

# LEFT-BEHIND



# CHILDREN IN RURAL CHINA

Impact Study of  
Rural Labor Migration on  
Left-behind Children  
in Mid-West China



Ye Jingzhong  
James Murray  
Wang Yihuan



SOCIAL SCIENCES  
ACADEMIC PRESS  
(CHINA)

It gives me great pleasure to inform you that Plan International - China, together with our partner the College of Humanities and Development/Center for Integrated Agricultural Development of the China Agricultural University has co-produced this most interesting and ground breaking research on children who have been left behind in their rural villages when their parents migrate to cities in search of work.

There has been for many years the acknowledgement that rural migrant workers have been the backbone of the labor force that provides the muscle for the rapid urban growth and development in the cities of China. This study, entitled "Left-behind Children in Rural China" provides the first insights from the perspectives of children themselves on this phenomenon. We now know, as a result of this pioneering study, that all is not well with children when their parents migrate to the cities in search of work. There are many social and psychological issues facing children that will influence their future because of what is happening to them now: when they are without the guidance, love and nurturing of their parents. It is my sincere hope that this exceptional research will activate the public and governments awareness on the need to undertake steps now to begin to address the ramifications of the cost to China's rural children who are bearing the high psycho-socio burdens of growing up without their parents.

I trust that you will find this as interesting and informative reading as I have and you will join us in our efforts to address the consequences of what has been and continues to be, a pressing issue for rural children and their families.

James R. Murray  
Country Director  
Plan International - China

<http://www.ssap.com.cn>

ISBN 7-80190-834-1



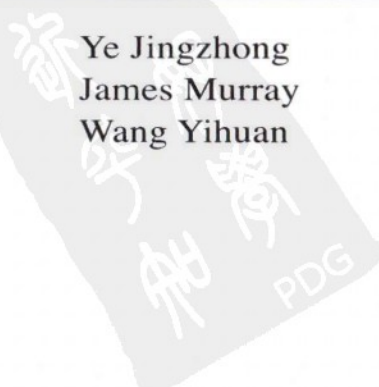
9 787801 908346 >

ISBN 7-80190-834-1/B · 092 Price: ¥78.00

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

关注留守儿童 (Left-behind Children in Rural China) / 叶敬忠, (美) 莫瑞主编. - 北京: 社会科学文献出版社, 2005. 10

ISBN 7-80190-834-1

I. 关… II. ①叶… ②莫… III. 儿童-社会问题-研究-中国-英文 IV. D432.7

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2005) 第 126618 号

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Cataloguing in Publication Data

---

Left-behind Children in Rural China — Impact Study of Rural Labor Migration on Left-behind Children in Mid-West China/October 2005

ISBN 7 - 80190 - 834 - 1/B · 092

Published by Social Sciences Academic Press (China)  
No. 10, Xianxiao Bystreet, Dongcheng District  
Beijing, China  
Postcode: 100005

© 2005 by Social Sciences Academic Press (China)

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Translator: Song Yuehua  
Cover designer: Sun Yuanming  
Printed in Beijing, China

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## Preface

The migration of surplus rural labor to urban areas is keeping up with the pace of modernization in China, and many such migrants choose to leave their children behind in the village. This results in the separation of parents and children and the emergence of a new social group – the ‘Left-behind Children’. Although relevant statistical data reported by different institutes vary from each other, all estimates reach into 20 million. Yet, despite the continuous social concern shown for this potentially vulnerable category of children, there remain few in-depth studies of this phenomenon. It is for this reason, therefore, that the College of Humanities and Development (COHD) of China Agricultural University and Plan China have cooperated since 2004 in the implementation of an Impact Study of Rural Labor Migration on Left-behind Children in Mid-West China.

Ten villages in Shaanxi, Ningxia, Hebei and Beijing were selected to be the communities for research. The study adopted an integrated sociological approach focusing on issues of development and exploring the daily lives and educational and emotional worlds of these children. The research tools included the design of a household questionnaire-based survey, case study and key informant interviews, a wealth ranking exercise and a record of daily routines, and semi-structured interviews, workshops and role play sessions. The conclusions drawn are based on a comparative analysis of the current status of both ‘non-left-behind’ and ‘left-behind’ children, and on an examination of the situations of these left-behind children before and after their parents migrated. The study contains both statistical data analysis as well as detailed cases.

This book, which presents the outcomes of the study, falls into three parts. The first consists of a general description of the research background, literature review, research methods, research process and results, and conclusions based on the investigation of ten selected research areas. The second part is made up of ten community-based sub-reports, each dealing with the situation of left-behind children. The contrasting research areas were chosen in order to highlight differences that might arise because of differing natural conditions, social organization, economy and culture. Each community report contains case studies dealing not only with the children in question but also their guardians and school teachers. More detailed data drawn from group interviews with left-behind children and their guardians, and letters written by left-behind children to their parents, are found in annexes to the sub-reports. The third part of the book consists of the appendix for the whole book wherein the research questionnaire and the outline for key informant and semi-structured group interviews are presented.

