illustrating these patterns. The coder needs to specify in what ways disorganisation is manifested by indicating the presence of the specific behaviour described above. The repertoire of these disorganised/atypical behaviours were collected through observations by the researchers conducting the CAI in non-Chinese cultural contexts. This raises the question of whether Chinese children with disorganised attachment would display similar behaviour, especially since no observations of Chinese children with disorganised attachment have ever been conducted with any type of attachment interview.

For example, the role-reversal controlling-caregiving behaviour of a child taking the parental role and exhibiting caregiving controlling behaviour is similar to the construct of parentification. Studies have found that the impact of parentification on child development varies between different cultural contexts. Studies have shown that parentification behaviours were associated with predominantly negative developmental outcomes for children growing up with cultural norms valuing autonomy, independence and boundaries, whereas parentification could be associated with positive outcomes for children growing up with cultural norms valuing family role flexibility and family interdependence (Khafi, 2014; Arcinas, 2021). The meaning attached to the children's provision of caregiving, and its implications for their emotional, behavioural, and relational adjustment, may depend on the culture in which the caregiving is embedded. What may be seen as malfunctioning behaviour

associated with attachment disorganisation in one cultural context, may be perceived as functioning behaviour in another culture.

In terms of controlling-punitive behaviour, it is unclear how cultural norms emphasising the obedience of children and respect towards adults would inhibit a child's manifestation of controlling-punitive behaviour, but this may be worth further consideration.

More exploratory studies on Chinese children should be conducted to collect and observe the behaviour repertoire of disorganised attachment in the Chinese context.

The way the CAI is used to assign the disorganised attachment classification in middle childhood is similar to the way Main and Solomon (1990) used it to identify disorganised attachment in infancy. While these methods captured bizarre and dysregulated behaviour in children, the meaning of this behaviour and how it signals disorganisation attachment needs further clarification. Rutter et al. (2009, p. 532) stated that the disorganisation classification 'undoubtedly identifies behavioural features of considerable theoretical and clinical significance, but the meaning of the pattern remains rather unclear'. Likewise, Lyons-Ruth and Jacobvitz (2016) have argued that more effort is needed to clarify the meaning of disorganised attachment and its behavioural manifestations before applying the classification in work with children and families.

Furthermore, the CAI classifies disorganised attachment without using scales, making it difficult to test the validity and reliability of the classification. Groh and colleagues also warned that the work on disorganised attachment classification did not keep psychometric modelling in mind (Groh et al., 2017).

Last but not least, the methodology of applying the CAI in the current research may impact its use in detecting all the attachment styles correctly. For example, the current research did not go through a strict translation procedure.

9.1.4 Gender differences of attachment

The current research found girls exhibiting more maternal secure attachment. This finding was consistent with some of the findings in previous studies of middle childhood using the CAI (Borelli et al., 2016; Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008; Zachrisson et al., 2011) and other attachment measures (e.g., Brumariu & Kerns, 2008; Granot & Mayseless, 2001; Karavasilis et al., 2003). These studies found that girls were more likely than boys to be securely attached to their mothers, whereas boys were more likely than girls to have avoidant attachment.

Generally, the evidence for systematic gender differences in attachment during infancy and early childhood was lacking (Del Giudice, 2009). However, such evidence becomes more ample in middle childhood studies, potentially due to the intensification of sex differences in many other aspects of children's developments, such as the rising level of androgens (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2009; Del Giudice & Belsky, 2010; Giudice, 2014).

The attachment strategy in middle childhood has evolved from seeking physical proximity to verbal communication (Bodner, 2019). Gender difference in attachment at this age stage may also be related to some gender differences in verbal communications. Interview and storytelling-based attachment measures partially rely on the quality of narratives produced by children. Previous studies analysing children's narratives showed that girls' stories had higher levels of narrative structure, character representation (Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007) and emotional understanding (Brown & Dunn, 1996) than stories by boys. Though not

tested in the current research, some studies also found that girls in China had better language competence than boys (Ma & Fan, 2015; Xiao & Li, 2021). These developmental language differences between girls and boys might be contributing factors in finding more girls securely attached than boys. The meta-analysis in chapter 3 found that boy LBC and girl LBC did not differ significantly in attachment security. It was possible that meta-analysis was based on studies using self-reports while the current study used the Child Attachment Interview, which gave more weight to the children's emotional expression while assigning attachment classifications.

Additionally, gender socialisation may lead to differences in how parents respond to children's emotions and consequently encourage different emotional behaviours for boys and girls (Chaplin et al., 2005; Denham et al., 2010; VanSchyndel et al., 2013). Children are socialised to express emotions in a gender-role consistent way. They are encouraged to express certain emotions and discouraged to express others (Fivush & Buckner, 2000). Girls are found to be more likely to express internalising emotions, such as fear, sadness or anxiety, which communicate vulnerability and express a need for comfort and care from others (Chaplin, 2015; Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Such gender differences in emotional expression have been observed in children as young as three months old (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013; Else-Quest et al., 2012)

Moreover, parents may have different relationships with their children of different genders. It has been observed that parents tend to use more emotional words and emotional content when talking to their daughters than sons (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Denham et al., 2010). And the current research is in line with the finding that children's relationships with their mothers is closer than with fathers and

that mother-daughter relationships are closest of all (Branje et al., 2013; Klimes-Dougan et al., 2007; Van Lissa et al., 2019).

In light of the evidence from the literature and the current study, a combination of the biological, psychological, social factors could contribute to the gender differences in the attachment styles.

9.1.5 Parent-child interactions and children's attachment styles

The data integration revealed indicative associations between certain forms of parent-child interactions and different attachment styles. Parent-child communication was very likely to be related to the children's attachment styles. Children with dismissing attachment styles often experienced parent-child communication of low quality and quantity before and during migration. The children were disconnected from their parents without sufficient communication with them. They did not have sufficient information about their parents' migration or parents' lives in the cities, and they did not share their feelings with their parents. The fact that some children lost contact with migrant parents completely for years was in fact an extreme example of parental unavailability or parental neglect.

Lengthy separations from migrant parents with little communication experienced by the LBC potentially prevented them from getting parental support in times of need, which could lead them to perceive their parents as unreachable, and themselves as self-reliant, thus tending to develop dismissing attachment styles. These children's experiences also fit the category of attachment disruption, one of the forms of 'attachment-related traumas' suggested by Kobak et al. (2004). The relationship between childhood trauma and insecure types of attachment (fearful, preoccupied and dismissing attachment styles) has been supported empirically and extensively (Erozkan, 2016; Stalker & Davies, 1995). Kobak et al. (2004) further

developed the concept of 'attachment-related traumas', referring to events where 'a frightening experience is accompanied by, or results from, the appraisal of loss, rejection, or abandonment by an attachment figure'. They suggested four different types of attachment-related traumas, including attachment disruptions of prolonged separation from parents with little communication or no plans of reunion, sexual abuse, loss of attachment figures and abandonment (Kobak et al., 2004).

Triangulation of the data also found that the way parents dealt with migratory separations might be associated with children's attachment style. Dismissing attachment style was over-represented in the acts of not informing children about the migration at all, leaving without saying goodbye, or making simple announcements about the forthcoming migration.

The moment of separation was an important point in the relationship between the migrant parents and their children because this moment signalled a change in the parent-child daily interactions. Parents realised that this moment would very likely elicit emotional reactions from their children. The way parents dealt with the farewell reflected the way they dealt with their children's difficult emotions induced by the separation. If children were not told about the migration at all and their parents left without saying goodbye, it demonstrated parents' avoidance or rejection of their children's emotions regarding the separation. These parents did not show their openness and care towards their children's emotions, or help children contain and cope with their emotions. If the children perceived such parental emotional unavailability repeatedly, they may learn to not express their vulnerabilities and emotional needs to their parents and appear emotionally self-reliant.

Securely attached children were associated with proper communication about the migration and a farewell with their parents, which usually included an open

discussion of the migration and an acknowledgement of the impact of the migration on the children. The triangulation of the data also suggested that the secure maternal attachment style might relate to more open, accepting and direct affective interactions between parents and children. The way parents dealt with their children's emotions was related to the children's attachment security. Studies found that parents who liked to talk to their children about emotions and helped them express and cope with their emotions were more likely to achieve secure parent-child attachments (Chen et al., 2012; Yeh et al., 2005). On the other hand, parents who tended to ignore or distract their children when they were in distress or who denied the emotions altogether were more associated with lower levels of attachment security in children (Chen et al., 2012; Yeh et al., 2005). The current researcher's findings regarding the possible link between the children's farewell experiences and parent-child attachment security reflected the importance of proper emotional interactions in the formation of attachment in the context of migration. It is possible that when parents showed openness and acceptance of their children's emotional distress, they were more likely to be perceived by their children as being emotionally reliable and encouraging of emotional expression, which contributed to the formation of secure attachment.

9.1.6 Emotion and attachment styles

Triangulation of the data may suggest that children with different attachment styles had different emotional experiences. The differences indicated their different levels of emotional reactivity in the context of the parental labour migration. Children with secure styles appeared more emotionally reactive or had higher levels of emotional arousal than children with the dismissing attachment. For example, securely attached children's experiences of feeling sad when they saw their peers

being taken care of by parents exemplified their emotional reactivity with attachment-related cues. There is some evidence in the literature associating higher attachment security with higher emotional reactivity. For instance, in a study of children playing anger-eliciting games, more securely attached children felt more anger (Spangler & Zimmermann, 2014). In another study of children watching videos of simulated parental conflict, more securely attached children experienced more anger, sadness and fear after watching the videos than insecurely attached children (Harold et al., 2004). The higher emotional reactivity among the securely attached children may reflect the greater emotional awareness of these children.

During the research interviews, securely attached children were more inclined to express and communicate their feelings about their parents freely. They often provided narratives that were more emotionally elaborate than those of the insecurely attached children. In the coding of the CAI (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008), one of the key markers of the secure attachment was a moderate to high level of emotional openness. The triangulation of data showed that the securely attached children's emotional openness was not only reflected in the attachment interview, but also manifested in the open interviews about their life experiences.

Through their coherent emotional narratives, the securely attached LBC showed their acceptance and containment of their own emotions without distortion, despite experiencing higher separation distress, as according to Cassidy (1994, p. 233), 'the experience of security is based not on the denial of negative affect but on the ability to tolerate negative affects temporarily in order to achieve mastery over threatening or frustrating situations'. This study was supported by the evidence that compared to children classified as having insecure attachment, securely attached children were more emotionally open to appropriate negative feelings without being

over-expressive and showed a greater ability to tolerate distress without becoming defensive (Shouldice & Hinde, 1992).

The triangulation data further showed that children with secure attachment tended to express positive perceptions of their parents. Cognitive appraisal is recognised as playing an essential role in producing and regulating emotions. The secure children's positive appraisal of their parents was linked to their feelings of gratitude to parents. Moreover, regarding the migration as an act of devotion by their parents rather than abandonment was consistent with secure children's positive attachment representation of their parents and their overall value of attachment relationships.

The securely attached LBC's emotional processes could benefit their social development. Children's peer interactions are often characterized with a high level of emotional communication (Garner & Estep, 2001). Children who are able to regulate their emotions are better able to respond in socially appropriate ways and to focus their attention, which makes it easier for them to learn and to develop social competence (Howse et al., 2003).

The lack of emotional responses of LBC was also found in Dreby's (2010) study on Mexican LBC. She found that some LBC appeared indifferent to parental phone calls and visits and refused to migrate to reunite with their parents. The current research looked at children's emotional indifference from the attachment perspective by associating it with the dismissing attachment style. The emotional indifference of dismissing children was also observed in an experiment where young children were classified as avoidant because they appeared affectless following brief separations from caregivers (Main, 2000).

The affectless reactions may result from affect regulation that is reliant upon deactivating strategies. They enable the children to diminish, minimise, or devalue the importance of attachment stimuli, and keep the attachment system deactivated so as to avoid frustration and further distress caused by attachment-figure unavailability (George & West, 2001; Zheng et al., 2015). Children with dismissing attachment may be actively suppressing their emotions and become less aware of their emotions (Borelli et al., 2013). Studies including both the physiological responses and a subjective report by the children showed that children with more attachment avoidance, despite their subjective reports of little distress, still displayed significant physiological signs of distress in a variety of stressful situations (Borelli et al., 2013; White et al., 2012). These children had a tendency to under-report their actual distress.

Applying the perspective of the attachment style and its corresponding emotional regulation strategy had implications for understanding some LBC's indifferent reactions to parental migration. These 'indifferent' children may not be unimpacted by the migration but rather be unaware of their emotional states, or unable to express their feelings.

