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中国留守儿童与父母的沟通：关系维系视角（英文版）

盛颖妍 著

Communication Between Left-Behind Children and
Their Migrant Parents in China:
A Relational Maintenance Perspective

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内容提要

本书从三层关系维系模型(自我层面、系统层面、外缘层面)出发探究中国留守儿童与父母之间的沟通和亲子关系质量。具体而言,本书探索了留守儿童如何想象与父母的交流(自我);父母和留守儿童使用何种关系维系行为来应对分离状态(系统);来自祖父母的支持如何帮助留守儿童及其父母维持远距离亲子关系(外缘)。本书的目的一方面在于拓展想象交流、关系维系行为和家庭支持方面的理论研究,另一方面在于帮助留守儿童及其父母维系远距离亲子关系并提升关系质量。本书的结论建议:在年龄、沟通频率、团聚频率等因素受控制的情况下,留守儿童的想象交流更多用于缓解压力和提升自我认知时,留守儿童从父母处感受到更多愉快的和任务分享型的关系维系行为时,其亲子关系质量更佳。

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中国留守儿童与父母的沟通:关系维系视角:英文 /
盛颖妍著. —上海:上海交通大学出版社,2021.12
ISBN 978-7-313-25288-3

I. ①中… II. ①盛… III. ①农村-儿童教育-
研究-中国-英文 IV. ①G61

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2021)第 164341 号

中国留守儿童与父母的沟通:关系维系视角(英文版)

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出版发行: 上海交通大学出版社

邮政编码: 200030

印 刷: 江苏凤凰数码印务有限公司

开 本: 710mm×1000mm 1/16

字 数: 236 千字

版 次: 2021 年 12 月第 1 版

书 号: ISBN 978-7-313-25288-3

定 价: 69.00 元

地 址: 上海市番禺路 951 号

电 话: 021-64071208

经 销: 全国新华书店

印 张: 11.75

印 次: 2021 年 12 月第 1 次印刷

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Preface

This book was based on a two-year study of left-behind children in Henan Province of China; their communication with migrant parents, their imagined interactions with migrant parents, the relational maintenance behaviors between parents and children, the support provided by caregiving grandparents, and how these factors work together to influence the long-distance parent-child relationship.

Completing this book was at times overwhelming and arduous, definitely an accomplishment that would have been impossible to achieve on my own without the support and encouragement from many people. I devote this section to acknowledging the individuals who provided assistance during the completion of this book. To begin with, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Mei-Chen Lin, for her consistent helpfulness, patience, consideration, and meticulousness. I greatly appreciate the constructive feedback, detailed instruction, valuable time, and kind encouragement that she has generously given to me as I wrote this book. She went above and beyond what was expected of an advisor, and I am grateful for all that I learned from her. Gratitude also goes to Dr. Amy Reynolds, the Dean of College of Communication and Information at Kent State University, for offering me great support to finish the book, to Dr. Bei Cai, for proofreading the questionnaire and offering suggestions for revision, and to Dr. Kun Xu, for providing help and suggestions on statistical analysis.

Next, I would like to acknowledge my dear parents for their support, not only during this process but also throughout my whole life. I am forever indebted to my parents more than anyone for instilling in me a reverence for knowledge and respect for education. They have always motivated me to do more than I thought I could in this lengthy and challenging journey. I thank my husband, son, parents-in-law, aunts and uncles for their love, caring, support, and understanding.

Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge my employer at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), notably the management and staff

from the Personnel Division and School of Journalism and Communication of SISU. Specifically, I am very grateful to the Deputy Director of Personnel Division, Prof. Qiuyan Zhao for her kind support; my lifetime mentor, Dr. Zuxin Zhang for his practical advice; and Dr. Lingning Wang, who kindly supported me in various ways.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the management and staff at the following for assisting me during the data collection process: Dengzhou Municipal Government, Dengzhou Bureau of Education, Dengzhou Chunfeng School, Dengzhou Siyuan School, and Shilin No.1 Middle School. I thank my research assistants, Minaier Tuolai and Gaowenxin Tang, for helping collect and enter the data. I thank the participating left-behind children for sharing their thoughts and feelings in the survey.

Finally, I would like to thank some of my close friends, especially Liangtao Ni, Jieyun Liu, Hong Xu, Miao Liu, Aisha Tengku, Peiyu Liu, Xueping Li, Weiping Zhang, Qingyun Meng, and Mark Miller for their help, encouragement, motivation, and emotional support throughout this challenging endeavor.