The overall aim of this book, then, is to provide a general characterization and analysis of the situation of left-behind children in China. It is our hope that, on the basis of these empirical findings, we can contribute to the betterment of social policy and other measures orientated to the problems currently experienced by left-behind children. The book is issued in Chinese and English versions. It may serve as a useful reference book for researchers grappling with the plight of these children; a practical aid for those engaged in the field of development studies and policy, as well as the management, research and practice of children work; and a guide for those responsible for implementing international community development and children development projects. Undoubtedly there still exist a number of lacunae in our understanding of left-behind children which can only be filled through the carrying out of more research of this kind. We are confident that the publication of this book will no doubt arouse wider concerns over the situation of left-behind children.

The volume is a collective product of the research team. The participants in the research included the following:

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	James Murray	Plan China	Country Director
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This English version has been translated from the original Chinese version, the translators are: Xiao Wangxing, Hou Yannan, He Ping, Li Fan, Wang Chunyu, Wu Huifang and Lu Jixia. The English language editors are Ann Long and Wang Yihuan.

The research and publication of the Chinese and English versions of this book have been made possible by the support of Plan China. We would like to thank Plan China for its long-term sponsorship of community development focusing upon children and women in rural China.

We would also like to thank sincerely all those who have so willingly cooperated with this research. They include the children, guardians, school teachers, doctors, shop owners, community managers, and leaders of the towns and the counties involved in the research. And we present our admiration to all those children whose parents migrate for reasons of family livelihood, because they work industriously in a comparatively harsh situation, fighting against numerous difficulties in life and studying enthusiastically with their family members, school teachers and partners, and largely without parental guidance.

Ye Jingzhong  
May 2005, Beijing



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## Measures

1 hectare = 15 mu

1 USD = 8.2 RMB Yuan (approximately in 2005)



**PART I LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN  
IN MID-WEST CHINA**





## **Chapter 1**

# **Impact Study of Rural Labor Migration on Left-behind Children in Mid-west China**

### **1.1 Research Background and Research Problem**

Since the beginning of the 1980's, the pace of modernization in China has led to increased migration to urban areas. This movement of rural people for wage labor can be seen on the one hand as a rational choice for poor farmers, but on the other, as a consequence of industrialization and urbanization. The purpose of migration for farmers lies in their pursuit of cash income, getting to know the outside world, and most importantly to earn money for their children's education, with the expectation that they will make a better life for themselves than their parents were able to do.

In many western countries migrants are able to buy housing in the new locality and claim the same rights as the local population. They are protected by the law, receive welfare benefits from local government, have the same opportunities for employment and education and in principle enjoy the same rights as local people. However, things work differently in China. Due to financial constraints and the existing 'dual system' of rural-urban relationships, farmers face educational and other difficulties when they migrate. These can be in housing, educational fees for transferring their children to new schools, transportation and so on. For these reasons, many farmers leave their children behind when they migrate for work and have to entrust their care to others. Thus, a new and weak group, referred to in this document as 'left-behind children', has emerged in rural areas of China.

According to official statistics, there are about 150 million farmers presently working in urban areas in China. The figure is increasing by five million each year. The fifth Population Census indicates that the number of left-behind children reaches to 20 million and this tendency is still on the increase. Research conducted by Dr. Wu Ni and colleagues (2004) from the China Central Institute for Education in five counties of Gansu, Hebei and Jiangsu Provinces, indicates that 31.5% of the sample children from primary and middle schools had either mother or father away working and 16.2% had both parents away. These figures account for 47.7% of the children sampled (Educational Development Research Department website, 2004), in other words, about half of the children in school were left-behind children. A survey in Caowuzhen Primary School in Jingshan County of Hubei Province showed that of more than 1,000 students, almost 50% had parents who worked on a temporary basis in urban areas (Rural China Website, April 13, 2004). The above figures show the large number of left-behind children in rural China.



Some of these children are cared for by one of the parents (usually mother), and some by grandparents, relatives or neighbors who thus miss the care and education of their parents. Research indicates that they are physically and psychologically affected by their parents' migration and in some cases their rights are abused. In the last year attention has been drawn to the fact that some get involved in criminal activity. With the pace of urbanization the numbers of left behind children are growing. This is therefore not a temporary but a long term controversial issue. The 'three-agrarian' issues - agriculture, rural areas and farmers - have attracted much attention and have been a bottle neck to development in China. Education of the next generation of rural farmers therefore becomes crucial to tackling the 'three-agrarian' issues.

Migrating to urban areas for wage labor work has increased farmers' incomes and accelerated the economic development of urban areas, but it has also generated a fluctuating living and educational environment for rural children. What the impacts and implications are of migration on left-behind children has thus not only become crucial to the growth of children, but also important for the sustainable development of rural education and holistic society. However, although there exists rich reporting from the media on left-behind children and some academic studies that have touched upon the numbers involved and the types of guardians and impacts on children's education, psychology and behavior, there is a lack of systematic in-depth research on left-behind children. Some of the existing studies used mainly questionnaire survey methods in the rural schools and lacked any rural community-based in-depth analysis.

