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What does 'left behind' mean to children living in migratory regions in rural China?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how in China in the early to mid-2010s non-migrant children in households with and without migrants interpreted the situation of children being left behind because of parental migration. These children lived in rural regions in China's eastern interior where parental migration had become a 'new normal' and where a good future was one that involved escaping rurality and progressing to a stable urban job through education. Based on my interviews with forty-four left behind children of two migrant parents and twenty-nine children who lived with both their parents, this article demonstrates that the children's deep feelings about their own family's circumstances impacted on their perceptions about the situation of children being 'left behind'. The children's views reveal implications of parental migration that are more complex than neat delineations of trade-offs between costs (reduced parental care) and benefits (increased income) suggest. The discussion further contributes to bridging conceptual dichotomies between migrants and non-migrants and between left-behinds and other stayers.

1. Introduction

This article explores rural Chinese children's perceptions of the circumstances of children who are left behind by their migrant parents in regions of high outmigration Much global literature on the implications of parental migration for children quantitatively examines left-behind children's outcomes for different aspects of their wellbeing while treating the children of non-migrant parents as a control group (e.g. Kandel and Kao, 2001; Jordan and Graham, 2012; Graham et al., 2012; Zhou, Murphy and Tao, 2014; Wang and Mesman, 2015; Murphy, Zhou and Tao, 2016) . Other studies use qualitative methods to examine children's subjective experiences of being left-behind by one or both parents (e.g. Fog Olwig, 1999; Parreñas, 2005; Dreby, 2010; Coe, 2011; Ye and Pan, 2011; Xiao, 2014; Hoang and Yeoh, 2015; Choi, Yeoh and Lam, 2019; Hu, 2019). This article extends these previous literatures by qualitatively exploring how children left behind by two migrant parents and children who live with both their parents perceive being 'left behind', thereby capturing left behind as both an actual and a notional circumstance.

Exploring children's views about being 'left behind' provides a way to study the implications of migrancy for all children regardless of their parents' migration status. 'Migrancy' or the salience of migration as 'a realm of possibilities' (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006) refers variously to a disposition of individuals (Näre, 2013), a social category (Näre, 2013) and a social space that pertains to non-migrants as well as migrants (Seeberg and Gozdaik, 2016). Migrancy is a product not only of migration but also of processes that exist concurrently with but independently of migration such as formal education and urbanization while, conversely, migrancy generates within individuals desires for certain mobile futures (Katz, 2004; Huijsmans, Ansell and Froerer, 2021). In this article, children's views about the circumstance of being 'left-behind' provide a lens through which to understand their feelings about their own receipt of care and material support given migrancy's impacts on their family's livelihood strategies, and on their expectations of their parents' support for their education and futures.

Migration is one manifestation of wider global and national economic restructuring that profoundly impacts on families' livelihood strategies and on the institutions (families, neighbourhoods, schools) and social relations through which material support and care provisioning occur. A global childhood studies literature reveals that children disproportionately bear the social costs of this economic restructuring, while intuitively emphasizing relationships as they contend with their circumstances (Mayall, 2000; Orellana et al, 2001; Katz, 2004; Parreñas, 2005; Dreby, 2010; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Much as earlier literature prioritising women's experiences has generated new directions in research on migration and livelihoods (Lutz, 2010; Hanrahan, 2015),

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studies focused on children's experiences provide new perspectives on families, livelihoods, migration, care and intergenerational mobility (Thorne, 2004; Mayall, 2000; Dobson, 2009; Gardner, 2012; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Zhang, 2015). Because migrancy so deeply affects children's care arrangements and care expectations, the next section turns to conceptualise their care in relation to migrancy.

2. Care and migrancy

Children's lived experiences of care are integral to their perceptions of family, relationships and expectations for the future. Care refers to human activities designed to meet human needs (Ruddick, 1998; Held, 2006). Most activities to deliver care occur within the daily routines of family life (;Hanrahan, 2015; Held, 2006). Typical activities to care for children include preparing food, washing clothes, escorting children to and from school, and providing guidance and education. Importantly, though, 'care' refers not only to these activities, but also to the emotional attentiveness that people assume is involved in doing them. Even so, acts of care do not always indicate the presence of an intimate bond between the caregiver and the care recipient (Liu, 2017). Instead, in some circumstances, care is an ambivalent practice or experience, with care-lessness impacting on relationships and individuals' needs as much as care-fulness (Hanrahan, 2015: 391).

While ideally care entails an emotional investment, Ruddick (1998) emphasizes that caregivers also need material resources to act on their feelings for whom they care. Meanwhile, as Zelizer (2005) observes, individuals blend money and intimacy as they negotiate their interconnected lives. In a Chinese context, such blending can be seen in practices of *yang*, with *yang* meaning 'to nourish', 'to support' and 'to raise' (as in *yang* children). For instance, Stafford (2000) explains that through everyday practices of '*yang*' individuals simultaneously exchange food, household items and money, express emotions and maintain relatedness. Both affection and material resources are therefore integral to nurturing care (Nussbaum, 1995; Ruddick, 1998).

When families adopt translocal migration strategies, one of the biggest conundrums they face is how to provide care (Carling et al., 2012). Researchers propose terms such as 'commodified love', the 'materiality of care', and 'the intimacy of remittances' to convey the intertwining of the emotional and material aspects of migrants' care for their families (Hochschild 2002; Parreñas, 2005; Coe, 2011; Carling et al., 2012). At the same time, children's perceptions about how families blend affection and money when their parents migrate without them are affected by context-specific gendered models of family. For instance, studies conducted in some Asian and Latin American countries report that left-behind children are more accepting of fathers' migration than mothers' migration because fathers' migration is consistent with men's breadwinner roles (e.g. Parreñas, 2005; Dreby, 2010). However, when mothers migrate, even as they use phone calls and remittances to 'care' for their children 'from afar', the children often resent them because they see them as abdicating their expected roles as primary nurturers (e.g. Schmalzbauer, 2004; Parreñas, 2005; Dreby, 2010). In parts of West Africa, though, because of legacies of 'distributed child-raising' and more flexible gendered models of family, left-behind children largely accept migrant parents' efforts at economic provisioning as expressions of their care regardless of the migrant parent's gender (Coe, 2011).