I dedicate this book to my son Zhanqi to show him that perseverance leads to accomplishments.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Millions of Chinese farmers have flocked to cities in search of better job opportunities in the last three decades as a result of uneven development in urban and rural areas in China. A report of the National Bureau of Statistics of China stated that the total number of migrant workers had reached 288.36 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). When the labor migrants left their children behind with extended family members or friends to work in the cities, a vulnerable group known as left-behind children came into being (Chan, 2009).

The term *left-behind children* was defined as “children under 18 who have been left behind at their original residence while one or both parents migrate into other places for work and have not been living together with them for at least six months” (F. L. Zhou & Duan, 2006). About 37.7% of rural children under 18, estimated at 61 million, were left behind when their parents migrated to cities to work (All-China Women’s Federation [ACWF], 2013), and the numbers have grown steadily in China’s vast rural areas. Left-behind children were recently redefined as

children under 16 who have been left behind at their original residence while both parents migrate into other places for work or one of the parents migrates into other places for work and the other one has no capacity of parental custody (State Council of China, 2016).

This definition reduced the number of left-behind children to 6.97 million across the country (Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, 2018).

A 2014 national survey showed that 46.74% of left-behind children were separated from both parents; among those, 32.67% of left-behind children lived with grandparents, and 10.7% lived with others (i.e., relatives, friends, or neighbors) (ACWF, 2013). In the western and central regions of China, the proportion of the left-behind children living with grandparents was as high as 73% (S. Z. Lu & Lu, 2006). The most recent national report indicated that 96% of the left-behind children were taken care of by their grandparents (Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, 2018). When entrusted with the care of left-behind children, grandparents often experience difficulties providing the psychological

and emotional support children need. In a survey in Sichuan, the province with the highest number of left-behind children, 80% of caregiving grandparents had difficulty satisfying the psychological needs (e.g., affection, companionship, and communication) of their grandchildren because of their physical weakness, lower educational levels, and poorer living conditions; in fact, 15% said they did not care about such needs (China Youth Research Center, 2008). Compared to children living with both parents, left-behind children became less attached and more depressed when their need for love and communication was unsatisfied by both migrant parents and caregiving grandparents (Chan, 2009).

Compared to children living with parents, left-behind children were furthermore reported to experience greater psychological and behavioral problems caused by long-term separation from their parents (Xiang, 2007). A study of 250 junior high school students who were left behind for more than six months in Jichun County, Hubei Province, showed that more than half of them had difficulties adapting to the left-behind life, 16.6% felt abandoned, 12.3% had problems of expressing difficulties or obtaining help, and 6.5% felt anguish about being left behind (Liang, 2004). In 2004 a survey conducted by the Women's Federation of Meishan City, Sichuan Province, sampled nearly 12,000 students, 51.2% of whom were left-behind children. The report suggested that left-behind children experienced high drop-out rates, poor academic performance, and problems in socialization and psychological development (X. Li, 2004). Without proper intervention, these problems, taken together, might result in emotional symptoms, peer problems, and antisocial behaviors (F. Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010).

The Chinese government issued a white paper on medical reform and the draft of a social insurance law, both acknowledging the needs of migrants (Chan, 2009). The social insurance law specified the rights of migrant workers to social insurance for the first time. To reduce the financial burden of rural children, the Chinese government has initiated the "two-waiver and one-subsidy" policy (Chan, 2009). Students in the poorest rural areas are no longer required to pay textbook and miscellaneous fees, and boarding students with financial difficulties are subsidized. In addition, many programs in China have been designed to improve these children's economic status, physical health, school performance (Luo et al., 2008), mental health, and psychological well-being (Jia & Tian, 2010).

1.1 Problem Statement and Rationale of the Study

Several scholars have examined relationships based on the underlying principle that relationships do not simply exist; instead, they must be maintained through various behaviors (e.g., Canary & Zellely, 2000). From a relational maintenance perspective, scholars posit that people keep their close relationships intact through communication, which reflects how relational partners attempt and achieve longevity and contentment in their relationships (Bute, Donovan-Kicken, & Martins, 2007).

One of the most personal and enduring relationships experienced by an individual is the parent-child relationship (Golish, 2000). Unfortunately, “of all the relation types studied, perhaps the ones most neglected, overlooked, or taken for granted by individuals are those of familial origin” (Vogl-Bauer, 2003, p. 31). It is important that parents and their children maintain relationships with one another to ensure the development of physically and psychologically healthy children; however, parenting and communication have become more complex in left-behind children’s families because of changing roles and geographical dispersion.

