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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Growing Up with Distant Parents: Socialization and Alienation of "Left-Behind" Children in Rural China

**Abstract** An increasing number of left-behind children has emerged in rural China as a result of the large-scale migration of rural farmers to urban cities since the 1990s. With the absence of parent(s) from the family, the left-behind children face crises in socialization and their relationships with their parents are threatened by physical distance. This paper investigates how Chinese left-behind children negotiate the missing roles of parents and how the parent-child relations in such families change over time, through in-depth case studies of two left-behind children with different family backgrounds in rural Henan province.

**Keywords** left-behind children, rural China, parent-child relations, socialization

## Introduction

With a continuous population flow in the contemporary world, migrant and immigrant families have become a prominent social phenomenon in many countries, attracting the attention of researchers and policymakers. In the process of migration, families undergo profound transformations that are often complicated by extended periods of separation between family members (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Separation between parents and children is normative in the migratory journey due to various reasons, such as immigration policy restrictions, financial constraints, sociolinguistic or cultural maladaptations, etc. (Parreñas, 2005; Xiang, 2007). While a substantial body of literature has emerged to examine the effects of migration on the well-being of children who accompany their parents (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Toyota, Yeoh,

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& Nguyen, 2007), little research has been done with regards to family separation arising out of the migrant experience and its effect on the children who are left at home.

Left-behind children emerged in rural China as a result of the large-scale migration of rural farmers to urban cities since the 1990s, which has had a great impact on macro-level economic and social transformations as well as micro-level family relationships and structures in Chinese society. The flourishing of the market economy in the past two decades had created a huge demand for labor in Chinese cities, but due to the rigid household registration system (*hukou*), migrant farmers who flowed to the cities typically engaged in unstable, low-pay manual work and were excluded from basic social benefits in the cities (Li, 2004; Chen, 2005), of which education was the one of paramount importance. In the current *hukou* scheme, urban public schools in China only enroll local urban children and are not open to children of rural migrant workers who are identified with a rural *hukou*. Even though the Chinese government has recently issued policies to allow migrant children to attend urban public schools up to the ninth grade, the strict protocols to get rural children into urban schools, popularly called "the five certificates,"[1] together with additional fees, pose insurmountable challenges to some migrant families (Liu, 2007). Because of the severe constraints in access to urban schools, many rural laborers choose to move to the cities by themselves, leaving their children behind in their home villages.

With the absence of parent(s) from the family, the left-behind children face crises in socialization and their relationship with their parents is threatened by physical distance. Decades of research have shown that parent-child relationships and family cohesion play important roles in children's education and development (Parsons & Bales, 1998; Coser, 1964). Positive and nurturing parent-child relationships have been reported to be associated with better academic performance and fewer behavioral problems (Fuligni, 1998; Tseng, 2004). On the other hand, literature on family structure shows that family separations in the form of maternal and/or paternal absence may lead to family friction and negative psychological outcomes for the children (Wolkind & Rutter,

[1] The five certificates refer to a temporary job certificate for the migrant parents, a temporary residence certificate, a one-child certificate, a housing ownership certificate or rent contract, and a household registration book. A large number of rural migrant workers find it difficult to obtain all these certificates.

1985; Seltzer, 1994).

This paper attempts to investigate how Chinese left-behind children negotiate the missing roles of parents and how the parent-child relations in such families change over time, through in-depth case studies of two left-behind children from different family backgrounds in rural Henan province. Specific questions this study seeks to address are: 1. What impact does family separation have on parent-child relations in rural migrant families? 2. How do rural left-behind children situated in different social contexts experience family separation?

## Existing Scholarship on Rural Left-Behind Children in China

In 2014 an estimated 273 million peasant workers (*nong min gong*) were living and working away from their home villages (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2015). According to China's 2010 Census, there were 61 million children below the age of 14 in rural areas living in migrant households, making up 37.7% of all rural children or 21.9% of Chinese children in total. Of these left-behind children, 47% had two migrant parents, 36% had a migrant father, and 17% had a migrant mother. The majority of them lived with grandparents or other relatives in the home village, with a surprisingly high percentage of 3.37% or two million living alone (Su, 2013).