Much quantitative research on the impacts of parental migration on children's wellbeing disaggregates money and care, calibrating the trade-offs between the two. Some of this research indicates that when parents migrate from poorer countries to wealthy countries, remittances enable significant investments in left-behind children's health, nutrition and education (e.g. Arguillas and Williams, 2010; Cebotari and Dito, 2021). But when parents migrate internally, the material benefits for children are less (Cebotari and Dito, 2021), which is relevant for this study because China's rural migrants mostly move internally. A trade-offs approach to parental migration counterbalances some literature's earlier emphasis on remittances by bringing migration's social costs to the fore. For children, the principal social cost of parental migration is reduced parental care. Several researchers adapt Coleman (1988) in conceptualising this social cost in terms of children's reduced access to parents' social and human capital and supervision (e.g. Kandel and Kao, 2001; Booth, 2003). But children's reduced receipt of intimacy in daily life is also significant to their lives and wellbeing (Valtolina and Colombo, 2012).

Many quantitative studies conducted in China's rural regions find that the costs of reductions in parental care are such that, when compared to the children of stayers, left-behind children exhibit more behavioural problems, higher rates of truancy, greater risks of emotional difficulties and loneliness, and lower levels of self-reported health (e.g. Lyu and Chen, 2019; Qin and Albin, 2010; Shen and Zhang, 2018; Wang and Mesman, 2015; Wu and Li, 2015; On the Road to School, 2017). Some studies also report worse educational outcomes among left-behind children compared to the children of stayers, including for years of schooling (Lyu and Chen, 2019) and satisfaction with academic performance (On the Road to School, 2017). Meanwhile, one study finds lower test scores among boys left behind by two migrant parents (Zhou, Murphy and Tao, 2014).

Other quantitative studies, though, suggest negligible differences between left-behind children and the children of stayers for selected indicators of wellbeing. Some reports of mixed outcomes for left-behind children include findings of no significant difference among children by their parents' migration status for general satisfaction with life (Murphy, Zhou and Tao, 2016), optimism about the future (e.g. Bi and Oyserman, 2015) and educational aspirations (Shen and Zhang, 2018). Meanwhile, yet other studies find no significant difference between left-behind children and children of stayers for height, weight, cognitive test scores, and time use, and for measures of subjective health and mental health (e.g. Xu and Xie, 2013; Zhou et al., 2015; Yeung and Gu, 2016; Hu, 2019).

Scholars explain negligible differences between 'left-behind children' and 'non left-behind children' for certain measures of wellbeing by the mitigating effects of alternative care inputs alongside remittances. For instance, Lu (2012) identifies phone calls from migrant parents as one expression of care that potentially ameliorates the effects of parental absence on children. However, Shen and Zhang (2018) note that the calls are usually too fleeting to compensate the children adequately. Scholars also highlight the care of grandparents in cushioning children from the effects of parental migration (Lee, 2011; Lu, 2012; Shen and Zhang, 2018), echoing observations of grandparents' care in other countries (Carling et al., 2012; Dreby 2010; Orellana et al. 2001; Schmalzbauer 2004). Meanwhile, several researchers contend that minimal differences among rural children by their parents' migration status reflect that all rural children are left behind more generally by China's urban-biased development model (Xiang, 2007; Xu and Xie, 2013; Rozelle and Hell, 2020; Zhou et al., 2015; Yeung and Gu, 2016; Shen and Zhang, 2018).

While the implications of parental migration for children are well researched, less is known about the implications of a *local prevalence of parental outmigration* for children, including for the children of stayers. I found only one study for any country on the implications of a *migratory environment* per se for the children of migrant parents *and* the children of stayers. Based on a survey of 2243 children in 427 villages in China, this study discovers that higher rates of outmigration from villages correlate with worse verbal and maths scores among children of migrants and children of stayers. This finding indicates that large-scale outmigration corresponds with a depletion of better educated adults with whom children can interact (Xie et al, 2019).

Other research uses qualitative data to examine the implications of a migratory environment for children. It demonstrates that children who live in 'transnational social fields' develop migratory dispositions such that their orientations towards their futures involve them anticipating their own migration (Coe, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Zeitlyn and Mand,

2012). However, even when parents do not migrate, wider cultural and economic forces still work to inculcate a 'cosmopolitan' migratory outlook among children (Katz, 2004; Coe, 2013; Huijsmans, Ansell and Froerer, 2021). Meanwhile, labour migration is one of the few routes available to many parents from poor rural regions to financially support the family's hopes for intergenerational mobility. Migrancy therefore impacts on children's expectations and experiences of family care and support.

3. Background

In China in the 2010s, migrancy permeated the consciousness of rural children and adults alike. Two meanings of the English term 'left behind' capture well the material and care contradictions of migrancy in an environment of rapid urbanisation and soaring socio-economic inequalities. Most obviously, 'left behind' refers to the situation of individuals who live in households where other members have migrated without them, signalling the households' spatial reconfiguration of their social reproduction (care-giving) and economic production (earning activities). However, the English term 'left behind' has another meaning, which is to occupy a lowly position in spatial and socio-economic hierarchies. In China, a devaluation of rurality in the nation's ongoing process of urbanisation has long underpinned many rural individuals' view that they are being left behind developmentally and that they must work to improve themselves and their circumstances (Xiang, 2007; Kipnis, 2011).