Contemporary scholarship has primarily focused on maintaining two types of long-distance relationships (LDRs) (Stafford, 2005, 2011): romantic and child-parent (Stafford, 2004). Given the scarcity of research on long-distance dispersive families, more research has been conducted on long-distance romantic relationships than other forms of LDRs (e.g., Janning, Gao, & Snyder, 2018). Definitions of *long-distance parent-child relationships* have been absent from the literature. Children are generally considered only secondary in long-distance romantic relationships, that is, in terms of the way their mere existence or age affects long-distance couples; and only a few researchers have examined the long-distance family as a whole (Stafford, 2005, 2011). In addition to children of long-distance partners, parents and children may be separated when the parents are no longer romantically involved—as in the case of divorced or never-married partners. Children may live apart from one parent because of court restrictions or other factors limiting access to that parent; long-distance parent-child relationships may also occur because of incarceration or military deployment. Little research has been conducted to examine the long-distance parent-child relationship when two parents are away and the child is under the

care of a surrogate.

Given the complexity and difficulty of LDRs involving left-behind children and their migrant parents, a systems perspective may facilitate full understanding of the relationship and its maintenance. A metaperspective of maintenance has demonstrated how all existing relational maintenance behaviors can be subsumed within four maintenance supracategories: the self, the system, the network, and the culture (Dainton, 2003). *The self* refers to the intrapersonal maintenance, which is psychologically based (e.g., imagined interaction proposed by Honeycutt [2002]); *the system* refers to the dyadic maintenance (e.g., five relational maintenance typologies proposed by Stafford and Canary [1991]); *the network* refers to the relational maintenance facilitated by third parties (e.g., family support); and *culture* is conceptualized as providing context for the relationship (e.g., maintenance influenced by belief systems) (Dainton, 2003). In this study I used the metaperspective of maintenance as a framework and looked mainly at the first three levels: (a) the self, that is, imagined interactions used by left-behind children on parent-child communication, based on Honeycutt's (2002) imagined interaction; (b) the system, that is, relational maintenance behaviors used by migrant parents and left-behind children to maintain the long-distance parent-child relationship; and (c) the network, that is, grandparents' support for the maintenance of the parent-child relationship. The possible cultural influence, although unexamined in this study, is addressed in the discussion section and will be included in future research.

A form of intrapersonal communication in which individuals imagine themselves in recent, anticipated, or hypothetical interactions with others (Honeycutt, 2010b), Imagined Interactions (IIs) constitute a type of mental imagery and cognition in which people think about anticipated encounters with others as well as review prior conversations. IIs have been frequently reported in the relational domain with numerous studies demonstrating their attributes and functions in personal relationships (e.g., Honeycutt, 2003; Honeycutt, Vickery, & Hatcher, 2015). Individuals have reported IIs involving relational partners; romantic partners, friends, family members, authority figures, people from work, and former and prospective relational partners (Honeycutt, 1989c). Studies have provided support for the usefulness of IIs in allowing individuals to continue their relationships even when circumstances prevent real interaction (Allen, 1994), yet little is known about how IIs function in the

long-distance parent-child relationship.

Relational maintenance has been conceptualized as the activities that occur in interpersonal relationships after the relationship is developed and before it is terminated (Stafford, 1994). Although many studies of relational maintenance have been focused on voluntary relationships, such as friendships (e.g., Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015) and romantic relationships (e.g., Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011), a host of researchers have investigated relational maintenance in a variety of nonvoluntary family relationships, including those between siblings (e.g., Goodboy, Myers, & Patterson, 2009), grandparents and grandchildren (e.g., Mansson, Myers, & Turner, 2010), and young adult children and parents (e.g., Myers & Glover, 2007; Vogl-Bauer, Kalbfleisch, & Beatty, 1999); yet little is known about the relationship maintenance of parents and younger children at a distance.

From the perspective of relational maintenance, support involves giving advice and offering comfort and reassurance (Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000). In a study of opposite-sex friendships, researchers found that support was one of the most frequently used maintenance behaviors (Messman et al., 2000); furthermore, the conceptualization of support appears to overlap with the maintenance behaviors of assurance and advice (Messman et al., 2000; Stafford, 2003). Social support has three categories: emotional support, which includes making someone feel loved and supported; instrumental support, which includes giving assistance to accomplish tasks; informational support, which is the provision of education and knowledge (Fahey & Shenassa, 2013; Negron, Martin, Almog, Balbierz, & Howell, 2013). Grandparents can be significant providers of all these types of social support (Burgess, 2015). The researchers of intergenerational support have examined the support exchange of grandparents and grandchildren (e.g., Chen & Jordan, 2018; Cong & Silverstein, 2012; Hoff, 2007), but limited attention has been paid to grandparents' support in helping maintain the parent-child relationship.