In September 2004, with the support of Plan China, the College of Humanities and Development of China Agricultural University formed a research team to study the 'Impact of Rural Labor Migration on Left-behind Children in Mid-West China'. The team carried out research in ten villages of Shaanxi, Ningxia, Hebei and Beijing. The research explores the changes that occurred in the children's lives, study and thinking after their parents migrated for work and the impacts this had on their physical and psychological development. The research, we hope, will make an important contribution to understanding left-behind children and will draw the attention of government organizations and academic institutes to resolving the problems they face in obtaining the same care as other children in their communities.

## **1.2 The Present State of Research**

There is little systematic empirical research on the impact of migration on the children of migrants, either for China or internationally. We limit our discussion here to existing domestic media, institutional, and research coverage of the issue.

### 1.2.1 Overview of domestic media coverage on left-behind children

Although the issue has existed for several years, it was not until a serious incident hit the media headlines in Sichuan Province in early 2004, that it was seen as a new social issue in the context of social transition. The incident involved a left behind child and was attributed to a lack of adult care. It aroused concern in general over such children and experts in various fields, including sociology and pedagogy, started to cast their eyes on the issue.

The following is an overview of the domestic media coverage.

#### 1.2.1.1 Problems met by left-behind children

The issue has frequently been covered by the mass media, including TV (CCTV and local TV stations), newspapers (*China Youth Daily*, *China Education Daily*, *Legal Daily*, *Yangzhou Evening News*; *Ningbo Evening News*) and websites (*Xinhua Net* and *Education Net*). Such coverage reflects society's growing concern over the problems involved.

1.2.1.1.1 *Chutian Metropolis Daily* (2001-11): A thirteen-year-old girl was found hanged in the dormitory of Yuyan Middle School in Qingquan Township, Xishui County, Hubei Province. Her mother and elder sister were permanent migrants and she lived with her father. Because of the long-term lack of maternal love, she became asocial, introverted, reticent and unhappy. She panicked over the changes occurring at adolescence and without correct guidance various unhealthy emotions developed that resulted in her suicide.

1.2.1.1.2 *Xinhua Net* (2005-02-01): In February 2004, a couple from Duchang County, Jiangxi Province working in Dongguan City, Guangdong Province put their child Jiang Menglan in the care of the wife's younger sister. On February 19, the child, studying in Wanhui Middle School, fell from a two meter high bed while playing games in the dormitory. Due to the lack of medical care, the internal brain injury was not detected in time, resulting in the death of the child. The couple grieved over the death and continuously repeated: 'We wish we had been at home and nothing would have happened.'

1.2.1.1.3 *China Youth Daily* (2004-5-26): In March 2004, a thirteen-year-old young girl in Junior Middle School in a township of Fushun County, Sichuan Province, gave birth to a child without anyone knowing. The under-age girl became a mother unexpectedly.

1.2.1.1.4 *China Youth Daily* (2004-11): In June 2004, a girl in Grade Four of primary school in Huangmei County, Hubei Province, whose parents were

temporarily working in other provinces, was hanged by her hot-tempered grandmother for talking back.

1.2.1.1.5 *Xinhua Net* (2005-02-01): On December 6, 2004, a rural woman killed her niece and an innocent young pupil by putting toxic poison on lollipops, only because she was reluctant to look after the girl left in her care by her migrant parents. The incident raised strong public repercussion in the local area and reflected the hidden worry over the living conditions of some rural left-behind children.

1.2.1.1.6 *Xinhua Net* (2004-08-09): A teacher in a village primary school of Sichuan Province expressed his concerns about left-behind children. He thought that because most of them were raised by grandparents and lacked parental love, they became relatively introverted. The children in junior grades were mostly naughty and became eccentric when entering senior grades and liked neither talking nor studying.

1.2.1.1.7 *Sichuan Daily* (2004-12-07): A local survey on left-behind children in Meishan City, Sichuan Province, found that children who lived away from their parents were inclined to be coddled and unchecked. The grandparent generation or temporary guardians tended to neglect the children's physical and mental health and education of character, leading to an absence of moral or ethical education. Children whose fathers worked outside were shy and not as confident or diligent as other children. Those whose mothers worked outside were not as virtuous or loving and lacked good habits of life and study. Some children in their adolescence slept with the parent staying at home, and others took up unhealthy habits, for example, fighting, stealing, or even taking drugs.

Besides these cases, there are others too numerous to count from many Provinces and Autonomous Regions. All the left-behind children concerned suffered serious psychological, physiological and security problems or even lost their lives because their parents were working away and their guardians could not take care of them. Although such reported incidents are extreme cases, they attract attention to the welfare of left-behind children. Currently, the government and other relevant institutions have started to adopt measures to reduce or eliminate the potential risks to such children.

#### 1.2.1.2 *Counter measures adopted by relevant institutions and departments*

Since the promulgation of 'Several Comments on Further Strengthening and Reforming the Ethical Development of Juveniles by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council' on February 26, 2004, some cities have made and applied various relevant policies and measures, and competent education departments in