In general, the triangulation of the current research showed that children's different attachment styles manifested in their distinctive emotional experiences, specifically, in their emotional reactivity and in what they do in response to those emotions (Abtahi & Kerns, 2017). The children's emotional strategies, i.e., suppressing or expressing openly, reflected through their interview narratives of their migration-related emotional experiences, were consistent with the different ways migrant parents handled their children's emotional distress. There was a provisional suggestion that securely attached children, who experienced open communication

with their parents about the migration, also tended to be more open to their own emotional experiences. On the other hand, insecurely attached children who did not communicate with their parents about the separation tended to be less emotional in the research interviews. This could indicate a possible process of the parents' openness to children's distress being internalised by children as an emotional regulation strategy, organised by internal working models. This process was also manifested in the development of the self-reflective capacity in the attachment relationship (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2019). Reflective functioning refers to the dynamic process of experiencing oneself or others in terms of the mental processes underlying interactions or behaviour, which could be reflected through one's own narratives. In the context of a secure relationship, children's affective signals are usually received and reciprocated by the caregiver with languages the child can comprehend. As a result, children develop emotional regulation skills and developed reciprocal communication skills to express their emotions properly (Fonagy et al., 2002; Weinberg, 2006).

In the CAI, children with secure attachment showed higher reflective functioning as indicated by their higher scores of narrative coherences on the coherence subscale and the coherence factor, which take into consideration that a child with secure attachment has the capacity to express the interplay of affect, mental states and behaviour, and to have an integrated picture of their attachment figures. Consistent with the attachment measure, in the open interviews about separation experiences, children with secure attachment showed higher reflective functioning, in that they were able to reflect on their own mental states with a high level of emotional expressiveness, as well as reflecting about their parents' mental states by showing an understanding of their parents' inner struggles with migration.

These understandings led to positive appraisals of parents, which could serve to preserve the parent-child attachment during separation. For example, a secure child would attribute their parents' not calling to work restrictions and not feel rejected or angry towards their parents. And insecure children often demonstrated low reflective functioning by stating that they did not know their own feelings.

For dismissing children, their deactivating strategies may seem adaptive to parental unavailability to some extent. They can serve as self-protection functions in the short term: when reflective mental activity would lead to emotional distress or distressful conclusions (e.g., that their parents did not want to be with their child or did not care about them), and in cases when suppressing or filtering such unwanted information from awareness would buffer a child from experiencing distress (Fonagy et al., 2000). However, an over-reliance on these regulation strategies prevents the processing and integrating of memories and experiences (Fonagy et al., 2000; Macfie et al., 2001). Prior theoretical and empirical work on dismissing attachment has pointed to significant physical- and mental-health related consequences associated with defensive avoidance (e.g., Brandão et al., 2016; Edelstein & Gil-lath, 2007; Maunder & Hunter, 2008; Monteleone, 2017). Also, the studies indicated that the defensive process of deactivation is highly effortful and prone to break down in the face of high stress in general and attachment-related distress in particular. Therefore, children's dismissing attachment styles towards parents should be understood in light of their effects on children's development. The literature review in the current work showed that LBC have more developmental disadvantages than NLBC in various domains, including mental health, personality development and academic achievements. Various studies on college students showed that students with childhood experiences of 'being left-behind' had mental health problems,

maladaptive personality traits and lower social competences than their 'non-left-behind' peers (Liu et al., 2015; Jia, 2020; Yang et al., 2021). Investigating insecure attachment styles, with their underlying inflexible working models of dealing with emotions, could be a useful mechanism to understand the developmental impacts of parental migration on children.

In general, the current mixed method research showed a complex interplay between the parent-child emotional interactions, children's emotional experiences and their competence in understanding and expressing mental states. The findings fit Pietromonaco and Barrett's (2000) proposition that working models of attachment may be characterised in terms of underlying affective processes, including emotional reactivity and emotional regulation.

9.1.7 Parental attachment and the gendering of parental roles

The qualitative findings in the present research showed that fathers and mothers had different parenting focuses reflected through their communication with their children. Migrant mothers engaged in more communication with their children, especially regarding parental care. Fathers had more conversations about material requests and disciplining. The difference between migrant fathers' and mothers' engagement in communications with children reflected the gendering of family roles that remains dominant in Chinese family culture. Following the popular proverb of 'strict fathers and affectionate mothers', Chinese fathers traditionally serve the role as instrumental and authority figures who are expected to be aloof and emotionally distant to their family (Xu, 2020). From the attachment perspective, the traditional motherhood role that emphasised nurturing and emotional care probably is more likely to foster secure attachment in comparison to the traditional fatherhood role.

In the era of labour migration, especially with the increasing female labour migration, it has been argued that the gendering of the family roles would change as female labour migration influences the intra-household power distribution (Lundberg & Pollak, 2003). This was a particular focus of discussion in the countries of south-east Asia, where there was a trend for the feminisation of labour migration, with mothers migrating and fathers staying behind in the hometown. This maternal migration is believed to cause significant changes in caregiving practices, and even result in the reversal of traditional gender roles within households (Teguihanon & Cuaton, 2019). However, the studies on Filipino left-behind fathers showed that although fathers may try to take the role of both parents, existing cultural and patriarchal mindsets may hinder them from performing tasks that are associated with 'mothering' (Teguihanon & Cuaton, 2019).

Though the participants of the current research experienced both of their parents migrating for work and contributing financially to the families, the mother-carer model of family role division did not seem to change radically. Instead of challenging the traditional gendering of the parental roles, the migrant mothers and fathers have incorporated the migration in different fashions and in fact maintained the gender-normative views of parenting. For migrant mothers, the mothers' growing financial contribution to the families did not replace caregiving with a breadwinning definition of motherhood (Yeoh et al., 2020; Yeoh & Lam, 2018). Providing for the family economically is bound to providing nurture, supervision and emotional care.

For migrant fathers, the labour migration was perceived as an extension of their breadwinning role. Fathering from afar does not seem to make enough adjustments, such as greater efforts towards establishing communication and intimacy with children, for the needs engendered by the labour migration, but rather

they performed 'a heightened version of conventional fathering' (Parreñas, 2008). Subscribing to gender norms of parenting might aggravate the relational gap between migrant fathers and their children and further contribute to the insecure-dismissing attachment style.

Combining the results from the CAI analysis and the results from the meta-analysis, shows that despite being more impacted by the migration, the maternal attachment remained more secure than paternal attachment. These findings may suggest that other factors are at play, for example, the pre-migration paternal attachment and maternal attachment security strength.

Some studies in China and other countries have found that maternal and paternal migration had different impacts on the LBC and that children's psychosocial development was more compromised by maternal migration (Liu et al., 2020; Yanovich, 2013; Yue et al., 2020). For example, the study by Gao et al. (2013) found that maternal migration increased left-behind adolescents' smoking while paternal migration decreased adolescent smoking in rural China. A study by Arlini et al. (2019) investigated the LBC in rural Indonesia and found that maternal migration had more negative impacts on the children's education.

Taking all the evidence together, one possible explanation would be that mothers have always been playing a more important role in the rural children's development. They might assume the roles of main caregivers and primary attachment figures of the children before migration (Xu et al., 2019). Therefore, migration challenged the maternal attachment bond more severely than paternal attachment bond and children are more impacted by the maternal migration. However, as the mothers continue to engage in more childcare duties than fathers during migration, the maternal attachment still remained more secure than paternal

attachment. There is a dearth of studies on the practices of migrant fathers in China. Attachment could serve a new perspective in exploring the different transnational parenting practices adopted by migrant fathers and mothers.

In addition to the impact of traditional parental roles on parental attachment, the lower attachment security with respect to fathers may be related to the use of the attachment measure in the present research. The current research found that the interview narratives regarding fathers were comparatively impoverished relative to the mother portions of the interviews. It was also suggested by previous research that perhaps there were some difficulties in rating paternal attachment classifications (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008). The rating of the CAI depends on the children recalling memories of interactions with each caregiver. Because interactions with fathers may be more limited, they may require unique consideration in coding.

Furthermore, the key assessment of the children's attachment security was based on children's perceived availability of caregivers in various situations, e.g., hurt, separations or illness. From the perspective of the attachment functions, the CAI solely focused on measuring the perceptions of the safe haven feature of attachment figures. However, it did not attend to the other important attachment-related functions, such as the secure base, which might be more related to the quality of children's exploration. For instance, the term 'secure exploration' refers to the idea that securely attached children often show persistence, flexibility and adaptive emotion regulation in exploratory contexts (Grossmann et al., 2008). The tendency to regard secure attachment as the same as safe haven support is very common in attachment measurements. For example, story stem assessment procedures use stories of situations that require access to a safe haven when a child is sad or threatened, rather than situations that call for the need of a figure to support

exploration, such as when a child is learning a new skill or coping with a challenge (Hillman et al., 2020). Similarly, attachment biographical interviews and questionnaires ask children what they do when they are upset, but do not explicitly tap into a secure base support (Ensink et al., 2020; Kerns et al., 2000). The focus on a 'safe heaven' function in attachment measures may limit their validity in assessing paternal attachment, which was found to be more associated with a 'secure base' function.

Studies have found that the differences between mother-child interactions and father-child interactions begin in infancy. When fathers do interact with infants, traditionally, it is in the domain of playful exchanges and less often in the areas of care and nurturance (Menashe-Grinberg & Atzaba-Poria, 2017). The varying interaction styles between mother and father could lead to differences in forming attachment bonds. Different conditions that activate the attachment system would lead a child to look for support and protection from different attachment figures (Thompson, 2006). Mothers are typically seen as the safe havens to whom children turn in at times of distress, hurt or sickness, whereas fathers are thought to serve more as secure bases and playmates who expose children to challenging games and activities, and are less often sought out by children in safe haven situations (Bretherton, 2010; Di Folco et al., 2017; Seibert & Kerns, 2009). This was also evident in the activities recalled by the LBC during the reunion holiday. Some LBC recalled their mothers cooking for them, showering them, and cuddling them to sleep at night, whereas their fathers took them out to play in the mountains and invited friends over for barbecues.

Sensitive support of exploration may be a key component of father-child attachment. Paquette (2004) developed the construct 'activation relationship' to

describe the unique features of father-child attachment as a complement to the classic attachment theory. Activation relationship refers to the affective bond that encourage the children to take risks and explore the outside world (Bögels & Phares, 2008; Bretherton, 2010; Grossmann et al., 2008).

The present attachment measure failed to capture the secure base function of the attachment figures and may not be able to fully assess the attachment representations of children. Bowlby stated that, 'No concept within the attachment framework is more central to developmental psychiatry than that of the secure base' (1988, pp. 163–164). The lack of focus on the child's secure base use and parental secure base provision in the attachment measurement (including the CAI) calls for further development in the attachment measure. For example, based on the theory of activation relationship, Paquette and Bigras (2010) developed a standardised procedure of assessing children's security of exploration in risky situations. The procedure was designed for assessing father-child attachment and could be used in combination with the Strange Situation procedures (Dumont & Paquette, 2013). Future research could aim to develop an attachment measure for paternal attachment for children in middle childhood.

9.1.8 Parental attachment and carer-child relationships

The current research found a potential link between the parent-child attachment and carer-child relationship, with secure children over-represented in the category of intimate relationships with grandparents and dismissing children reported over-represented in the category of conflictual or emotionally distant relationships with grandparents. The grandparents, who were the main caregivers for the majority of the LBC, played an important role in shaping children's separation experiences and their understanding of migration. Many children mentioned that it was their

grandparents who told them about the migration and so were with them when they became distressed over their parents' departure. For example, child 24 stated: My grandma told me they left home to work in the cities. I felt really sad. I cried while hugging grandma and she kept telling me not to be too sad, they were working in the city for me and my sister.

Through the comfort from the grandma, the child was able to construct a positive narrative about their parents' leaving. On the other hand, child 11's grandparents often complained about her migrant father in front of her. She stated: 'I don't really think about the migration much, only when my grandparents complained about not receiving money from him.' In this case, the grandparents' complaints about the father reinforced the negative representation of the migrant father for the child.

By explaining and reminding children of their parents' reasons for migrating, surrogate caregivers are the keepers of the image of the absent parents. Whether positive or disparaging, their messages were likely to be internalised by children and used to construct their own narratives of the migration. When coherent, these narratives help children make sense of their separation experiences and preserve the representations of their migrant parents (as dependable and self-sacrificing or rejecting and unreliable). When children are provided (by their parents and caregivers) conflicting messages about the separation, children may feel confused and find it difficult to construct a coherent separation narrative. As a result, they may feel ambivalent about the separation and about their parents' reasons for migrating. This ambivalence may consequently give rise to feelings of abandonment. When messages about their parents are positive and consistent, children may find it easier

to internalise their migration as an act of love and to feel secure in their attachment to them.

How children were comforted or given the news of the parental migration by grandparents may be connected with the relational interactions between the grandparents and children. If grandparents were emotionally sensitive and responsive to the children, they may be more likely to provide support and care to children distressed over separations from their parents. Otherwise, they may not be able to help comfort children's distress and help children understand parental migration.

On the other hand, it was possible that children's pre-existing attachment pattern with parents could influence their relationships with grandparents. As attachment theory has pointed out, early caregiver-child attachment acts as the blueprint for subsequent close relationships (Simpson et al., 2010). Children who already formed insecure representations of attachment figures and deactivating emotional regulation strategies may carry them into their relationships with surrogate caregivers and hinder the formation of secure attachment with their caregivers.