Simultaneously, potent meritocratic discourses endorse education as the optimal route for enhancing individuals' quality and competitiveness, promoting intergenerational advancement (Li and Lau, 2012) and accelerating national development (Kipnis, 2011). Admittedly, few rural students manage to enter China's higher tier universities because of a rural–urban gap manifest in the inferiority of rural schools, rural families' socio-economic disadvantages, and discrimination against rural students in university admissions (Hao, Hu and Lo, 2014; Rozelle and Hell, 2020). Nevertheless, when children are younger and their academic aptitude has yet to reveal itself, their families still hope that they will be one of the lucky few to progress through education to a white-collar urban job (Obendiek, 2016; Hu, 2019). The idea that parents are responsible for investing in their children's prospects has special implications for families in rural areas with few local earning opportunities. The phenomenon of children being left behind therefore represents rural families' response to a competitive, unequal environment where singular ideas about a good life and a worthwhile person prevail.

A cause and effect of migrancy's dominance in China's rural interior is that millions of individuals are impacted by the migration of others, either directly or indirectly. In China the number of internal migrants rose from 6.7 million in 1982, to 70.7 million in 1990 to 173 million in 2018 (Duan et al., 2013; National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). This migrancy exists in a context where state structures necessitate rural families' spatial separation while legally codifying rural people's inferiority. Specifically, China's household registration (*hukou*) system allocates health care, housing and school places to individuals at their registered place of residence (Fan, 2008). Under the *hukou* system, most rural migrants do not have access to the public goods and services that they need to settle with their children in the destination areas (Fan, 2008). Rural migrants also work long hours in arduous jobs for less than half the wages of urban *hukou* holders (Chan, 2014), so they can only save money if their children remain in the countryside. Furthermore, most migrants are excluded from state and employer provided social insurance packages (Fan, 2008). Instead, rural peoples' access to the cultivation rights of their household's land in their villages provides them with subsistence security (Fan, 2008). Only migrants with high levels of education and high incomes can ever hope to obtain an urban *hukou* in major cities. China's municipal authorities and capitalists thereby evade contributing to rural migrant families' social reproduction costs even as they profit from the migrants' labour (Fan, 2008), which replicates a global pattern whereby state-endorsed structures detach social production from economic production (Katz, 2001).

In 2010, more than 61 million children aged 0–17 years were left behind in China's rural areas while one or both of their parents worked elsewhere: approximately 47 percent of these left-behind children had two migrant parents, 36 percent had a lone migrant father, and 17 percent had a lone migrant mother (ACWF, 2013; Duan et al, 2013). The number of rural left-behind children in 2010 represents a three-fold increase on the number for 2000 (Duan et al, 2013). Demographers Chan and Ren (2018) report that the overall number of left-behind children in 2010–2015 was 69–70 million. But by 2015 the number of *rural* left-behind children had fallen from 61 million to 41 million, while the number of *urban* left-behind children had risen from 7.7 million to 28.3 million. Importantly, though, this shift largely reflects a re-categorisation of districts from 'rural' to 'urban' rather than any substantive change in these children's circumstances (Chan and Ren, 2018: 139).

China also provides an instructive case for exploring children's perceptions of being 'left behind' because of a rise after the early 2000s of a discourse about a need to 'care for left-behind children'. This discourse contradicts the afore-mentioned discourse impelling rural individuals to migrate to earn money. In the 'care for left-behind children' discourse, the Chinese word for care (*guanai*) comprises a character meaning 'to be concerned for' (*guan*) and a character meaning 'to love' (*ai*). In connoting a compassionate kind of care, *guanai* discursively reinforces these children's disadvantaged social positions (Sun, 2009: 55-71). Similar contradictions in public discourses around parental migration exist in other countries where parents migrate in large numbers without their children such as the Philippines (Parreñas, 2005), Poland and the Ukraine (Lutz, 2010), even as in these countries many of the parents migrate transnationally. Such inconsistencies in public discourses around parental migration play out as a cause and effect of institutional continuities and transformations as nations grapple with global economic integration (Lutz, 2010). At the same time, though, a nation's discourses about parental migration also invoke context-specific terminology and cultural references.

In Chinese, the term for 'left behind' (*liushou*) means 'to hold the fort at home' and differs from its English equivalent in indicating that the non-migrants anticipate the migrants' return (Xiang, 2007). Even so, *liushou* still resembles the English term 'left-behind' in connoting the non-migrants' passivity, vulnerability and lowly social status (Xiang, 2007; Jacka, 2014). China's discourse about a need to 'care for left-behind children' has arisen because of three intersecting factors. One is the emergence after 2000 of census statistics that focused public attention on left-behind children by revealing their burgeoning numbers (Duan et al, 2013). Secondly, from the 2000s onwards, netizens and then the state media reported ever more stories about tragedies befalling left-behind children (Nie et al., 2008; Li, 2015). Thirdly, in the 2000s and 2010s, China's left-behind children discourse was affected by the growing prominence of maternal care in public representations of family life. This heightened a trend that had been underway since the early 1980s. Chiefly, in response to declining family size and an intensifying emphasis on preparing children for competition in education and labour markets, intimacy became increasingly feminised in both state and market-endorsed 'expert' guidance about how to raise a high 'quality' (*suzhi*) child (Evans, 2010). Children who lacked a mother's care were therefore depicted by urban-based middle-class professionals as especially disadvantaged (Pissin, 2013).