1.2 The Goal of the Study

Accordingly, the main goal of this study was to examine the communication and relationship quality of China's left-behind children and their migrant parents from the systems approach of relationship maintenance at three levels (i.e., the *self* context, the *system* context, and the *network* context). If the

overlapping theoretical space of IIs (i. e., the *self* context), relational maintenance behaviors (i.e., the *system* context), and social support (i.e., the *network* context) offers a potential source of new tools for predicting and explaining parent-child relationships occurring in the specific context of the phenomenon of left-behind children in China, then it deserves careful examination.

The first objective of this study was to extend Honeycutt's (2002) previous research by focusing specifically on the IIs used to maintain parent-child relationships and the manner in which it in turn affects parent-child relationship quality. IIs serve six basic functions: (a) maintaining relationships, (b) managing conflict, (c) rehearsing messages, (d) aiding people in self-understanding by clarifying thoughts and feelings, (e) providing emotional catharsis by relieving tension, and (f) compensating for lack of real interaction (Honeycutt, 2003; Honeycutt & Ford, 2001); notably, any combination of these functions can occur simultaneously. IIs help maintain relationships as people think about their relational partners outside their physical presence. Researchers tend to ignore IIs used in parent-child dyads because of the assumption that parents and children live together and have plenty of chances to communicate face to face. By looking at the IIs used in left-behind children and migrant parents' relational communication, this study may add empirical investigation to the domain of II research.

Another primary objective of this study was to extend the existing literature about relational maintenance in long-distance parent-child dyads. Specifically, in this study the researcher examined the relational maintenance behaviors used by left-behind children and their migrant parents and their association with parent-child relationship quality. In relational maintenance research, little attention has been focused on young children and both parents in geographic dispersion. Various forms of LDRs (e.g., romantic relationship and friendship) have received increased and adequate attention in the interpersonal communication domain, but few researchers in this area have explored the parent-child relationship (Vogl-Bauer, 2003), which also requires maintenance by communication and relational behaviors despite its nonvoluntary nature.

Third, the aim of this study was to access the manner in which grandparents' support can help maintain the long-distance parent-child relationship and improve the relationship quality. Previous research on family support has seldom touched upon the grandparents' support to help maintain the

parent-child relationship, making it an aspect worth investigating.

Next, the study also offers an exploration of the communication between left-behind children and their migrant parents as well as the way it relates to left-behind children's IIs and affects the long-distance parent-child relationship quality.

The final aim of this study was to test the way IIs, relational maintenance behaviors, and family support work together to affect the long-distance parent-child relationship by applying a systems perspective to the research domain of relationship maintenance.

In the next chapter, I will introduce the current status of Chinese left-behind children; summarize the three main factors of the four-level metaperspective of relational maintenance that guided this study; identify and explain empirical findings of II in terms of maintaining interpersonal relationships; highlight relevant literature on long-distance relational maintenance; summarize the past studies addressing family support; and pose relevant hypotheses and research questions for the study.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The current chapter provides an overview and summary of relevant literature pertaining to each hypothesis and research question. First, an introduction of left-behind children and migrant parents in China is provided. Second, an overview of the main theoretical framework (i.e., four-level metaperspective of relational maintenance) used in the study is explained, followed by a summary and related research on the first three levels: (a) the *self* level (i.e., left-behind children's IIs with migrant parents), (b) the *system* level (i.e., relational maintenance behaviors between left-behind children and their migrant parents), and (c) the *network* level (i.e., caregiving grandparents' support). Third, the relevant hypotheses and research questions of the study are offered at the end of the chapter.

2.1 Left-Behind Children and Migrant Parents in China

The following sections elaborate on the phenomenon of left-behind children, definition of left-behind children, and communication between left-behind children and their migrant parents identified in the current literature.

2.1.1 Phenomenon of Left-Behind Children

The mass movement of more than 200 million rural laborers to China's cities has been described as the greatest internal migration in history (Chan, 2009). Migrant workers have built the gleaming skyscrapers, superhighways, and shopping malls that have transformed China over the last three decades; they have worked for hours on end in stifling factories to produce the electronics, clothes, and shoes demanded by Western consumers.

Migrant workers seek jobs in big cities because they want to build better lives for themselves and their families. A massive oversupply of labor lies in the Chinese countryside, where employment opportunities are few and far between and income levels are roughly one sixth of those in the cities (Zhu, 2008). Few signs indicate that the disparity in rural and urban China will diminish in the