In the context of parental migration, the parents, the surrogate caregivers and the children formed new relationship dynamics that were very complex. For children who experienced conflict with their grandparents, how their parents handled the grandparents-child conflict would impact children's perceptions of their parents. For example, child nine stated:

I once told my mother about it when having a video call with her, telling her they [grandparents] wouldn't believe me, blaming me for stealing things. My parents said, on one side there is my own kid, on the other side are my own parents, they didn't know whom to believe. Then I shut myself in the room for

two days after that. They didn't call me for meals anyway, and I didn't talk to them for two or three days.

Insensitive handling of grandparents-child conflicts may lead to children's disappointment and distrust in parents. Although grandparents were an important buffer for disruptions in the parent-child relationship, parents could also be an important buffer for any conflict in the grandparents-child relationship.

The links between different family relationships has pointed to a family-wide network perspective on attachment of the rural migrant families and the LBC. The rural migrant families are networks consisting of multiple relationships, each of which has distinct attributes and are inextricably intertwined with the others (Kozłowska & Hanney, 2002). A central organisational concept was proposed as the 'secure family base', defined as a reliable network of attachment relationships that share responsibility for ensuring every family member will be cared for and feel secure enough to explore and develop freely (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). A secure family base was important for families going through parental migration, as the migration may constitute a threat to all members' sense of security. Research with adolescents suggests that the perception of a secure family base contributes to better mental health (Woodhouse et al., 2009). When parents migrate, family flexibility is tested, as the system structure and organisation necessarily shift, and family roles and dynamics are renegotiated. In the midst of major change, re-establishing a secure family base can enhance the family's adjustment (Luthar, 2006; Walsh, 2006).

9.2 Critical reflections on agency and resilience

The following section discusses the implications of the grounded theory on our understanding of the children's agency, including the children's psychological agency, the situated nature of the agency and the agency as the core of resilience.

Then the discussion explores the implications of the grounded theory on the understanding of the rural migrant family in relation to their 'family display', being a distinctive family type, and the resilience of the rural migrant family.

9.2.1 Implications for children's agency

Resonating with the studies on transnational families (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Lam & Yeoh, 2018), the current research found that children were not passively observing the parental migration, they were participating in and influencing migration processes and outcomes. They were social agents, acting upon their internal cognitive and emotional processes, and affecting what was happening to them.

Psychological agency

The notion that children are active agents in their own development and socialisation stems from sociological studies of childhood (Brady et al., 2015) and has now been widely accepted in developmental psychology (Lennings & Bussey, 2017; Romano et al., 2015). The sociological approach to human agency centres on the relationship between agency and structure. The rural migrant families and the rural communities are the structures within which the LBC negotiate support and constraints through interacting with migrant parents, caregivers, teachers, peers, relatives and neighbours. The current research also accentuated psychological agency mainly involving one's meaning making and self-regulation. The psychological self is the 'causal structure' of the self-agency through which the LBC exerted self-influence intentionally and managed their inner life (Bandura, 2006). The components of psychological agency identified in the current research corresponded to the core features of agency proposed by the social cognitive theory: forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2018). Regarding forethought, the LBC demonstrated forward thinking and behaved with foresight to set goals,

such as their future oriented beliefs and behaviour. For self-reactiveness, the LBC acted as self-regulators who monitored and examined their emotions and behaviour, for instance, they evaluated their school performance and adjusted their behaviour according to their expectations. Children were also conscious actors reflecting on their own mental state as well other people's mental states, a process facilitated by the children's development in meta-cognition.

Bandura's social cognitive theory of agency is widely used in the field of education (Maclellan, 2016; Martin, 2004). The current research illustrates more broadly how the LBC exercise their psychological agency in their daily lives. The psychological agency has instrumental value for the LBC in adjusting to difficult situations. Studies have found that the exercise of psychological agency is associated with positive experiences of psychological well-being (Ryan & Hoyt, 2018), increased hope (Sølbeck, 2010), and relationship satisfaction (Kostenko & Klein, 2018). The various modes of psychological agency constituted the LBC's psychological capital. They were the useful psychological resources or tools that could facilitate the LBC's adjustment to migration and development and therefore should be recognised and fostered.

Agency situated in context

The current research located the children's agency in the family practices of doing rural migrant families. Though the children's experience did not represent the whole family's experience, their agency of coping with migration was an integral part of and was shaped by their whole family's ability to cope with the migration.

One of the common assumptions of agency is to view it as the exercise of free will against social constraints (Hammersley, 2016; Mizen & Ofosu-Kusik, 2013). The current research did find evidence illustrating children's free will, such as children

rejecting parental arrangements. This type of agency is connected with a sense of autonomy or 'independent self-hood' that descends from the western concept of individualism (Durham, 2011). Emphasising the autonomous aspect of children's self-agency could release children from being viewed as intrinsically dependent and powerless. However, it could also risk separating children's experiences from the social-cultural context in which they are embedded, leading to unhelpful individualisation of children (Kjørholt, 2005). It should be acknowledged that agency is not a synonym for individual autonomy, but a relational phenomenon developed and expressed in family practices as well as other social interactions (Valentine, 2011).

The current research emphasises the children's agency in parent-child relationships but did not assume that children had dominant control in the relationships. The research speaks to the bidirectional perspective on the parent-child relationship. The concept of bidirectionality stresses the co-occurrence of both directions of influence, from parent to child and from child to parent, in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003). The relationship context in which parents and children know each other intimately and have their influences intertwined in an interdependent long-term relationship makes parents and children receptive as well as vulnerable to each other's influence.

Children's engagement with their parents is partly dependent on the way parents acted towards them, especially how parents performed family roles. Children's intimate engagement or estrangement from their parents is conditioned by parental actions that would further foster relationship intimacy or distance. Similarly, from the attachment perspective, young children's behaviour such as smiling and crying, or their approach and avoidant attachment behaviour in stressful situations

have been reinterpreted as actions that reward and punish parental behaviour (Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003). This shows that children are not passive receivers of parental care but are also actively engaged in the parent-child relationship in a reciprocal way. Parent-child relationships or parent-child attachments are mutual processes wherein children and parents can both exert influence on each other.

In addition to the intimate family relationships, agency is 'mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors' (van Lier, 2008, p. 171). Children often rely on other people's provision of resources for their needs and have limited direct control of their life conditions. They very often use 'socially mediated agency' or what is described as 'proxy agency' to achieve desired outcomes through influencing other people who have the resources and capacities to act on the children's behalf (Bandura, 2006).

Children's contexts in rural migrant families could circumscribe or expand their agency. When families offered more options for the children, they had a wider realm to express their agency, for example, by involving children in family migration decision making they had the chance to express their opinions. On the other hand, families could circumscribe children's agency when they disregarded the children's voices, such as by making care arrangements for the children against their personal preferences. Therefore, the children could appear to have little agency or have agency according to different circumstances.

The LBC's constrained agency was similar to Dreby's (2007) description that children left-behind were both powerful and powerless. Children are 'powerless' because they usually have little influence in migration and reunion decisions, yet through their interactions with the adults they may be able to change their family's

migration trajectories, and effect some form of change in their family structures and functions. The LBC's agency may not necessarily manifest in 'big' ways or may not even be immediate. They could use their agency to make 'a difference – to a relationship, a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints' (Mayall, 2002, p. 21). The varied effects of the children's exercise of agency was similar to the constructs of 'thick agency' and 'thin agency' (Klocker, 2007; Tisdall & Punch, 2016). Thick agency represents the options and decisions children make that could change their present and future lives. For example, in the current research, some children applied their thick agency by making choices in their living arrangements and deciding whether they went to boarding school. On the other hand, 'thin agency' represents children's everyday decisions and actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts with few or limited opportunities, for example making plans about how to finish homework as well as the household duties at the weekend.

Agency and resilience

The LBC's agency was closely tied to their ability to cope with the parental migration. Children expressed their agency in minding their own well-being, keeping the family functioning and together, and negotiating with support resources. Their agency was not a static condition, but a dynamic process embedded in their daily activities and capacity to live through adverse situations. The children's 'everyday agency' showed their daily struggle in face of difficult circumstances (Payne, 2012). Therefore, their agency was essential for the children's resilience processes in coping with parental migration. Agency is connected to how disadvantaged children (e.g., street children, child labourers, child beggars, orphans) overcome deprivation and demonstrate resourcefulness. For example, the study by Eide and Hjern (2013)

used the term, agency, to explain how unaccompanied refugee children demonstrated resourcefulness and had a clear and positive vision of their future despite their developmental disadvantages.

The current research identified the protective resources available, however, the presence of these resources alone did not guarantee the children's successful adaptation. It was the children's active engagement involving these protective resources through their agency that became their resilient processes, as highlighted by Ungar (2008, p. 225), resilience is 'the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways'.

Children's agency in the face of adversity is linked with coping processes and therefore is usually perceived as 'positive', enabling children to strive towards self-improvement, responsibility and constructive action. This perspective of the children's personal agency, though it frees children from being viewed as victims, is not directly equivalent to constructive or successful coping (Hoggett, 2001). For instance, the children's agency associated with their mobile phones shows that children could take more action in life by using their phones, for instance by using phones to connect with people, dealing with boredom by seeking online entertainment, or searching for study materials. However, some children did not always use their personal agency with phones positively. Some had problems spending too much time and money on phone-games. Many scholars and practitioners have started to pay attention to the issues of phone or internet addiction among the LBC (Kuang et al., 2021; Niu et al., 2020).

Moreover, limited parental influence enabled children to exert more agency in their school life and even make future decisions regarding further education or career choices. For example, child 34 stated: 'I told my parents I didn't want to go to high school. I'm considering going to the vocational training school or I could go to their place and start working early.' When the interviewer asked: 'What did your parents say about this?' the child replied, 'They didn't say anything, they said it was all up to me.' With their personal agency, some children showed low study motivations and even quit school prematurely. In the follow-up contact with the participants it became clear that several children had joined their parents and became migrant workers themselves without finishing the compulsory education required by the government. This finding warned us that children might use their agencies negatively or even destructively. Gigengack (2008) cautioned against romanticising agency as inherently good and argued that, for example, street children may not always use their personal agency positively; they were often involved in practices that were self-destructive, such as theft, substance abuse or violence. Similarly, Hoggett remarks on the risk of valuing agency as inherently 'constructive:'

The desire to give emphasis to the active, resilient, resourceful aspects of the welfare subject is an understandable reaction to the pathologizing and problematizing of the passive and 'dependent' welfare subject . . . However, there is a danger that we slip into equating agency with constructive coping as if the two were synonymous. The point is that there is nothing necessarily constructive about agency, and we should be beware of smuggling normative assumptions into our thinking here as if agency is good and absence of agency is bad (Hoggett, 2001, pp. 42–43).

Another type of children's agency that questions the 'inherent positiveness' of agency is when children assume adult-like roles and responsibilities. Disadvantaged environments, including economic difficulties, and low education of caregivers might thin children's agency. However, in many cases, these contexts could also coerce children to 'develop' agency. There is an old saying in China that children from poor families learn to manage households early. The current research also found that children demonstrated very sophisticated abilities in taking care of themselves and managing households. In some cases, the children could be living by themselves completely. Studies have found that children 'mature overnight' and take on responsibilities as carers or even household heads in adversity, e.g., poverty, parental mortality (e.g., Abebe, 2012; Day, 2017). Skovdal et al., (2009) found that orphaned children in Kenya coped with caring for ailing family members by engaging in income-generating activities, mobilising social support and resources, and building positive identities.

These children's agencies fit the construct of the 'ambiguous agency'. The ambiguous agency of children is the type of agency that is in contrast to the established social perceptions about what kind of activities children and young people are supposed to be engaged in, and what sort of life was regarded as appropriate for them (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). The cases of children engaging in economic activities, e.g., child labourers, or leading households were often considered expressions of ambiguous agencies as these activities contested the normative conceptions about childhood. Indeed, ambiguous agencies could be particularly associated with children 'at risk', such as 'juvenile criminals', 'child soldiers' and 'child sex workers' (Johnson et al., 2018; Seymour, 2012).

There is a difference between viewing children as active social actors and seeing children as fully competent actors (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). Children's agency does not mean that they have the capacity to act in their own best interests. Such perspectives are vital in understanding the experiences of the LBC as well as other children living in disadvantaged environments. Overemphasising disadvantaged children's agency and resilience risks romanticising adversities and 'individualizing that which requires collective action' (Abebe, 2019; p. 8). It also perpetuates children's disadvantages by deflecting attention away from the roles of adult support/supervision and the moral and legal responsibilities of the government and other social institutions to improve their life circumstances. After all, it should not be forgotten that the institutional factors of the household registration restrictions and urban-rural dualism contributed to the children being left behind.