After the mid-2000s the public discourse about left-behind children's need for care circulated within rural areas partly via official policies communicated 'down' to lower levels, especially to schools. For example, in July 2007 a joint notice released by the Organisation Bureau and six ministries, including the Ministry of Education required that schools in regions of high outmigration adopt special measures to care for left-behind children (Wang and Wu, 2016). Later, in January 2013, the Ministry of Education issued a notice requiring more work to care for

left-behind children in years 1–9 (Ministry of Education MOE, 2013). In the early to mid-2010s, in response to such higher-level requirements, schools in regions of high outmigration visibly displayed their commitment to care for left-behind children (Murphy, 2020). For instance, when visiting schools in rural regions during 2010–2015, I saw charts pinned on walls allocating groups of left-behind children to dedicated teacher-mentors, banners stating 'care for left-behind children' in playgrounds, and plaques outside special activity rooms called the 'home of left-behind children'. Television programmes also featured stories about initiatives to care for left-behind children run by organisations such as local branches of the Communist Youth League. This discourse had powerful effects. Indeed, in their study, Bi and Oyserman (2015) observe that the negative associations of a 'left-behind' label are such that "rural Chinese children become less optimistic … when they are guided to consider whether they are left behind", while the children's actual status as 'left-behind' or 'not left-behind' has no independent effect on their level of optimism.

In the early to mid-2010s, therefore, school-aged children in China's migratory rural regions knew that they lived in 'underdeveloped' regions where people were poorer and less 'able' than others, especially urban residents. At the same time, these children were exposed to discourses about rural adults' obligations to migrate to earn money for their children's education. Furthermore, they observed that many rural parents had migrated while leaving their children behind. However, most children had also heard of the slogan 'care for left-behind children'. This was the contradictory social space of migrancy in which rural children explored their feelings about their own material support and care when contemplating parental migration and the circumstance of being 'left behind'.

4. Methods

I talked with children and their caregivers in separate matched digitally recorded interviews in two counties in Anhui province and two counties in Jiangxi province. I visited two townships in each of the four counties and conducted the interviews with children accompanied by one of six different Chinese research assistants during repeated fieldwork trips between 2010 and 2015. In 2010 approximately one third of children in years 4, 6 and 8 (typically aged 10–14 years) in the four townships in the Anhui counties had two migrant parents. Meanwhile, 47 per cent of children in years 4, 6 and 8 in two townships in one Jiangxi county had two migrant parents, and 61 per cent of children in years 4, 6 and 8 in two townships in the other Jiangxi county had two migrant parents (Murphy, 2020). Hence, the fieldwork sites were highly migratory even for Anhui and Jiangxi, provinces where in the early 2010s, over half of rural children had at least one migrant parent (Duan et al, 2013).

In 2010–2011 I interviewed 109 children and either a parent or grandparent caregiver. I interviewed the children for the first time in 2010–2011,[1] when they had a median age of 12 years. I recruited the children for interview through rural schools with the help of their homeroom teachers, which is a teacher who has special responsibilities for a class. I communicated to the teachers my request to purposefully select children with different characteristics (gender, age, academic performance), from families differently involved in migration, and from poorer and richer families. The teachers facilitated this sampling strategy. They also obtained consent from the children's caregivers for my research assistant and me to approach the children for interview.

This article draws only on my interviews with forty-four children of two migrant parents and twenty-nine children who lived with both their parents as well as with their caregivers.[2] In addition to the interviews I conducted in 2010 and 2011, I carried out follow-up interviews in 2013, 2014 and 2015 with twelve of the children whose parents had both migrated and three of the children of stayers.[3] Before each interview my research assistants and I gave the respondents age-appropriate written and verbal explanations about the project and asked them if they were happy to participate. A research assistant joined the interviews to follow good practice in research with children by having two adults present. With one exception the research assistants were locals, though they all came from provincial academies or universities. Given the possibly unsettling appearance of a foreign researcher, these research assistants' presence helped to reassure the children. We interviewed the children in Mandarin in a corner of the playground or in a vacant office away from their classmates and teachers. Scholars caution that interviewing children in a school may position them as subordinates who should give the 'expected' answers to teacher-like figures (Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Huijsmans, Ansell and Froerer, 2021). This possibility notwithstanding, the children in this study expressed diverse views that emanated from their deeply felt personal experiences.

The interviews with the children ranged in duration from fifteen minutes to one hour and twenty minutes, with an average of approximately forty minutes. Questions to the children covered their family's migration history, care arrangements, important memories, daily life, hopes for the future, and views about parental migration and the term 'left behind'. A further question to left-behind children was whether there was any difference between themselves and their peers who lived with both parents. Children varied in how comfortable they appeared to be in the interviews. Some younger children looked nervous and answered questions in single words punctuated by long silences. I asked these children if they were happy to continue and told them that they could go if they felt tired, but they all wanted to stay. Meanwhile older, more confident and more academically successful children talked at length, steering much of the conversation themselves.

I transcribed the interviews from the recordings directly into English. I coded the data to identify recurring themes in how children in households with and without migrant parents talked about parental migration and the circumstance of children being left behind. The children's references to 'care' on the one hand and to 'a need for money' or 'material support for education' on the other emerged as salient themes. I use these recurring themes to address the questions: Did the left-behind children identify with a public discourse about 'left-behind children' and see themselves as in need of care? Did the children who lived with both their parents think that their left-behind peers needed extra care? Did children who lived with both their parents think that they enjoyed advantages over their 'left-behind' counterparts because their parents were by their side? Addressing these questions unveils complexities in the children's perceptions of the implications of parental migration for their material support and care in a social space dominated by migrancy.

5. Findings[4]

Children's views about being 'left behind' – whether as their actual situation or as a notional circumstance – reflected (1) their feelings about their family's material support for them, and (2) their feelings about the quality of the care that they received in their families – this

[1] I could not interview the caregivers of two children who lived alone.

[2] Twenty-eight out of the 109 children had a home-alone mother and migrant father, and another eight children had different family circumstances including a lone migrant mother, or a parent who had died or left through divorce.

[3] As the project from which this paper draws material focused on 'left-behind' children, most follow-up interviews were with children whose parents had migrated. The selection of children for follow-up was influenced by who local teachers and education officials could contact during my visits.