The emergence of left-behind children in rural China has drawn considerable attention from the Chinese media, scholars, and policymakers alike. Since the 2000s, media reports and scholarly research in China have heightened the public awareness of left-behind children, who were typically portrayed as a neglected group living amidst poverty and insecurity (Kong, 2012; Xu, 2004) and not receiving enough care in terms of food, clothing, safety, emotional needs, academic support, and behavioral monitoring (Duan & Wu, 2009; Fan & Sang, 2005; Zhou, Sun, Liu, & Zhou, 2005). The most recent and influential reports related to the group suicide of four rural left-behind children in a migrant family with no caregivers in Bijie, Guizhou province, on June 11, 2015 (Bai, 2015, June 12), poignantly bringing the issue of left-behind children into the national spotlight. Due to the visibility of these extreme cases, Chinese literature on the left-behind children has tended to problematize left-behind children as a whole and overemphasize their deplorable circumstances without delving into the

authentic life worlds of these children (Pan & Ye, 2009).

Publications about the health and schooling of left-behind children in rural China have also appeared in English journals in recent years, though mostly written by Chinese scholars. They are largely empirical studies aimed at examining the impact of parents' migration status (who migrates), point and duration of separation (how old was the child at the time of separation and how long was the separation), as well as the guardianship arrangements (who were the caregivers) on the psychological development and educational performance of the left-behind children (Zhou, Murphy, & Tao, 2014; Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010; Liu, Li, & Ge, 2009). Findings in general indicate that left-behind children are at risk of developing emotional/behavior problems, particularly if they are left behind early in life, separated from mothers or both parents, for longer periods, in the care of young caregivers or non-relatives with poor education and low socioeconomic status, and have less teacher support. At the same time, a small number of studies have presented a mixed picture of the possible effects of parents' migration on the wellbeing of left-behind children. For example, Chen et al. (2009) found, rather surprisingly, that some children's educational performance improves after their father out-migrates. Lu (2012) attributed their educational attainment to the improvements in family wealth, the actions of migrant parents in maintaining contact, and the actions of guardians in compensating for the absence of parent(s). These studies suggested that parental migration is not necessarily an injurious situation for youth development. More comprehensive information about left-behind children's life trajectories and their multilevel social contexts is called for to enable a fuller understandings of the left-behind experiences.

While most of the existing literature has relied on anecdotal stories or survey studies to draw policy implications about left-behind children in rural China, there have been few studies to date, either in the Chinese and English scholarship, which have attempted to examine the quality of parent-child relations in rural migrant families through in-depth sociological probes. Furthermore, none of the previous studies considered how social contexts that individual left-behind children are situated in may impact their relations with parents and shape their life trajectories in different directions. This study aims to fill the gap.

## Methods

### Data Collection Procedures

This paper is based on case studies of two rural migrant families, the Liangs and the Zhaos, from Henan province, China. Henan was selected because it is famous for its large population of migrant workers and because the researcher has extensive personal networks there. Starting in January 2009, case studies were conducted with the two children from the Liang family and the Zhao family over the course of 10 months. I initially approached the two left-behind children as a private tutor and was introduced to their parents by a fellow villager. As I grew more familiar with the families, I explained the purpose of my study and obtained their consent to be participants in the study.

During the study, I conducted 24 interviews, 10 home visits with each visit lasting for at least two hours, and numerous informal talks online, over dinner and by phone with the two children. The informal chats and text message exchanges were important to the study because of the long distance between the researcher who was located in Beijing, and the children who were studying at schools in Henan. Moreover, the children were found to talk more freely and sometimes confidentially in these electronic correspondences. In-depth interviews, on the other hand, helped me learn about important events in the lives of the left-behind children as well as their interpretations and feelings about these events.

In order to corroborate the information obtained from the two children, I interviewed their parents and grandparents informally in the two rural families as well as several classmates of the children. During the home visits, I conducted participant observations of the physical surroundings in which the children lived. These helped me gain a holistic view of the left-behind children's world and enabled me to contextualize their inner feelings within these multi-level factors, such as family, school, parents' education and occupation, reasons for migration, relationship with caregivers and peer relations, etc. In case studies, extensive, multiple sources of information are important to enhance the validity and reliability of the data.