Nonetheless, Ungar (2008) proposed the term 'hidden resilience' to understand such misuse of agency in children's coping with an unsatisfactory environment. He argued that some children's problematic coping behaviour could be an adaptation to adverse situations. It may be a protective mechanism acting to alleviate stress. In the short term, hidden resilience may be necessary for survival in certain environments, however, it often leads to dysfunctional consequences unless children are able to change and use more acceptable ways of coping. To do so, children need to demonstrate their agency in navigating and negotiating their ways through adversity. More importantly, to foster such changes more resources should be made available in the environment, perhaps by adults.

9.2.2 Implications for rural migrant families

Children's perceptions of family practices showed that the rural migrant families managed the labour migration to restore and maintain the functioning of the

rural household. The left-behind family filled up the gaps created by the migration and also created new practices to incorporate the labour migration as part of family life.

Family practice performed and displayed

The LBC constructed meanings and attached importance to the practices in the grounded theory and acknowledged them as part of their doing rural migrant family. Some family practices were participated in by the LBC directly. Also, some practices were displayed to the LBC as they were performed by the other people in the family. Children were both the 'actors' and 'audience' of the family practices. This illuminated the construct of the 'displaying family'. Finch (2007) proposed that family practices needed to be performed, but their meanings needed to be conveyed to each other so they could be confirmed as 'doing family things'. That is, families need to be done as well as displayed (Finch, 2007). Families that may be viewed as not conventional, such as migrant families, may have a stronger desire to 'display family' not just to each other but also to the outside world to show that they are legitimate families (Cabalquinto, 2019; Dempsey & Lindsay, 2018). The displaying helps them construct familial identities. The rural migrant families both constructed the 'internal identities' through daily family practices such as long-distance communication, and 'external identities' when they displayed themselves to the community by going to village events together as a family during the New Year.

Family could be displayed in many different forms, through objects such as remittance and gifts, and actions such as family meals. For the LBC, family displaying was also achieved by family communication through which the families constructed and shared the stories of parental devotion for the family's best interests. When children heard the reasons for the migration from their parents or

grandparents, they were the audience of the display, however, they were not 'passive consumers of display but are actively engaged in the process of creating the meaning of family' (Haynes & Dermott, 2011, p. 159). Through co-constructing narratives, the LBC understood the family practices performed in the family and located them in 'an accepted repertoire of what family means' (Finch, 2007, p. 78). The construct of 'displaying family' remains rather vague and needs more empirical evidence. Studies have started to use the construct as an analytical tool to understand the key practice in transnational families from the perspectives of the migrants (Share et al., 2018; Walsh, 2018; Waruwu, 2021). The current research illustrates the 'family display' of the rural migrant families from the perspective of the familial audience of the LBC who also contributed to developing of the construct.

A distinctive type of family

The current research identified the key family practices that were 'part of the normal taken-for-granted existence' (Morgan, 1996, p. 190) of the rural migrant families. Through these practices, the families came into being. Many of the practices, such as communication through ICT, were adopted by all types of families, but they were much more accentuated in migrant households (Wajcman et al., 2008). Most studies on the family practices of migrant families focused on how migrant parents in transnational families, particularly migrant mothers, practiced parenting from afar through ICT (e.g., Ducu, 2018; Madianou, 2016; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Waruwu, 2021). These studies focused on what and how family practices were applied by the migrators. The current study, though from the children's perspectives, illustrates the family practices performed and co-constructed by all the members in the family.

The rural migrant families differ from regular family norms that emphasise the co-residing of family members and the stability of family structures. However, the standard normal family structure has been challenged alongside the growing diversity in current family compositions. The de-territorialised nature of migrant families disputes the traditional definition of family as a place-bound unit by constructing its nature as a set of activities that acquire meaning under particular circumstances.

Rural migrant family should be recognised as a distinctive family type instead of an unusual and temporal family arrangement to cope with the stress of migration. Labour migration has been a practice in the geographical area of the current researcher's field work, as well as throughout the whole of rural China for decades. The rural families investigated in this research have been engaged in labour migration for many years. Migrant work as a means of livelihood is being passed from one generation to the next, including the children interviewed in the current research. The labour migration is not a temporary situation for the rural families, it has become a way of life in Chinese rural areas, and in many migrant sending communities around the world (Tanle et al., 2020, Scoones, 2009, Yeoh & Lam, 2018). Studies used to name rural families experiencing labour migration as 'rural left-behind families' or 'left-behind households' (Hou, 2020; Liu et al., 2021). These terms emphasized the disadvantages and needs of the family members left behind in the rural areas, but also further disengaged the migrants from the rural family lives. The current research proposed the term 'rural migrant families' to both accentuate the household strategy of labour migration and the continuing participation of the migrants in the family practices of the rural families, highlighting how the families

overcame physical dispersion of members to establish an intact family with flexible boundaries.

Narratives about migrant families should not focus solely on a comparison between migrant families and non-migrant families or assume that migrant families adopted new family practices to emulate the co-residing families (Baldassar, 2016). Such narratives put the migrant families at an inferior position and risk polemising and victimising the rural migrant families. One study has shown that migrant mothers defined their families within the context of migration and evaluated their family practices based on migrants and families with similar experiences, rather than on how closely they could perform traditional roles (Waruwu, 2021). Understanding the rural migrant families should explore their own features of family relationships, roles, needs, risks, constraints, resources and how they maintained functioning within their own contexts. Acknowledging them as a legitimate family type gives more voice to the rural migration families and empowers them to be heard.

Rural migrant families' resilience

The family practices were key to the rural migrant families' resilience. Family resilience in migration is achieved largely through the cooperation between members. Everyone, including the children, make a contribution to the family interaction.

While the LBC demonstrated personal agency in coping with parental migration, their families demonstrated 'collective agency', the shared belief and interdependent efforts in accomplishing desired outcomes (Bandura, 2000). The whole family could also be viewed as an agent using its capacities to influence the course and outcomes of migration. Every family is unique and so is family resilience, it varies between different families, in terms of resilience resources, challenges and

risks. The current research developed a family resilience model tailored to the rural migrant families from the children's perspective.

Family resilience used to be regarded as the ability to bounce back to the pre-existing state. However, for many individuals or families going through a major crisis, it is impossible for them to simply return to what it was like before the crisis. If the rural migrant families returned to the family practices before the migration, they would not be able to meet the challenges brought upon them by the labour migration. Walsh (2002) stated that it is more accurate to see resilience as 'bouncing forward' instead of 'bouncing back'. In the aftermath of significant stress, families often need to go through structural reorganisation to meet new challenges. They need to build a new sense of normality while constructing new patterns of communication and interactions to fit the new situation. While constructing these new practices, flexibility is a key determinant to the family's resilience. Lack of flexibility in doing family practices could compromise the family's adaptation to stress. When Filipino mothers migrated, they maintained contact with their left-behind husbands and used creative strategies to settle the conflicts that resulted from the disparity between cultural ideals of parenting and their living reality (Peng & Wong, 2016). On the other hand, father-migrating families resonated with role division in nuclear families and reinforced the gender norms of male breadwinning and female caretaking (Poeze, 2019). Without flexible adjustments in family practices, their families often suffered from emotional distance between migrant fathers and their left-behind families (Parreñas, 2008). The evidence highlights the importance of keeping flexibility in the migrant families to accommodate the needs created by time apart. The practices of the migrant families are changing and need to change. Policies, social structure,

economy and family life create both possibilities and constraints that enable family practices to develop in new and unexpected ways (Epp & Price, 2018).

Sometimes, the newly established family practices could challenge traditional family practices and lead to deep changes in the family structure and family cultures. Rural-urban migration has contributed to the de-traditionalisation of family and gender values in rural areas to some extent. Migrant workers sometimes gain bargaining power from work and education and therefore detach from traditional values (Guo et al., 2011). For example, labour migration could be a strategy to empower rural mothers economically and foster positive changes in the families and local communities, such as reducing the rates of marital violence, and causing gendered impacts on the family. Child 25 shared her story of her mother who divorced her abusive husband, gained her daughter's custody, and bought a new flat for them both with the money earned from labour migration. The study by Hu (2016) also showed that rural-urban migrants tended to have more liberal values pertaining to gender roles, marriage and divorce.

The reconstruction of the family practices brought about by the migration can help families overcome challenges in the short term but may lead to complicated or even negative long-term effects. For example, some family practices, such as the practice of 'children-led households' and 'elder children assuming adult roles' adopted by the rural migrant families after parental migration may lead to negative implications for the children's education and psycho-social development.

9.3 Research limitations

A number of limitations in the current research have been identified, some of them concern the chosen sample. First, the study was only conducted with a small sample size, so the results may not be transferable to the wider population of the

LBC. Regarding the attachment study, due to the small sample, the current research did not identify cases of preoccupied attachment and disorganisation attachment. Therefore, the findings are unclear about the distribution of these two attachment patterns or their features.

Second, the current sample was confined to a group of LBC in Yunnan province. Yunnan is one of the poorest provinces in China. It is also unique in China as it's mountainous with a diverse ethnic culture. Such factors may impact the patterns of labour migration as well as the experiences of the LBC. The current sample also focused on children whose parents both migrated, which could have limited applicability to children with other patterns of parental migration, e.g., children with only one parent migrated. Furthermore, the sample was taken from children in middle childhood. The children's experiences of the migration are likely to change when they become older. For example, when children grow older and leave home themselves either for education or work, their perception of migration or family reunification may evolve alongside their own development. Therefore, the findings of the grounded theory in the current research may not be directly comparable with research investigating children and young people in other age groups.

Third, the current sample did not have a comparison group of the local NLBC, so it was not possible to compare the attachment distribution between the LBC and the NLBC in the local area. Though there was some evidence of the distribution of maternal attachment patterns among Chinese children in other areas to make a comparison to the current sample. All of these studies were conducted in urban areas, while the current sample was recruited from a rural area in the wider social context of economic underdevelopment. Studies have shown that mothers who experienced more economic difficulties tended to engage less sensitively with their

children (Aute, 2020; Wandella, 2015). Du and Su's (2009) study also found that children from rural China received harsher parenting and exhibited less attachment security towards parents compared to urban children. Without comparison to the local NLBC, it is unclear whether the predominance of the dismissing attachment styles was a feature of the whole rural community or unique to the rural LBC. The need for a local control group was even more necessary for the paternal attachment, as there was no available evidence regarding the paternal attachment patterns elsewhere in China.

Some research limitations relate to the data collection and analysis, because the current research only investigates children's attachment representations towards parents and did not investigate children's attachment styles towards their carers. As the main carers of the children during migration, the children might have established attachments with them and regarded them as attachment figures. Research has shown that children who experienced disrupted attachment with their birth parents were still able to form secure attachments with their new carers, e.g., foster parents, adoptive parents etc. (West et al., 2020). Researchers also found that children living in extended families could benefit from having multiple attachment figures (Umemura et al., 2018). In transnational families, LBC in countries of origin tended to develop attachments with their carers (Foner & Dreby, 2011). Emphasizing the role of the other attachment relationships was not intended to overlook the impacts of the disruption of the parent-child attachment on children but rather to focus on the protective factor in the LBC's environment and increase their resilience in the context of long-term migration.

Though the current study provides some evidence for the validity of the CAI classifications and subscales, there is concern over the psychometric properties of

the measurement. For example, there were some insignificant correlations between the CAI subscales and the self-report attachment measure, and some subscales could not differentiate between the secure attachment style and the insecure attachment style.

During coding and early analysis of the grounded theory, some concerns arose. First, the children's narratives were usually filled with activities or observations of activities but lacked self-reflection. Their narrative styles led to concern that the findings may have over emphasised the relational and interactional experiences of the LBC while overlooking the children's intra-psychic processes. Second, the adoption of the attachment theory and family systems theory may limit the analysis and interpretation of the data. Coding guided by other theoretical frameworks may lead to new directions of data interpretation. Also, despite having supervision, the coding process of the grounded theory was solely completed by the researcher. The lack of an additional coder might compromise the reliability of the grounded theory. Future qualitative studies, including grounded theory, could benefit from having multiple coders, especially coders from multi-disciplinary backgrounds, both in developing analysis and establishing reliability by achieving intercoder agreement (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016).

Though the triangulation of data has revealed many insightful findings, it also had limitations. The identification of over-representation of an attachment style by counting the number of participants lacked methodological rigour, because there is no clear definition of the number that constitutes 'over-represented'. During the coding process, there are numerous ways to form categories. Different coders could organise codes in different ways, create different categories and this may lead to

different triangulation results. Nonetheless, the triangulation has led to many findings that could become potential areas of future research.

9.4 Future research

Potential areas for future research arise mainly from the findings of the current research and the reflections of the research limitations. First, future research should investigate the distribution of attachment patterns of LBC with larger samples in order to identify cases of all attachment patterns and discover whether they exhibit distinctive features that may indicate cultural variations of the children's attachment. Second, while investigating the attachment of the LBC, future research should also investigate the attachment of children from more diverse backgrounds (e.g., non-left-behind children, maltreated children, children with mental disorders) and compare the attachment distribution between different groups to gain a fuller understanding of the attachment of children in the context of migration. Third, more analysis of the psychometric properties and further refinement of the CAI is needed. This could include the test-retest reliability to examine the temporal stability of the CAI. The CAI's assessment of paternal attachment can be refined in relation to the differences between paternal and maternal attachment functions. Future research could also consider the possibility of refining the anger subscales that have been the main indicator of the preoccupied attachment but showed relatively lower validity than other scales. The suggestion by Target and her colleagues of adding an additional subscale of anxious scale to better capture the preoccupied or disorganised attachment with the CAI is also a possible direction for future research (Target et al., 2007).