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

being an effect of the quality of their relationships with their parents and/or their grandparent caregivers. At the same time, though, children's views also varied by their academic performance, which in China usually refers to school test scores (Kipnis, 2011). As mentioned, academic performance is pivotal to rural Chinese families' and individuals' aspirations for intergenerational mobility. Meanwhile, children's academic performance can reflect their families' economic circumstances, and it can both reflect and affect the nurturing quality of the care children receive (Li and Lau, 2012). The children's perceptions of parental migration can additionally vary by their age, personality and view of their prospects.

The left-behind children in this study fell into three broad groups: children who thought that the 'left-behind' label did not apply to them because they felt cared for and supported in their studies; children who thought that the 'left-behind' label captured their need for more care; and children who expressed ambivalence about whether they counted as 'left-behind'. Meanwhile, the children of stayers fell into two groups. Some children of stayers thought that left-behind children were no worse off and even better off than they were. Others pitied left-behind children because of their lack of parental care. All the children, therefore, evaluated actual or potential parental migration with reference to their feelings about their own situations.

5.1. *'I am not left behind'*

The *liushou* children who did not feel 'left-behind' enjoyed close relationships with their migrant parents and grandparent caregivers, and they also perceived that their parents supported their studies. They saw themselves as not like *those* pitiful left-behind children. Lihong, an articulate thirteen-year-old was such a child. When I met her, she lived with her seventy-four-year-old widowed grandmother and her two sisters aged seven and three. Her parents worked in factories in Jiangsu province. When I asked her if she had ever heard the term 'left-behind' she confirmed that she had heard the word at school. However, she explained that unlike some children of migrant parents she was not left behind because:

> …I have the care and support of my paternal grandmother, my sisters, my maternal grandmother and my teacher. If there are things in my heart, then I tell others.

She described her father as having "a razor mouth and a *toufu* heart". She said she appreciated her parents' encouragement of her studies and compared her situation favourably to that of some "kids whose parents discipline them over poor grades and so they easily lose their confidence". Although she missed her parents, she felt their love as well as the care of others.

When interviewed in 2010, eleven-year-old Haoran also did not feel that he was 'left-behind'. His parents had run a clothes repair stall in Shenzhen city since before his birth. At the age of six he had moved to live with his paternal grandparents and younger male cousin. When I asked him if he was 'left-behind', he replied:

> Even though I would fit the definition of a left-behind child, those children often need special care. But I don't need this special care because every week my parents call me, and I spend the winter and summer holidays with them. When I grow up, I want to work in finance. Once when I was in Shenzhen, my dad took me to a finance building and talked with me about it. I'll need to study hard. I feel my parents support me a lot in my studies, but they don't pressure me.

In 2013, though, he told my research assistant and me that he now felt left behind 'in some respects' because he had endured disappointments and he also had not recently seen his parents. Nevertheless, by 2015 he had won a place at a top senior high school in the county. That year he said that his parents' sacrifices for him, their frequent calls to him and his father's heartfelt apology for his years of absence demonstrated to him that his parents had never 'put' him 'to one side' (*diu*) in their hearts. For the most part, therefore, Lihong and Haoran did not feel left behind because they perceived that their parents and others cared for them. These two children also valued their parents' constructive support for their education, which reassured them that they mattered.

5.2. *'I need more care'*

Other children embraced the 'left-behind' label because it expressed their feeling that they needed more care. Notably, several adversities intersected with these children's 'left-behind' status to impact on their longing for more care. The impacts of intersecting adversities can be seen in the case of an eleven-year-old boy called Sanxin, whose situation I have previously discussed in Murphy, 2020. Sanxin's parents both lived in Beijing. His mother worked in a restaurant and his father did odd jobs on construction sites. Sanxin told us that his father gambled and recalled that once when he had visited his parents in Beijing, he had gone for a stroll with his father. However, after a short distance his father had spotted a casino and disappeared inside, leaving Sanxin outside for what felt like ages. Sanxin's mother happened to walk past and see him, and thereafter his parents had fought fiercely.

Sanxin's hardships did not stop there. When he visited his parents in the city during the summer holidays, his mother often beat him with an implement for low grades or homework errors. But Sanxin said that the beatings were his mother's way of trying to *guan* him and that she was the only person who did *guan* him. This word *guan* differs from the character for 'guan' in the word for 'care' (*guanai*) discussed previously. The word used by Sanxin means 'to control', 'to discipline', 'to love in a concerned way' as well as 'to care for'. It expresses a Chinese approach to child-raising whereby, ideally, parents combine their high expectations for a child's behaviour and educational attainment with warm supportive interactions to help them meet these expectations (Chao, 1994). However, some children such as Sanxin did not experience the warm interactions, with rural Chinese children's risks of harsh treatment being the highest when their parents are poor and uneducated (Li and Lau, 2012). Sanxin also endured bullying at school from other boys. But he never told his mother or grandmother about the bullying or anything else in his heart because he did not want to worry them. He felt left behind because he was lonely.

Twelve-year-old Xiaojun also felt left behind. In 2011, he lived in a rundown house with his seventy-seven-year-old grandparents and his younger male cousin. His grandmother was gravely ill. Xiaojun's parents worked in Shenzhen. Xiaojun's grandfather told us that the boy understood that his parents' living and working conditions were poor and that he cried whenever he thought about them. The grandfather also said that the boy's mother had not returned home in over four years because she could not afford to forfeit her earnings. Xiaojun said that he felt left behind because he was unhappy, but he did not want to say why, explaining that he did not share his inner thoughts or feelings with anyone. He also said that he envied his classmates who had more money to buy snacks and that his grades were poor. Previously, his grandfather had explained that the boy refused to take calls from his parents because the questions were all about grades. Xiaojun felt left behind because of estranged family relationships and perceived poor life prospects, both of which amplified his loneliness.