Forth, future research should have a more in-depth examination of the LBC's attachment, for example, the factors that could moderate the impact of the parental

migration on attachment, such as the age of children when their parents left, care arrangements and frequency of parent-child contact. More importantly, the attachment with surrogate carers should be further researched. The current research not only found that the relationship with carers has a significant impact on the children's well-being (e.g., children could be severely distressed when they had conflictual relationships with their carers), but also found a link between parent-child attachment and the carer-child relationship. These could be two directions for future research.

Fifth, the triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data found potential links between the parent-child emotional interactions, children's attachment security and children's emotional regulation strategies. Follow-up quantitative research could explore the relationship between the emotional quality of parent-child communication, LBC's attachment style and LBC's emotional regulation. Parental factors could be investigated, such as parents' attachment styles and reflective functioning that influence parents' approaches to handling children's migratory distress, that is, whether they tend to be open to or avoid children's distress. Children's reflective functioning, a core competence related to their attachment style and emotional regulation, is also worth researching. Research could use the Reflective-Functioning Manual developed by Fonagy et al. (1998) as a source of rating tools to assess parents' and children's reflective functioning with interview transcripts of AAI, CAI or even the transcripts of the current research.

Sixth, the grounded theory of the research identified the key processes of LBC and their families living with the challenges associated with migration. Future research could further investigate how to promote the positive outcomes of the migration and mitigate negative outcomes. For example, what factors in the

communication between children and migrant parents or carers could promote relational cohesiveness? How could research promote positive functioning in specific aspects of the rural migrant families, for example in the difficulty of grandparents supporting children with their study? Besides the protective factors, the risk factors that could constrain the LBC and their families' adjustment may be further investigated.

Seventh, some information revealed in the children's interviews is worth further study. For example, the grounded theory discovered gender differences in the LBC's experiences and suggested future research could take a feminist perspective. Some girls talked about being discriminated against by their grandparents. Furthermore, several girls mentioned that they wanted to continue education in the future and not get married too soon like other older girls in the villages. These experiences indicate the ongoing influence of the culture of 'son preference' and gender inequality in rural China. Left-behind girls may experience more stressors than left-behind boys. They can be the most vulnerable in the already vulnerable population of LBC. Future research could investigate how left-behind girls perceive the gendered culture and how their agency is constrained by such culture in their family and communities.

Eighth, though the current research was conducted from the children's perspectives, the findings have implications for exploring and understanding the experiences of adults in the rural migrant families. For example, in the current research, some children revealed that they witnessed their grandparents crying over the separation from their adult children. The left-behind grandparents could experience emotional distress caused by their adult children's migration. Furthermore, as these left-behind grandparents started to take over more essential

family duties, including childcare to support their adult children's migration, they could experience many unique stressors and difficulties, which would further impact the LBC. However, the left-behind grandparents have been overlooked even more than LBC in the literature. Future research could explore their experiences and facilitate their adjustment in relation to migration. The research found the 'agency' of the LBC as well as evidence of the 'agency' of other people in the families from the children's narratives. For example, migrant mothers gained more economic independence through the migration and some of them were able to leave unsatisfying marriages. Grandparents started to be in charge of the rural households and played more roles in family life. Future research could explore the personal agencies of other adults in the rural migrant families and how their agencies are reshaped by the labour migration.

9.5 Implications for practice

The current research proposes a resilience perspective on the LBC. The resilience perspective encourages policy makers, educators, social workers and mental health professionals to focus more on the adaptive processes of the children and the families instead of their 'disadvantages'. The resilience-based practice is to discover the children and rural migrant families' resources to encourage them to 'acknowledge, adapt and apply' their resources in dealing with their challenges (Simon et al., 2005).

At the macro level, policy makers could focus on reducing the risks that undermine family functions in their environments and increase the adaptive and protective resources that could facilitate the development of the families.

At the micro level, parents, carers, teachers and clinicians could facilitate children's resilience by supporting the key family practices of the rural migrant

families, including improving the quality and quantity of family communication, increasing flexibility regarding roles and responsibilities and decreasing isolation through the utilisation of community and social supports. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge children's agency and actively involve them in the preparation stage before the migration, and in family communication and family role adjustment processes during the migration.

Children's own perceptions of their separation experiences and living conditions may provide 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, policy makers should be encouraged to incorporate the left-behind children's perspectives when designing policies and services both to promote their well-being and to enhance service efficiency. This position is consistent with the argument of van Bijleveld et al. (2015) that children need to be seen as service users who are knowledgeable social actors and should be afforded a central position in the decision-making process from the beginning.

The inclusion of children in the making of decisions when structuring programmes of care and support has been increasingly recognised. For example, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives (UNCRC, 1990). Many social work professionals have attempted to involve children in the design and provision of care at all levels of practice, from the structuring of individual meetings and case conferences to the organisation of service provision at institutional level (Vis et al., 2011).

During the preparation for the migration, families may consider the possibility of involving children in making family migration decisions, as proposed by Bushin

(2009). At least parents are encouraged to have an open discussion with their children regarding the migration and the upcoming life changes before leaving home. Parents could explain the meaning and the necessity of the migration and have a proper farewell with their children on the day they leave home. A proper farewell could reduce children's shock and confusion about their parents' departure and lessen their sense of helplessness and lack of control over the situation. This important moment has been quite overlooked by the many rural families and social institutions. Most social programmes facilitating children's communication with the parents focus on communication during the period of migration. They encouraged the LBC to make phone calls, write personal journals and send cards to their parents (Road to school, 2015). However, more attention could be paid to the parent-child communication before the migration.

Regarding the parent-child contact during migration, more assistance needs to be provided for the younger children. For young children who do not know how to make phone calls, adults could teach them how to call parents themselves and help arrange stable schedules for parent-child contact. For boarding children who could not contact their parents during the week, the school could provide the necessary support for them to call their parents.

Apart from the quantity of the communication, the quality of the communication matters. Consistent with the attachment theories, it is not so much the physical presence of the attachment figures per se that is important for healthy development, but rather the quality of care and nurture that children receive. Parenting support programmes could be offered widely to the migrant parents regarding the psychological challenges faced by the LBC and how to help, soothe and comfort them in distress. Parents could receive more guidance on how to be

more sensitive and responsive to their children's emotional response to the migration and how to communicate with them with more emotional openness. This approach could foster children's sense of security and their competency in emotional regulation, which in turn may reduce potential mental health consequences from unresolved emotional trauma.

According to Bowlby (1988) the presence of attachment figures able to provide the nurture needed for healthy development may guarantee a propitious outcome for children who are separated from their mothers. Hence, if in their parents' absence children are cared for by loving relatives, separations may not be detrimental. However, a conflictual relationship with surrogate carers could be a significant risk factor for the LBC's well-being. Therefore, parenting programmes could also be delivered to the carers about how to help children deal with separation from their parents. The current research also points out common factors that could hinder the carers' care provision to the LBC, including a lack of education and being over-burdened by family duties. It calls for help from local communities or governments to reduce the stress on the surrogate carers and provide better care for children.

Considering that the emotional regulation strategies could contribute to the link between attachment insecurity and psychopathology, it may be worthwhile to promote emotion regulation training programmes focused on fostering more adaptive strategies and higher self-reflective competence for the LBC. Self-reflective and mindfulness-type activities, such as writing an emotion diary, may be worth pursuing. Furthermore, such parenting programmes could specifically target long-distance fathers to help them to transcend traditional gender norms of male breadwinning and authoritarianism and adjust to the emotional needs of the LBC.

The research also shows that children take an active part in role readjustment in the families after migration. However, shouldering extra family duties could place a physical and mental burden on children, hindering their well-being and development. Although the LBC may enjoy some autonomy and freedom with the absence of their parents, they may also suffer from lack of parental supervision. For example, the convenience of owning and using their own mobile phones could turn into a problem of phone addiction or online gaming addiction without proper supervision. The current research found that the LBC could benefit from more adult supervision in domains of phone use, study and personal safety. Again, this finding spoke to the issue of the children's ambiguous agency or the negative use of their personal agency. While the current research advocates acknowledging the LBC's agency when practitioners plan social services for them, the children's agency itself may be an obstacle to social intervention, e.g., when the social services aim to provide more disciplinary control over certain behaviour, the children may resist such control. Therefore, social programmes or services for the LBC should move forward from recognising that children do have agency to discussing what kinds of agency are socially appropriate, transforming social agency into 'responsible agency' (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). This move may require the assessment and evaluation of the conduct of children and young people in their specific social and cultural contexts.

Finally, the research also shows that despite the efforts of their migrant parents and carers and help from their social networks, children still experienced a certain loss of parental functions. This indicates a greater need for policies, initiatives and programmes from schools, communities and local governments to help compensate for the loss of the parental functions, and to address the special needs of these children. For example, many LBC reported that they often spent time

alone at home at the weekends. The local community could organise tutoring groups for children in the same village. In the tutor group, the children could spend time with each other and receive help from adults or older children with homework.

9.6 Contributions to knowledge and conclusions

This piece of research explored how LBC experienced parental labour migration, particularly, how they experienced the parent-child attachment and family processes in the context of parental migration. An initial literature review included an account of the developmental outcomes of the LBC and the lived experiences of the LBC both in China and globally. It revealed that LBC experienced emotional distress and various changes in family structure after parental migration. They were also at risk of worse psycho-social development due to prolonged separations from parents. Attachment theory has proved to be an empirically based theoretical framework to explain the link between separations from parents and the children's development. A meta-analysis of the studies comparing the attachment security of LBC and NLBC showed that the LBC had significantly lower attachment security towards parents than NLBC, which could shed light on the underlying mechanisms leading to the developmental disadvantages of the LBC.

Despite the substantial amount of research on LBC, including those using attachment theory, there were some gaps. These studies fell short in that they tended to view children as passive recipients of parental migration and focused more on the children's reactions rather than their active processing and coping with the migration. The exploration of the children's personal experiences was limited and did not appropriately consider their complex interactions with parent-child attachment, family processes and external factors. In addition, all the studies assessing the attachment of the LBC in China were built on self-report measures which came with

methodological limitations that have not been challenged by using alternative methods.

This study explored the LBC's experiences regarding parental migration with a focus on their parent-child attachment and family processes, both through the use of an attachment measure and the narratives of the children constructing their own stories. The study was conducted with the theoretical frameworks of the attachment theory and the family systems theory. Thirty-nine children were recruited from rural schools in Yunnan province in China. Participants were interviewed individually with the Child Attachment Interview to assess their attachment styles and the open interviews to construct a grounded theory of their experiences. Finally, the findings from the two approaches were integrated to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon.

Findings revealed that the LBC had over-representations of the dismissing attachment styles both towards fathers and mothers, deviant from the normative hypothesis of the attachment theory. The paternal attachment has a lower rate of the secure attachment style than the maternal attachment. And boys had less secure maternal attachment than girls. Nonetheless, it was possible for some children to maintain secure attachment representations towards parents despite the prolonged separations.

The grounded theory contained a coherent story starting from the children's early migration separations and emphasising children's agency in the family practices of the rural migrant families as perceived by the LBC. Through these various processes, the children and rural migrant families demonstrated resilience. The data triangulation further showed that children's attachment styles were related to parent-child interactions, especially parent-child communications and affective

interactions. This work has confirmed the important and active roles of the LBC in both their own adjustment and their whole family's adjustment to the migration. Furthermore, this work also highlighted the continuing roles of the migrant parents and the children's social interactions within and outside family contexts.

This study contributes to existing knowledge in several ways. First, the research conducted the first meta-analysis of the attachment of the LBC, providing more robust evidence on the impact of parental migration on the children's attachment. Second, the study was the first attempt to assess the distribution of the attachment styles of the LBC. As the LBC in the current study were in middle childhood (6 to 12 years old), it was also the first one to assess the distribution of the attachment styles of the children beyond infancy. It added to the understanding of the attachment styles of children facing prolonged migratory separations from parents and the attachment features of the children in China in general. The findings also suggest more attention should be paid to the gendered impacts of migration on the family, such as the lower attachment security among boys. Third, the research contributed to the body of mixed method research with its complicated multi-stage design and the creative ways of integrative analysis by transforming qualitative data into quantitative data. The data integration revealed a possible association between the parent-child interactions and the children's attachment styles, which had implications for the practice of the rural migrant families, that is, children's attachment security could be fostered by improving the quantity and quality of the parent-child communications, especially, the father-child communications.