Gaozan likewise felt left behind. When I met her, she was twelve years-old and lived with her grandparents and two cousins. She had previously spent seven years with her parents in Yunnan province where her father ran a small shop and her mother worked in a restaurant. Gaozan's elder brother studied at a college in a second-tier city. Gaozan said that she felt left behind because she thought that her parents didn't like her anymore. She explained that they invited her elder brother to visit them at times when they did not invite her, and that the adults would always give more food and treats to her younger male cousin than to her. Gaozan said that her grandfather was often angry and sometimes

hit her which made her miss her parents even more. She thought that her parents did not need to live as migrants because they could earn money at home instead and she felt twinges of longing whenever she saw other children with their parents. Two years later, Gaozan still said that she considered herself to be left behind and in need of more care. Moreover, she vowed that in the future she would never leave a child of her own behind.

Sanxin, Xiaojun and Gaozan clearly each saw themselves as 'left-behind' not only because their parents had migrated without them but also because they felt that they needed more care, especially companionship and affection in daily life. These children's accounts add texture to findings from quantitative research in rural China that multiple stressors intersect with a child's left-behind status to influence the intensity of their loneliness (Jia and Tian, 2010).

5.3. Ambivalence

Several other left-behind children expressed ambivalence about whether they considered themselves 'left-behind'. 'Ambivalence' refers to a state of not having feelings about something in any direction. Xiao (2014) explains that the left-behind children she met in rural Hunan were 'ambivalent' about their migrant parents: they said that they 'loved' their parents but did not feel emotionally close (*qin*) to them because they had grown accustomed to their absence. The children who expressed ambivalence about whether they felt 'left-behind' were teenagers. They resembled younger children in associating the circumstance of being 'left-behind' with care deficits. But much as they recognised that their parents' migration had created practical and emotional difficulties for them, they also thought that they did not and should not need extra care to cope with these difficulties.

Instead, these teenagers emphasized their ability to deal stoically with life's vicissitudes and to care for themselves. They perceived themselves as superior to their peers who lived with their parents because their left behind circumstances had made them more independent and more capable. For instance, they noted that peers who lived with their parents had their mothers to wash and cook for them while they could do these tasks themselves. A few teenagers also laughed at their younger selves for having been so immature, shy, or distraught at missing their migrant parents. This included some of them laughing at their memories of their tearful responses to my questions the first time I had interviewed them a few years previously. They resembled the teenage girls Gilligan (2011) interviewed in the United States who over time learnt to suppress a human desire for the emotional interdependency and authenticity that is integral to caring relationships. They did this to meet societal expectations that they should stand on their own feet and demonstrate their maturity and competence in a competitive world.

5.4. Non-Left-Behind Children's Perceptions of 'Left Behinds' – 'They enjoy advantages and don't need more care than others.'

Children of stayers similarly understood the state of being 'left-behind' in ways that reflected their feelings about their own circumstances. Children of stayers who thought that left-behind children were not disadvantaged emphasized their economic disadvantages or else the lack of nurturing care in their lives. A thirteen-year-old boy, Pengwei, emphasized the former. He lived with his parents and sister in a house that had an earthen floor and crumbling mud walls. Pengwei's father worked part-time as a postman and had taken over farming his migrant brother's land to bring in extra income. His mother was too ill to work. Pengwei asserted that left-behind children were "not at all pitiful" because they received both their parents' money and their grandparents' care. He said that many of "those 'left-behind' children" wasted their parents' hard-earned money on sweets and electronic games and they discarded notebooks before they were fully used. Meanwhile, he worried that his family's poverty might prevent him from being able to attend senior high school. He acknowledged that he could easily talk with his parents because they were with him. But he also believed that his life would turn out better if they were to migrate to support his education. Whereas some 'left-behind' children felt lonely, Pengwei felt frustrated.

The influence of migrancy on children's hopes for parental economic support for their education could also be seen in the case of Huangmei. I visited her home for the first time in 2010 when she was eleven years old. At this visit, I learned that as a boy, her father, Mr Tan had accompanied his widowed mother when she had remarried to the village. However, as the sole member of another patrilineal surname group in the village, he had endured bullying. Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution he had been beaten for having taken an apple from the production brigade's tree, leaving him crippled. Mr Tan's younger half-brother had migrated for work two decades earlier, earning enough to pay for his son's education. When Huangmei's half-cousin passed the university entrance exam in 2008, Huangmei's mother had given them a cash gift in a red envelope. But the half-cousin's mother had thrown the envelope to the ground. Huangmei said that was the exact moment she had resolved to bring honour to her family by studying hard and getting into university. When I revisited Huangmei in 2014 at her school, she told me that her mother was working in a biscuit factory in Guangdong to earn for her studies. However, when I visited her home one weekend, I learned that her mother had never migrated! Huangmei later found me in the vegetable plot to tell me that she wished her mother really would migrate to earn money for her studies. She thought that parents' migration indicated that parents saw their children as a source of hope for the family. Much as Huangmei appreciated her parents' companionship and love, she lamented that they could not migrate for her.

Some other children of stayers, though, focused on the quality of care that they believed left-behind children received, contradicting a common assumption in public discourses about left-behind children that parents necessarily provide the most nurturing care (Ye and Pan, 2011). These children compared their own parents' strictness to the gentleness and leniency with which they imagined grandparents cared for left-behind children. One such child was thirteen-year-old Cengzuan. Her mother had once worked in the city for a year when she had been in primary school. Meanwhile, her father had never worked 'outside' because his lame leg prevented him from doing heavy manual work. Nevertheless, her parents still earned a decent livelihood from farming over two hundred pigs, contracting out pig production to other farmers and co-ordinating the sales. In 2011, Cengzuan told me that she was fifth in her class and that her father would hit her if her grades fell below the top five because he wanted her to get into a top senior high school. When I asked her about any difference between her life and that of left-behind children, she replied:

> Most kids whose parents are outside are raised by their grandparents and their grandparents are more tolerant of them than my parents are of me. I sometimes envy them that. I would be happy for my parents to go out. They could do trade or other work. If they went out, my grandmother could look after me.

However, children's age also affected how strictly their parents treated them and hence their views about parental migration. When I met Cengzuan again in 2015 she attended an 'ordinary' senior high school, a humble building that sat literally and figuratively in the shadow of a grand shiny public 'key point' senior high school. She laughed when explaining that she now understood why her father used to be so severe with her. But she also said that these days her father just wanted her to find a job that would not require her to endure tiredness. She felt that her younger childhood years would have been happier and more relaxed if her parents had migrated. Nevertheless, she appreciated that her parents had tried their best to raise her.

A few children who had strained relationships with their fathers and wanted them to migrate also did not see left-behind children as especially lacking care. In 2011, twelve-year-old Hejun was one such child.

He lived with his farmer parents in a decrepit house and wore rags. In my fieldnotes I wrote: "The people in this family look like they can't care for themselves properly". All three family members slept together in a dusty wooden bed that had chickens hatching underneath the frame. Hejun said his father's migration would at least leave more room in the bed. He also complained that his father was lazy, gambled, and hit him when his test scores were low. When I revisited the village in 2015, I learned from another child respondent who lived in a nearby house that Hejun was repeating year eight for a third time. This boy faced high parental expectations but received little support in meeting them. For Hejun, parental migration signalled parents doing something useful for their children.

Ten-year-old Meiying also wanted her father to migrate. Meiying's mother was a farmer while her father worked on nearby construction sites, returning home in the evenings. Meiying told me that her father favoured her one-year-old brother and was not interested in her. This was confirmed in our conversation with Meiying's father. He said that he preferred boys to girls, had little interest in talking with his daughter and did not know or care what her interests were. Meiying liked to draw and wanted to be an artist: she showed my research assistant and me her wonderful animal sketches that her father had never seen. Meiying said that she had overheard her father talking about his plans to migrate for work when her younger brother was a little older and felt pleased at the thought that he would leave. She said that children whose parents were migrants were not in greater need of care than she was.

5.5. *'Left behind children need more care'*

Other children of stayers thought that 'left-behind' children needed extra care. These children appreciated their own parents' care of them, while recognising that rural parents did not inevitably stay with their children. Children of stayers who thought that left-behind children needed more care came from both poorer and richer families. Children from poor families emphasised the preciousness of family closeness over money whereas children from wealthier families highlighted the consequences of care deficits for left-behind children. This observation, based on a small set of cases, does not necessarily indicate a wider pattern in children's views by their families' economic circumstances. But it resonates with some sociologists' observations for other contexts that poorer and working class individuals talk about care and happiness as alternative sources of worth and meaning in life to hard numerical indicators (e.g. income or children's exam scores) (e.g. Choi and Peng, 2016; Lamont, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Reay 2000). Meanwhile, relatively advantaged individuals may be more likely to articulate views consistent with those of the professional classes in a society (Lamont, 2000; Lareau, 2003).

One twelve-year-old boy who emphasized the value of family togetherness over money lived with his parents in an old adobe house. His parents worked seven days a week from 7am to 7 pm in the village fireworks factory and he stayed with his maternal grandmother on the weekends. His mother said that when her son was in first grade, she had worked in the city for three months. But she had cried continually because she missed him so much. She had returned home shortly after her husband phoned to say that her son's grades had fallen. She explained:

> I see some kids in the village washing their own clothes in the pond and cooking their own food. I don't let my son do these things

The boy did not remember his mother ever having worked away from home. But he resolutely did not want either of his parents to migrate. He thought that the difference between his life and that of left-behind children was that he had his mother's love and care, expressed through her daily nurturing (*yang*). A few other children similarly talked about their parents' at-home care of them as a kind of blessing, explaining: "My left behind classmates envy me that my parents are at home. They cry when they talk with their parents on the phone. They tell me that I'm lucky."

Another child who appreciated his parents' presence despite the family's hardship was fourteen-year-old Mengxin. The bricks and floor of his family's house were made from mud, the roof had holes in it and sparrows sat on the interior beams. However, the family seemed happy. The parents talked about how they joked as they farmed side-by-side. Mengxin's eyes welled when he thought about the sacrifice his parents made for him by farming extra land to a total of thirteen *mu* (2.14 acres) and doing casual waged farming. He knew that his parents were trying their best to support his studies. He also knew that they were waiting for two years when he could board at senior high school and then they would migrate to try to earn more money. Mengxin appreciated that his parents had been by his side to raise (*yang*) him during his childhood and he wanted to reciprocate them for all their sacrifices and care by getting into university, finding a good job and later looking after them.

A few children from economically secure families highlighted left-behind children's care deficits and the consequences for them in ways that resembled official discourses about left-behind children. For instance, a twelve-year old boy whose father was a carpenter and whose mother ran a stall in a township said:

> Left-behind children are more introverted. They don't speak much, and they sometimes lose their temper. There's lots of bad things about parents being out. For instance, if children are at home by themselves there must be many things that they are not able to do for which they would need their parents' help, for instance, someone to give them money to buy books…[]If my mother were to go out my personality would become introverted because I'd lack care and I'd be lonely, and my grades could fall.

A thirteen-year-old girl who lived with her housewife mother and truck driver father on the main street of a township talked in a similar vein. She attended weekly general revision and English classes in the county seat, which was rare for rural *hukou* children. When explaining how left-behind children's lives differed from her own, she said that parents are notified of exam grades with a slip they must sign that the students need to return to school. "However, some left-behind kids live with illiterate grandparents so they cannot bring back the notices signed. Then the teachers tell them off, so I can see that these kids have difficulties." These two children sympathised with left-behind children, but they also distanced themselves from these peers, signalling their implicit awareness of their better-off class positions and more upwardly mobile trajectories.