Fourth, the grounded theory further revealed resilience models for the LBC and the rural migrant families to overcome the challenges associated with the migration. The resilience model for the LBC comprised of meaning making and self-

regulation, relational recourse from families and social networks and the contextual resources of the school institution. The resilience model for the rural migrant families mirrored the children's individual resilience model, consisting of elements of building family collaboration, family self-organisation processes and the interactions with social networks. The resilience model could guide the LBC and their families to successfully cope with the migration. Rural migrant families did not have to be shattered by the geographical separations imposed by the migration but could still reach positive family outcomes with adjustments from members inside the family and support from the external environment. Overall, the research revealed the multifaceted and interactive nature of the LBC's experiences emphasising both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors. The children were impacted by relationships, family processes, wider social networks and institutions. Simultaneously, they enacted their personal agencies to influence their relationships and environments. Such interactive processes could both lead to positive and negative changes.

Though the current research highlights the LBC's agency, the main responsibility for successful adaptation to migration should not be attributed to the LBC themselves. Instead, the LBC's adaptation requires collective family and social solutions. Interventions and guidance should be provided for the migrant parents and the surrogate carers on best practice in parenting. Further interventions may involve increased support by social services, school personnel and those from other educational institutions, in programmes aimed at providing greater awareness of the problems faced by children left behind and their families. Above all, policy and practice changes need to occur on a larger societal level. On the one hand, it is crucial for migrant-sending areas to diminish the economic necessities that push millions of people to migrate and leave their families behind. On the other hand, the

migrant-receiving areas should consider new migratory policies aimed at reducing family separations, such as allowing non-local children to attend school.

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Appendix 1

Information Sheet for parents / guardians (Version 1 Dated 2017.3.20)

Introduction

I am a PhD student in Clinical Psychology from the University of Edinburgh. This research is part of my Doctoral studies, as a student of University of Edinburgh.

What is the purpose of the study?

Millions of parents from rural areas move to cities to seek employment. This study seeks to explore the personal life experiences of those children who are left behind by migrant parents and experience long-term separation from their parents due to migration.

Why has my child been invited?

Your child has been invited to participate in this research because the child has been identified by their School as meeting one of the following criteria. Children who are aged 6-12 years, have been separated from both parents who are working in cities as migrant workers for at least one year, and have not experienced any other major types of parental losses in life before parental migration.

Does my child have to take part?

No. It is up to you and your child (wherever possible) to decide to take part in the study. If you agree to let your child, take part, we will then ask you to sign a consent form. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and the signed consent/assent forms to keep for your records. Your child will be provided an informed consent form with languages that easily to be understood by children. Your child is free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen to my child if we agree take part?

The research will involve interviews and questionnaires. There could be at least two interviews arranged with your child individually. The exact number of interviews are yet to be determined according to the progress of the research. The interviews will be audio and video recorded. Two questionnaires will be given to your child to answer all the questions. The interviews include a standard semi-structured interview of Child Attachment Interview lasting half an hour to one hour and one unstructured interview about life experiences of parental migration. The questions of the unstructured interview are not fixed but will be surrounded children's life experiences under parental migration.

The two questionnaires are: *The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment* and *The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire*. They will be given to your child after the first interview.

What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

The interviews require the participating children to think about experiences in times of getting hurt, illness and separation. Some children may feel distressing by the interview. During the process of interview, your child has the right to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview completely. If participants choose to withdraw from the research, the information that was acquired will be deleted. However, because the information that is being collected is anonymous once the collection of the data is over, specific participant data will not be able to be retrieved and destroyed.

What happens when the research study finishes?

The research will be presented in the researcher's doctoral dissertation and submitted to the committee at University of Edinburgh. The research results may be presented at academic conferences and in academic journals. No identifiable personal information will appear at these research results. The data collected will only be accessible to the researcher and her supervisors. Any reports of this study will contain information that reflects group results and not information about specific individuals. Participants' identities will be kept private

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. All of the information collected in the research will be anonymised so that those reading reports from the research will not know who has contributed to it. Nobody other than the researchers will have access to the data, which will be saved securely on encrypted network space and stored securely for 10 years in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any questions or would like more information, feel free to contact principal research Yanwei Chen at any time by email S1121732@sms.ed.ac.uk or phone 07561587700. In the case of any complaint regarding the research project, please contact Professor Matthias Schwannauer by completing "Request for Complaint" form appropriately (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/imports/fileManager/WEB%20Complaint%20Form.pdf>) and emailing to m.schwannauer@ed.ac.uk

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Who has reviewed the project?

The study has been reviewed and received a favourable opinion from the University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee.

Thank you for taking the time to read this Information Sheet.



Appendix 2

Consent Form for Parents / Guardians

Please indicate the following:

- I confirm that I have read the information sheet (Version 1 Dated 2017.3.20) provided and have had the opportunity to consider this information and have any questions answered.
- I understand the purposes, study tasks and risks of the research described in the project and I have discussed these with my child.
- I freely agree to my child participating in this research study. I understand that I am free to withdraw this consent at any time during the project.
- I consent to my child participating in the follow-up interviews and understand it will be audio-taped and transcribed and that anonymized quotes of interview may be used as part of research.
- I agree to my anonymized data being stored on the Edinburgh Research Archive for 10 years. After 10 years this status will be reviewed. I consent to my anonymous data being used for the purpose of future projects for the public good.

Parent/guardian name:

Parent /guardian signature:

Parent/guardian phone number:

Date:



Appendix 3

Information Sheet for children (Version 1 Dated 2017.3.20)

Hi!

I am Yanwei Chen, a Ph.D. student from the University of Edinburgh in the UK now. I came here to do research about children's experiences with parents migrating to cities to work. 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 difficulties in your life, and what are your aspirations for the future. I genuinely want to learn about your own opinions.

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. The research will take the form of two types of interviews, that is, the two of us together will exchange ideas and discuss the topics mentioned above. The interview will take about 30-60 minutes each time, and we will decide the time and place of the interview together. If you agree, I want to record and video tape our conversation. There will be at least two interviews, but we might have more than two interviews.

Lastly, I want to assure you that anything you tell me will only be used for research and absolutely be kept confidentially and securely. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in all my research records and dissertations. I will not tell anything about you to any other people, including teachers, parents, and classmates, unless the information you give me involves harm or a crime. Some parts of what you said might appear in my dissertation, but it would not be recognizable as I had changed the key personal information.

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 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.

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My cell phone number is 139-6721-****, QQ: 1020520***, and my E-mail is S1121732@ed.ac.uk

Thanks for your participation!

The researcher: Yanwei Chen Ph.D. Student, Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Edinburgh, UK



Appendix 4

Consent Form for children

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

- I confirm that I have read the information sheet (Version 1 Dated 2017.3.20) provided and have had the opportunity to consider this information and have any questions answered.
- I am willing take part in the research.
- I know that I do not have to take part in the study and that I can decide not to continue at any time.
- I understand and agree that the interviews will be audio and video taped and anonymised quotes of interview may be used as part of research.
- I agree to my anonymised data being stored on the Edinburgh Research Archive for 10 years. After 10 years this status will be reviewed. I consent to my anonymous data being used for the purpose of future projects for the public good

Signature:

Date:



Appendix 5

Child Attachment Interview Protocol

Introduction—interview not a test, want to know how things are like in your family from your point of view.

1. Can you tell me about the people in your family? The people living together in your house? (Then ask about extended family.) Here establish who main carers are.
2. Tell me three words that describe yourself, that is, what sort of person you are. Examples for each
3. Can you tell me three words to describe your relationship with your mum, that is, what it's like to be with your Mum? Examples for each.
4. What happens when your mum gets cross with you or tells you off? Example. Feel? How she feels? (Questions 3 & 4 repeated for Dad or other main caregivers)
5. Can you tell me about a time when you were really upset and wanted help? Example
6. Do you ever feel that your parents don't really love you? When? Do they know you feel that?
7. What happens when you're ill? Example.
8. What happens when you get hurt? Example.
9. Have you ever been hit or hurt by an older child or a grown-up in your family? How frequent? Example. Have you been badly hurt by someone outside your family?
10. Have you ever been touched in the private parts of your body by someone much older than you? How Frequent? Example? Feel? Others feel?
11. Has anything [else] really big happened to you that upset, scared, or confused you? Example.
12. Has anyone important to you ever died? Has a pet you cared about died? Example. How feel and others feel?
13. Is there anyone that you cared about who isn't around anymore?

14. Have you been away from your parents for longer than a day? (If child is not living with parents (e.g., is in foster care], ask about time when he/she left parents). How did you and parents feel? What was it like when you saw them again?

15. Do your parents sometimes argue? Example. How do you feel? Do they know how you felt?

16. In what ways would you like/ not like to be like your mum/ dad when you grow up?

17. If you could make three wishes when you are older, what?



Appendix 6

The Interview Protocol of the open interviews

1 Set-up of the interview

The interview will take place at lunch break or during night classes after dinner if the interviewee is a boarder at the boarding school. Each interview lasts around 30 minutes.

Interview will take place in separate room originally designed for children after school activities. The room is equipped with chairs and tables suitable for conducting interviews. A recorder and a camera will be placed in the room to record the interview. Cookies, tea, paper tissue, colour pens and paper will be placed on the table to be easily accessed by children at any point of the interview.

During the initial part of the interview, the aim is to help the child feel comfortable and relaxed, and make sure the child understands what an interview is and their rights in the interview. After greeting and welcoming the child, I will open up the conversation by introducing myself, asking about child's prior activities before the interview, and introducing the interview.

2 Content of the interview

The first part of the interview will focus on collecting personal background information of the interviewee. The second part of the interview will focus on their separation experiences and attachment experiences relating to the research question of the research project.

Background information on Interviewees:

Name/Age

Information about parental migration: Who migrated? When did they leave home to work? How long have they been away from home?

Family members: how many people in the family? Who is taking care of the children when parents are away?

Key points of the interview of children's separation experiences

Experiences of parents leaving home to work in the cities for the first time

Interactions with parents

Interactions with other family members

Reunion with parents

Daily life at school and home

3 Debriefing the child interviewees

There will be debriefing for the interviewee after the interview. If the interview is paused or the child decides to withdraw from the interview, debriefing will be provided as well. The purpose of the debriefing is to make the child interviewee feel appreciated whether the interview is fully completed or not, to hold and sooth the child's stress from the interview, and to build a good collaboration facilitating follow-up recruitments and interviews.

During the debriefing, the interviewer will thank the child for participating the interview and have an easy conversation with the child about their following activities after the interview. If the interview has emotional reactions during the interview, it is important to calm and comfort the interviewee's feelings, and to ask if the child needs any one for further help and support. Further interview appointment may also be made with the child.



Appendix 7

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)

These questions ask you about your relationship with your migrant mother.

1. My mother respects my feelings.
2. I feel my mother does a good job as a mother.
3. I wish I had a different mother.
4. My mother accepts me as I am.
5. I like to get my mother's point of view on things I am concerned about.
6. I feel it's no use letting my feelings show around my mother.
7. My mother can tell when I am upset about something.
8. Talking over my problems with my mother makes me feel ashamed or foolish.
9. My mother expects too much of me.
10. I get upset easily around my mother.
11. I get upset a lot more than my mother knows about.
12. When we discuss things, my mother cares about my point of view.
13. My mother trusts my judgment.
14. My mother has her own problems, so I don't bother her with mine.
15. My mother helps me to understand myself better.
16. I tell my mother about my problems and troubles.
17. I feel angry with my mother.
18. I don't get much attention from my mother.
19. My mother helps me to talk about my difficulties.
20. My mother understands me.
21. When I am angry about something, my mother tries to be understanding.
22. I trust my mother.
23. My mother doesn't understand what I am going through these days.
24. I can count on my mother when I need to get something off my chest.
25. If my mother knows something is bothering me, she asks me about it.

These questions ask you about your relationship with your migrant father

1. My father respects my feelings.
2. I feel my father does a good job as a mother.
3. I wish I had a different father.
4. My father accepts me as I am.
5. I like to get my father's point of view on things I am concerned about.
6. I feel it's no use letting my feelings show around my father.
7. My father can tell when I am upset about something.
8. Talking over my problems with my father makes me feel ashamed or foolish.
9. My father expects too much of me.
10. I get upset easily around my father.
11. I get upset a lot more than my father knows about.
12. When we discuss things, my father cares about my point of view.
13. My father trusts my judgment.
14. My father has her own problems, so I don't bother her with mine.
15. My father helps me to understand myself better.
16. I tell my father about my problems and troubles.
17. I feel angry with my father.
18. I don't get much attention from my father.
19. My father helps me to talk about my difficulties.
20. My father understands me.
21. When I am angry about something, my father tries to be understanding.
22. I trust my father.
23. My father doesn't understand what I am going through these days.
24. I can count on my father when I need to get something off my chest.
25. If my father knows something is bothering me, she asks me about it.

Response categories:

1 = Almost never or never true

2 = Not very true

3 = Sometimes true

4 = Often true

5 = Almost always or always true



Appendix 8

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ)

1. *Considerate of other people's feelings*
2. Restless, overactive, cannot sit still for long
3. Often complains of headaches, stomachaches or sickness
4. Shares readily with other children (treats, toys, pencils etc.)
5. Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers
6. Rather solitary, tends to play alone
7. Generally obedient, usually does what adults request.
8. Many worries, often seems worried
9. Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill
10. Constantly fidgeting or squirming
11. Has at least one good friend
12. Often fights with other children or bullies them
13. Often unhappy, downhearted or tearful
14. Generally liked by other children
15. Easily distracted, concentration wanders
16. Nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence
17. Kind to younger children
18. Often lies and cheats
19. Picked on or bullied by other children
20. Often volunteers to help others (parents, teachers, other children)
21. Thinks things out before acting
22. Steals from home, school or elsewhere
23. Gets on better with adults than with other children
24. Many fears, easily scared
25. Sees tasks through to the end, good attention span

Response categories:

0 = Not true

1 = Somewhat true

2 = Certainly true

Appendix 9

Interview record of participants

| Name code | Gender | Age | Boarding | Child Attachment Interview | First unstructured interview | The number of follow up interviews |
|-----------|--------|-----|--------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| C11 | FEMALE | 11 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| C12 | FEMALE | 8 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| C13 | MALE | 13 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| C14 | MALE | 13 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| C15 | FEMALE | 11 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| C16 | FEMALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | N/A |
| D11 | MALE | 10 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| F11 | MALE | 9 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| J11 | FEMALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| L11 | MALE | 11 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| L12 | MALE | 7 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| L13 | FEMALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| L14 | MALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| L15 | FEMALE | 11 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| L16 | MALE | 11 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| L17 | MALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | N/A |
| L18 | MALE | 8 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Q11 | MALE | 13 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Q12 | FEMALE | 9 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Q13 | MALE | 9 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|--------|----|--------------|---|---|---|
| W12 | MALE | 10 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Y11 | MALE | 10 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Y12 | FEMALE | 10 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Y13 | FEMALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Y14 | FEMALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Y15 | FEMALE | 11 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Y16 | MALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Y18 | MALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Y19 | FEMALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Y20 | FEMALE | 10 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Z11 | MALE | 10 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Z12 | FEMALE | 8 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Z13 | FEMALE | 10 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Z14 | FEMALE | 11 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Z15 | MALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Z16 | FEMALE | 11 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Z17 | MALE | 12 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Z18 | FEMALE | 9 | Non-boarding | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Z19 | MALE | 9 | Boarding | 1 | 1 | 2 |

Appendix 10

Coding in Nvivo

The screenshot displays the Nvivo interface with a text document on the left and a list of codes on the right. The text document contains several interview questions and answers, with some parts highlighted in yellow. The codes on the right are organized into a list, with some codes having colored bars next to them, indicating their application to the text.

Text Document Content:

Interviewer:When they were away, how would get in touch with each other? Before the left, they would leave me a sim card with money inside. A

Interviewer:How often would you call them?
I would call them when I missed them, sometimes I was busy, studying, I miss them that much and I would not call.

Interviewer:Did they call you often?
No, they didn't call me quite often. They called me about once a week to work. They couldn't call me at work. But I also called them so we

Interviewer:Who made more phone calls? you or them?
I called more. Sometimes when they were at work they couldn't pick up the call.

Interviewer:How did you feel when they cut off the phone call?
Not scared. They were at work, had to do the job, they didn't want to

Interviewer:What would you usually talk on the phone?
Sometimes, to ask them to buy me something, sometimes when we don't have money, I ask them to send money to pay the tuition fee. Or sometimes just chat.

Interviewer:What would you say to them then?
I would say, I really miss you dad and mum, do you miss me. They would miss you, you are our own child, how come we don't miss you.

Interviewer:When would you really want to call them?
When I really missed them. Sometimes when I was at school and they were at home, I have tears then after I got back home I would call them and talk to them.

Interviewer:Could you tell me more about it?
After they just left home, I would often think about it at school and home.

Interviewer:Did you cry in the classroom?
No, alone. I covered myself with the duvet. And cried inside the duvet.

Interviewer: Did you tell your parents about it?

Code List:

- Seeing school peers as brothers and sisters
- Emotional connection with parents
- Good friends
- Good relations with peers
- Activities with parents in reunion holiday
- Children's agency self-focused agency
- Role sharing
- Emotional distress after first migration
- Early migration
- Child care in reunion holiday
- Resuming family roles in reunion
- Peer relationship
- Children's agency in maintaining an intact family
- Support seeking
- Recent new year reunion
- Reunions
- Long-distance communication and reunifications
- Children's agency
- Maintaining an intact family
- Coding Density
- Sadness

Appendix 11

A full list of categories in the grounded theory analysis

Building family collaboration

Reaching mutual support

Believes in migration

For the children and the family's future

Migration is temporary

Getting children's support

Instructing children to be obedient to adults

Shared decision making

Asking child's permission for migration-early
separation

Changing migration plan

Ending migration

Parents making arrangements with carers

Father's relation with uncle

Parents call uncles

Parents-grandparents interactions

Call between parents and grandparents

Parents making arrangements with surrogate
carers

Parents only told grandparents of migration

Telling grandparents about coming home

Children's agency

Agency not as constructive coping

Bringing a knife to protect brother

Online phone game addiction

Children's agency self-focused agency

Emotion regulation

Avoidance-distracting

Avoiding the farewell scene

Self-containment

Self-reasoning

Suppression of emotional expression

Can't tell the feelings

Didn't say anything about migration

Embarrassment over emotional expression

Not sharing feelings with anyone

Making meaning of the migration

Family devotion or personal interest

Migrating for self-interest

Migrating for the family

Earning money for children's study

Making money for a new house

Migration to make money

They are working hard for us

Financial difficulties

Is migration worth it

Prefer non-migration

Pros and cons of migration

Supportive

Not understanding migration

Not understanding parental migration

Too young to understand

Self-management

Gaining parental trust by study score

Managing homework

Self-discipline

Using mobile phone reasonably

Constructive compliance

Adjusting to the new environment actively

Carer's home VS. own home

Better than living alone

Comparing carers to parents

More tolerance from parents

Different sleeping arrangement at carer's place

Feelings of moving homes

Loss of own home

Receiving similar care

Helping grandparents with housework

Helping uncle

Moving by myself

Following adults' orders

Resisting

Refusing to go to divorce place

Refusing to move

Resist visiting grandpa

Resisting in conflicts with carers

Subtle resistance

Disagreeing with father on mum

Disagreement of migration

Threatening of death to not be with father

Voicing disagreement on migration

Support giving

Being considerate to parents

Care for parents

Less burden for parents

Understanding parents' mental states

Supportive of migration

Support seeking

Children asking for help

Listening to brother's campus advice

Peer relationship

Good relations with peers

Good friends

Seeing school peers as brothers and sisters

Graduation separation

Peer support

Peer companionship

Peers make parental migration easier

Study with peers together

Socializing with peers

Chatting with peers

Hanging out with peers

Peer conflicts

Seeking companionship

Always having peer companionship

Less lonely through chatting on phone

Sleep with others after parents left

Seeking emotional support

Pet attachment

Seeking companionship

Sharing feelings

Children's agency in building family collaboration

Appreciation for parents' hard work

Children's agency in shared decision making of
migration

Asking parents not to leave

Begging parents to stay

Could you not leave

Nagging parents back home weekly

Mum ending migration for the child

Saying goodbye is better

Suggesting dad to migrate

Concerned of sister stopping migration

Self determination

Determined to study hard

It's my turn to help the family

Children's agency in maintaining an intact family

Children agency in long-distance communication

Asking about parents' lives

Child initiating the call

Accommodating parents' work schedule

Child making calls

Remembering dad's number

Writing down parents' phone numbers

Involving parents in children's lives

Asking parents for help

Asking parents for materials

Children sharing lives with parents

Complaining grandparents to parents

Not motivated to call

Not telling parent of exam scores

Children's agency in role sharing

Increased economic agency

Child being conscious of money

Getting access to more allowances

Helping manage the store

Online shopping

Increased family roles

Buying groceries

Doing housework

Helping with land work

Taking care of younger sibling

Playing cell phone

Entertainment

Playing phone before sleep at home

Playing phone in the weekend

Self-care

Close relationships with surrogate carers

Difficulties in contacting parents

Bad internet for video call

Bad quality video call

Couldn't talk to parents unless they called

Long distance call too expensive

Not having parents' number at first

Emotional connection with parents

Emotional attachment with the parents

Mum as emotional support

Parents can't be replaced

Trust in parents' availability

Emotional responses

Emotional response to no reunion in new year

Anger and disappointment

Feeling sad of no new year reunion

Lonely

Sad of brother not coming back for new year

Toleration of parents not coming home

Trust in them

Unhappy of no reunion

Wish a complete family

Emotional responses of parents leaving-post
new year

Avoiding the farewell scene

Children's response to 'no goodbye'

Call mum upon leaving

Cry after being told parents had left

Didn't ask parents whereabouts

Didn't wake parents to say goodbye

Disappointed not seeing mum off

Sad of No goodbye

Couldn't control my feelings

Crying -post new year

Crying-post new year

Desire being with parents

Not enough reunion

Unsatisfied reunion

Wish mum come home

Wish parents back early

Wish parents home

Wish parents work closer

Didn't want them go-post new year separation

Disappointed not meeting parents

Feel like leaving with parents together

Feeling sour of parents leaving

Kept thinking of parents' leaving in mind

Lonely-post new year separation

Sad of parent(s) leaving after new year

Unhappy of dad leaving

Unhappy of mum leaving

Emotional responses of phone calls

Concerned if no call from parents

Crying on the phone

Expecting mum's call

Feeling liked from phone calls

Happy calling parent(s)

Missing parents a lot-when calling

Sad of answering calls from parents

Want parents back home

Emotional responses to other changes and losses

Crying over sister leaving

Feeling sad of being left at uncle's

Missing paternal-grandparents after moving

Sad and lonely after sis's wedding

Sad of grandpa's death

Sad of parental split

Sadness and cry over mum's death

Very lonely after grandpa moved away

Emotional responses to reunions

Emotions seeing parents

Crying meeting up mum

Expressing attachment

Finally back

Happy and feeling strange to parents

Happy seeing parents at reunion

Nervous seeing parents

Sad seeing migrant parents again

Too shy to greet parents

Too surprised to say much

Happy having parents home

Looking forward to next reunion

Physical expression of affections

Emotions triggered by peers' family interactions

Indifference to migratory separations and reunions

Indifference to reunions

Indifference to separations

No feelings towards phone calls

Not missing migrant parents

Negative regard for migrant father

Don't like divorced father

He doesn't deserve to be my father

Migrant father being irresponsible

Would rather miss deceased mum than missing
father

Children's agency in negotiating constraints

Children's agency in parental conflicts

Brother not showing up in divorce

Children intervening parents' conflicts

Knowledge of divorce

Noticed parents not talking to each other

Parental dispute before migration

Sad of parents' conflicts

Still my mum after divorce

Taking sides

Blaming sibling for using mum for money

Custody choice

Felt sorry for mum in marital violence

Refuse to choose father in divorce

Worry of parental split

Relationship with parents after divorce

Continuing bond

Estranged

Resentment

Taking mobile phone to the school

Children's agency in negotiating support

Being aware of other people's needs

Care for grandparents

Comforting younger sister

Grandma's loss

Younger sister longing for mother

Helping grandparents

Happy helping grandma

Intellectual support

Labor support

Teacher-child relationship

Early migration

Communication of the early migration

Communication with children about the migration

Proper farewell

Emotion adaption

Emotional adaption

Emotional adjustment duration

Feeling better

Used to it

Maturity and acceptance of migration

Emotional distress after first migration

A sense of loss

Abandonment

Anger of migration

Boredom without parents

Crying during interview

Depressive symptoms

Emptiness in heart

Lost appetite for weeks

Lost interest

Don't want them to go

Fear

Helplessness

Loneliness

Migrating impacting study

Missing parents

Sadness

Forced acceptance

Little communications of separation before migration

Leaving without goodbye-post-new-year

No prior communications of migration

Simple announcement of migration

Maintaining an intact family

Blending with extended family

Family structure before migration-extended family

Grandma living with uncle's

Raised by grandparents before migration

Two households under one roof

Living arrangement after parental migration

Living alone by myself

Living with grandparents

Living with the sibling

Living with uncle's family

Moving home after migration

Change in schooling

Moving into new place

Relationships in left-behind households after migration

Hanging out with grandparents

Chatting with grandparents

Companying grandma

Siblings

Nice relationships with siblings

Closeness with sibling

Concerned with younger sibling

Emotional support

Sibling companionships

Boarding with sibling

Asking sister for money

Comforted by sister at boarding school

Different dorms with brother at boarding
school

Sharing a bed with sibling

Chatting with sibling

Companying younger sibling

Hanging out with siblings

Same school with siblings

Talking about study with older sister

Uncle and auntie (Other carer)