6. Conclusion

Consistent with Choi et al.'s (2019) observation that children's experiences of migration are always 'situated', this article positions children vis-à-vis their families' migration strategies, economic circumstances and care-giving relationships, and in a wider migrancy-dominated environment. The findings reveal that children's interpretations of being left behind, whether as an actual or a notional state, stem from their own deeply felt needs and desires. Specifically, the children I met emphasized their need for companionship and affection in daily life. At the same time, they also expected their parents to try to support their education such that they could pursue the urban futures that migrancy compelled them to envision, with their gratitude, frustration and disappointment around this support likewise deeply felt. Such a focus on children's feelings about their families' care and support of them contributes to redressing an 'insufficient attention to feelings' in social science representations of Chinese intergenerational relations that are largely 'dominated by norms and obligations' (Liu, 2017: 1035).

The children in this study all referred directly to their own personal experience of care when reflecting on the implications of being 'left behind'. Left-behind children fell into three categories. Firstly, some

children felt that they were not 'left-behind' because they received nurturing care at home and perceived that their parents supported their education. These children therefore accepted some monetisation of parental care, but not in lieu of receiving everyday affection and companionship from significant adults. Secondly, other children considered themselves to be 'left-behind' because they felt lonely. Notably, these children shouldered multiple adversities without the care-ful support of an adult, a situation that was underscored to them by their parents' physical absence. Thirdly, some teenagers expressed ambivalence about whether they considered themselves 'left-behind'. They recognised that parental migration had brought them practical and emotional hardships, but they did not think that they needed extra care to cope. Rather, they asserted that as mature and capable individuals, they could and should rely on themselves in dealing with their hardships.

The children of stayers likewise emphasised their own experiences of care even though for them 'left-behind' was a notional state. Children of stayers who received nurturing care in their families and enjoyed parental support for their education pitied their left-behind peers because of their lack of parental care. Some of them also implicitly recognised their more advantaged class positions by echoing official discourses about left-behind children's care deficits. By contrast, other children of stayers felt that they lacked care such that left-behind children did not need more care than they did. A few of these children experienced detached treatment from at-home parents who thought they would contribute little to their family's intergenerational advancement because of their gender or grades. Meanwhile, several children in non-migrant and migrant households experienced harsh treatment from adults who had high expectations of their behaviour and attainment but lacked the educational, economic or emotional resources to support them in meeting these expectations. Whereas left-behind children who experienced care-less care longed for more and warmer parental care, children of care-less stayers wanted these parents to migrate.

Other children of stayers, though, preferred the thought of missing even care-ful parents to ongoing poverty. This recalls Parreñas's (2005) observation that some poor children in the Philippines viewed mourning migrant parents' absence as a 'luxury' that they did not have. Certainly, the pressure on children in poor families in rural China could be intense (Li and Lau, 2012). Faced with such pressure, children like Pengwei and Huangmei lamented that their parents could not migrate for their education as their classmates' parents had done. Meanwhile, Mengxin responded to family poverty by emphasizing the intrinsic value of closeness. Even he, though, anticipated a time when his parents would migrate for him. Hence, children's feelings about their material circumstances and care were shaped by the context of migrancy.

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, when viewed from children's perspectives, parental migration has implications more complex than neat delineations of costs and benefits suggest. This resonates with Menjívar's and Agadhanian's (2007: 1250) observation about the impact of husbands' migration on left-behind women in rural regions in Armenia and Guatemala, namely that: "The effects of the partner's absence cannot be easily categorised as gains or losses; examining the situation through women's eyes allows us to unveil its complexities." Children's perceptions of parental migration as both an actual and notional state demonstrate that affection and material provisioning intertwine in children's feelings about their family relationships, lives and prospects. Moreover, tracking evolutions in children's feelings about their care further complicates any dichotomization of care and money in cost-benefit analyses of migration. Such a longitudinal perspective exemplifies Zelizer's (2005) observation that the nature and intimacy of a relationship influence the meaning of any material exchange. In this study, a longitudinal approach specifically demonstrates that growing up in a social space permeated by migrancy affects the nature of children's intimate relationships and children's perceptions of their past and ongoing receipt of material support and care from their families.

This article's exploration of how different children in migrant sending regions perceive the phenomenon of parental migration and family separation additionally helps transcend conceptual binaries between stayers and migrants and between left-behinds and other stayers (e.g. Stockdale and Haartesen, 2018). The children in this research were all 'would-be' migrants (Xiang, 2014) whose lives in the present were influenced by expectations that they needed to study to prepare for their future spatial and socio-economic mobility. Analysing the views of both left-behind children and the children of stayers highlights the contradictions of migrancy's pressures on all rural families, and the complexities in children's expectations and experiences of their family's care and support of them given these pressures.

In summary, in the early to mid-2010s rural Chinese children's interpretations of being left behind converged around their feelings about the nurturing quality of the care they received in their families. When children used the term 'left behind' (*liushou*), they meant the feelings of loneliness and abandonment that children could experience if their parents had migrated without them. At the same time, though, the socio-economic status of their families also mattered to them. The children who suffered the most were 'doubly left behind'. They saw themselves as having been 'put to one side' within their families with no-one to help them while also being excluded from possibilities for a good life, usually because of limited chances for educational progression. But material deprivation and care deficits could also afflict the children of stayers, with several of these children feeling that they were no better off than their left-behind (*liushou*) counterparts. Chan observes that at a time when the Chinese state is urging urban middle-class women to have more babies to counter population aging, millions of children of migrants are "not adequately cared for, educated and supported" (Chan, 2019: 626). The unique circumstances of left-behind children's adversities notwithstanding, Chan's (2019) insight can be extended also to the many rural children who feel deeply the effects of being left behind in China's polarizing drive for economic ascendency (Rozelle and Hell, 2020).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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