Auntie living at home

Auntie's selling marbles till late

Uncle and dad working on land

Uncle cooking for family

Uncle cutting woods in the mountain

Uncle making wine at home

Uncle working on the land

Long-distance communication and reunifications

Affective interactions between parents and
children

Communication means

Family contacts on QQ

Family contacts on WeChat

Phone call with parents

Call duration

Call frequency

Frequently

Monthly

Stable weekly phone calls

Unstable call frequency

Owning a mobile phone

Getting a phone from parents

Having own mobile phone

Parents calling child's mobile phone

Passing on the phone

Passing the phone from child to
grandparents

Passing the phone to child

Passing the phone to dad

Video call

Familiarity with parents

Living condition of migrant parent

Migrators' jobs

Parents chilling after work

Parents work at night

Parents' meals in the city

Little communication during migration

Little phone communication during migration

Not knowing parents' lives in the cities

Parents not knowing about me

Parent children call each other

Parents call more

Parents sharing city life with children

Reunions

Holiday in migrating city with parents

Activities in the cities

Back to hometown from visiting parents

Distance to the city

Living with migrant parents in the city

Visiting migrant parents

Little communications about the reunion

Little communication with parents during the
reunion

No communication of the reunion schedule

Not saying anything at the reunion moment

New year reunions

Most memorable reunion

No new year reunion

Changing plans of coming home

New year activities without parents

Compensating for not coming home

Didn't go out in holiday

Getting red pocket money from auntie

Having new year with extended family

Eating at local market with aunt

Eating with extended family

New year with grandparents

New year with uncle's family

Relatives' visiting in new year

Help with new year ceremony

Lighting the fireworks

New year call

Call on new year eve

Chatting about new year meal

Happy calling dad for new year

Video call in new year

New year call to dad at work

New year call to the mum at work

New year eve call with dad

No new year call with parents

New year dinner

New year dinner and new year TV show

with mum

New year food

New year meal

Playing fireworks with peers in new year

Scared of lighting fireworks herself

Not seeing mother every year

Not seeing parents for years

Reunion gap, frequency and duration

Reunion duration

Reunion gap

Yearly reunion

Reunion with sibling

Recent new year reunion

Communication of new year reunion

Informing children of coming home in
advance

Knowing parent's coming back in advance

Planning reunion

Uncertainty

Leaving after new year

Farewell-post-new-year

Awoke the child to say goodbye

Farewell din'ning-post new year separation

Seeing parents off-post new year

Informing children of leaving

Informing child of leaving by parents-post
new year

Telling children of leaving at the last
moment

Leaving schedule

Long journey of coming home

Only one parent back for new year

Resuming family roles in reunion

Childcare in reunion holiday

Activities with parents in reunion holiday

Children initiating activities with parents

Helping with land work secretly

Picking fruits for mum

Recommending parents of phone
game

Companionship

Chatting with parents in holiday

Eating together with parents

Watching TV with migrant parents

Doing 'work' together

Doing housework with parents

Repair appliances in holiday

Working on land with parents

More new 'exploration'

Going to restaurant with parents

Going to the mountain

Inviting people for dinner

Playing fireworks with parents

Taking children out for shopping

Travelling in new year holiday

Visiting local markets with parents

Visiting relatives with parents

Bringing things to children in reunion

Caring sick or injured children

Comforting and enjoining child before
boarding

Going back to own home with parent

Lecturing the child to stop crying

Parenting

Interpersonal relations

Parenting regarding study in reunion

holiday

Phone use

Physical punishment

Safety supervision

School matters

Well behavior

Sleeping with mum in reunion

Taken care by father when he's home

Children's communication with parents

during reunion

Casual chat

Small arguments with mum

Festival activities

Community catering

Fireworks in festival

Not going out with parents

Parents preparing for spring festival

Qingming festival tradition

Red pocket money

Parents doing farm work in reunion

Parents doing household work in reunion
holiday

House construction

Parents cleaning the house

Parents cooking meals in reunion

Staying home until finishing the work

Parents' activities in new year holiday

Attending funeral in the community

Dad visiting and talking to grandma

Entertainment

Parents living in new house in reunion

Parents preparing money for brother's
wedding

Reunion moment

Arrival and meeting up

Arrival date

Arrival date before new year

Arriving after spring festival

Back on new year eve

Chatting with parents on arrival

Coming home earlier than planned

Helping with luggage

Paying attention to each other

Picking up migrant parents

Reunions- coming to school to see child

Reunions-waking child up after arrived

Woke up, parents are home

Unforeseen reunion

Temporary reunion besides New Year

Coming back for children's graduation

Coming back in their holiday

Coming home for family affairs

Coming home for personal matters

Coming home temporarily for work

Departure for migration after a short stay

Retaining the rural base

Role sharing

Children's increased responsibility

Assigning children household duties

Asking child to graze cows

Asking children to take care younger sibling

Asking children to tidy corns

Asking children to visit maternal family

Asking children to work on the land

Assigning house chores to kid

Doing housework

Boiling water

Cleaning house

Cooking

Cutting vegetables from family garden

Doing housework with adults

Watching the house

Handling more housework after migration

Helping with housework since young

Laundry

Planting flowers at home

Plucking fowls

Repairing damaged things at home

Setting up fire basket

Taking turns to do housework

Washing dishes

Farm work

Corns

Cows

Digging land

Feeding livestock

Getting firewood

Helping with farm work from little

Labor work at weekends

More agricultural work after migration

Sugarcane

Time spent working on the land

Responsibility as an older sibling

Taking care younger sibling

Baby sitting

Brother relying on my care

Celebrating younger sister's birthday

Cooking for younger sibling

Help taking care cousin brother

Stopping younger brother from playing water

Teaching sibling

Younger sister reminds of parents

Grandparents' roles

Grandparents making money

Grandma planning to open a bakery

Grandma selling vegetables in the market

Grandma working at school

Grandma's migration

Running a grocery store at home

Grandparents with agricultural work

Crops

Grandparents with farm work

Grandparents with housework

Grandparents' increased duties after migration

Grandpa guarding the house after migration

Grandparents supporting us financially

Grandparents taking care of children

Daily care

Grandpa giving me last piece of food

Grandparents ask auntie to buy clothes for
child

Grandparents buy food and clothes for
children

Grandparents cooking

Grandparents doing laundry

Grandparents giving allowance to children

Grandparents left money to the child
before leaving

Weekly allowance from grandparents

Emotional care

Grandparents preparing for boarding

Grandparents taking care of multiple children

Parenting children

Grandparents coming to PTM

Grandparents didn't comment on future
schooling plan

Grandparents not asking about scores

Helping transferring school

Parenting effects

Failed child discipline

Fear of scolding

More compliant with grandma at home

No restrains at home without grandma

Sad of being scolded by grandparents

Parenting focus

Behavior

Life at school

Peer relations

Study

Parenting methods

Beating

Comparing grandchildren

Grandpa lecturing kid

Parenting child by scaring

Refusing to top up for child

Rewarding money

Scolding

Migrant parents parenting during migration

Asking children about school adjustment

Asking children about their daily life

Caring study over phone

Asking about children's study on the phone

Caring study by threatening

Encouraging study

Father suggesting army school

Communicating with the teacher about the children

Parents disciplining children

Disciplining by threatening physical punishment

Instructing children to be obedience

Scolding for not listening to grandparents

Migrant parents sending money back home

Mum VS. Dad

Dad's concern

Less emotional with dad

Missing mum more

More memorable of mum's reunion

Mother as emotional support

Mum nicer than dad

Mum's concern

Talking to mum more

Parenting and childcare from others

Asking auntie for help with study

Auntie taking children out

Being scolded by carers for not doing housework

Older sibling as carers

Parent Teacher meeting-other carers

Uncle asking about scores

Triangle

Assisting communications

Asking child to call parents

Grandparents asking children about parents'

health

Migrant parents asking children about family

condition

Parent-child contacts through grandparents

Parents asked child to comfort grandma

Resolving conflicts across generations

Telling parents of grandparents' cry

Telling the child of the parental dispute

Uncle asking father to come home

Co-parenting

Disciplining children across generations

Parents instructing children to listen to the
carers

Triangling

Dad treats me better without mum

Dad promise of buying anything

Grandma complaining about dad to the child

Grandparents complaining about not receiving
money

Grandparents parented more when parents
were away

Grandparents treat me worse without parents

Favoring more obvious without parents

Step grandpa mean to me without parents at home

Treated me better with mum home

Negotiating constraints

Arranging suitable call schedule

Call home as soon as they finish work

Call parents on holiday

Calling according to school schedule

Accommodating child's time

Call after school

Call parents when back home from boarding school

Not calling at boarding school

Calls with parents at night at home

Calling child through the teacher at boarding school

Experienced constraints

Call restrictions from work

Family separations

Death of the elderly

Divorce

Age of parental divorce

Divorced father remarried

Family split

Change in reunion after divorce

Family split due to divorce

Father angry of brother calling mum

Moving place after divorce

Mum living in another village

Older brother contacting father after divorce

Tension between divorced parents

Leaving of other family members

Grandma migrating

Grandpa moved into uncle's

Separation from sibling

Sibling going to college

Sibling migration

Older sibling's labor migration

Quit school to migrate

Going to work before graduation

Sibling migrated to parents' place

Older sibling as migrator-living with
parents

Working in the same place with parents

Young migrator changed job

Older sibling's new year reunion

Physical changes of migrant sibling

Separating from migrant sibling

Sibling split after parental migration

Older sibling's wedding

Seeing separated sister in holiday

Visiting sister's adopting family

Younger sis living with paternal
grandparents

Parental death

Children's responses to parental death

Little communication regarding parental death

Mum had incident in the working place

Participating mum's funeral

Parents' marriage issues

Dad's marital affair at workplace

Marital violence

Mother despising father

Not migrating together due to marital problems

Parents separated

Parents' argument

Separations due to parental migration

First migration

Age of migration

First migration duration

No memory of earliest migration

Planning separation-early migration

Migration condition

Migration before boarding

Migration location

Parental migration status

Parents' living situation in the city

Parents living together in the city

Parents not living together

Parents' working condition

Parents not working together

Parents working together

Seasonal migration

Second migration

Sequential migration

Separation gap

Less than three years

More than three years

Younger sister being given away

No new year reunion due to work

Busy at work to make money

Couldn't take the leave at new year

Explanation for no reunion

No new year for medical treatment

Reduced family functioning

Grandparents' inability

Grandma can't handle the land work

Grandma couldn't use the phone

Grandma's unable to protect me

Grandparents getting sick

Grandparents treat me better

Grandparents uneducated

Not fun living with grandparents

Too old to take care of me

Less parental care after migration

Going to community events alone

Less emotional care after migration

Less help from parents with study after
migration

No longer cooking and buying things for me

Not taking children out

Limited financial benefits

No money to come home for new year

Parents not sending money back

Parents' family roles unfulfilled after migration

Change in home atmosphere

Reduction in family labour supply

Relational disconnection with surrogate carers

Conflicts with carers

Little communications with carers

Remarriage (after migration)

Getting along with stepfather

Getting alone better with stepfather

Life after remarriage

Parent's new marriage

Unhappy with mum's new marriage

Blaming stepfather for not being with mum

Mum living with stepfather in another place

No knowledge of mum's new marriage until
meeting new father

Remarriage for me

Sleeping alone after mum remarried

Unhappy seeing stepfather

Schooling VS. Migration separations

Boarding didn't offset the impact of migration

Migration makes weekend reunion different

Missing parents disturbed sleep

Parent's home makes boarding different

Emotional reactions to weekly boarding

Indifference to boarding separations

No difficulties when starting boarding

No feelings to weekly boarding

Missing parents when starting boarding

Sending money back when it's really desperate

Structuring parent-child contact

Leaving on school day

Limiting parent-child communication

Missed reunion

Separation on a school day-early migration-
missed

Unstable schedule of migrant father

Family economy getting better after migration

Life quality improved after migration

Things gained after migration

Built new house after migration

Getting new things from migration

Getting solar energy at home

New flat of mum and daughter

Positive change in parents

Change in parenting after migration

Caring about me more than before

Less beating more talking

Less demanding

Less restrict with children

More parental supervision after migration

Personality and behaviour change in parents

Dad became funnier after migration

Dad less gambling

Mum less swearing

Parents picking up new accent from the city

Parents' temper got better after migration

Physical change in parents

Parents become trendy

Parents gained weight

Parents look younger after migration

Skin fairer

Returned migrating child from the city

Watch phone

Negotiating support

Calling via other people

Community

Father borrowed money to come home

Going out for events in village

Hiring people to work on the land

Migrating with people from the same village

Neighbors

Extended family

Cousin

Boarding with relative

Cousin became LBC

Cousins missing me

Hanging out with older cousin

Semi siblings

Calling cousins as siblings

Cousin at the same school

Cousin living at my home

Extended family structure

Four generations under one roof

Maternal grandma's extended-family structure

Helping within extended families

Other relatives

Socializing with extended family

Parent-teacher communication