All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. I transcribed and translated the interviews verbatim and made best efforts to use the participants' original quotes (translated into English) in the data analysis. While linguistic subtleties may be

lost in the translation, this does not affect the study much since this research does not involve discourse/language analysis.

**A Profile of the Two Cases**

The two case children, Xiaoya Liang and Long Zhao (both pseudonyms), were both left behind since early childhood, before they started school. But they were situated in quite different social contexts, which made for a sharp contrast on many facets. Xiaoya Liang, a girl of 14, was born as a single child in an upper-middle-class family in the township of Chengguan, with the monthly family income of over 4,000 RMB[2] (Xiaoya's mother, personal communication, February 1, 2009). Her mother graduated from a vocational school and used to work in a local state-owned enterprise. Her father had a high school diploma and worked in the township government as a civil servant. When Xiaoya was three years old, her mother left the family to seek better employment opportunities in Shanghai. At the time of the study, Xiaoya's mother worked as a hotel manager in Shanghai, while Xiaoya lived with her father and grandmother and was attending the senior grade (Grade 8) in the No. 1 Middle School, a key middle school in the township.

Long Zhao, a boy of 14, also attended No. 1 Middle School in the township of Chengguan, but he came from a neighboring village of Changling, a low-income village with an annual income per capita of only 3,600 RMB[3] in 2008 (villagers, personal communication, January 29, 2009). Unlike Xiaoya's parents, Long's parents only finished primary school and had no stable occupations in the village except for farming. When Long was six years old, farmers and families in the village suffered financially when the village was struck by flood. In order to survive, Long's parents, along with other fellow villagers, went to Shanghai to seek employment, leaving Long and his elder brother in the care of their grandmother. Several years later, the grandmother with whom Long and his brother were initially entrusted passed away. At the time of the study, Long's brother was attending a boarding school and Long stayed in a cheap rented studio close to school with his other grandmother (on the mother's side), with whom he was not very familiar.

[2] About 700 USD.
[3] About 600 USD.

### Data Analysis and Limitations of the Study

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a case is a "bounded system," bounded by time (10 months data collection) and place (two rural families). Analysis in a case study consists of making a detailed description of the case and its setting, highlighting the major players, the sites, and the activities (Stake, 1995). In presenting a detailed view of the two cases in this study, I have sought to establish patterns and themes in the lives of the two left-behind children through the "constant comparing and contrasting" method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

This study focused on only two cases of left-behind children from two rural families. They cannot reasonably represent any group of left-behind children in any region of China. While the advantage of case studies lies in the in-depth, contextualized information on the mechanisms and processes involved in one or more single cases, this also constitutes its biggest disadvantage, i.e., limited scope and a sample size that is too small. Findings from case studies usually have little generalizability value. However, Stake (1995) suggested that case studies allow for "naturalistic generalizations," that is, people can learn lessons from the case itself or apply the understanding of the issue to other selective cases.

Researcher bias was inevitable in this study as I intended to delve into the subjective inner worlds of the left-behind children. Given the fact that the two children were rural teenagers and I was an urban adult, I may have sometimes imposed my thoughts on them and asked questions that reflected my assumptions. Moreover, as the two left-behind children regarded me as their good friend over time and often confided to me their complaints and resentments in online private chats, I might have exaggerated their negative feelings in portraying the parent-child relations below.

## Findings

### Parent-Child Alienation: The Liang Family and the Zhao Family

*Xiaoya with a Migrating Mother: "Delivering without Raising"*

In Xiaoya's life, her grandmother was the major caregiver and acted as her surrogate mother. Although her father stayed behind, it was the grandmother who took care of her daily needs, so she had a close relationship with her grandmother.

In contrast, her relationship with the migrating mother was full of tension. She seldom made calls to her mother. Although her mother would call home every two or three days, the daughter was cold and indifferent.

> She has to be called several times before she comes over to pick up the phone, often reluctantly. If she is in a good mood, she would talk to me for a while. Otherwise she grows impatient easily: "Go ahead if you have something to say, or cut it off. I am very busy." (Xiaoya's mother, personal communication, February 1, 2009)

When my study started in January 2009, Xiaoya's mother was back home for the Chinese New Year. But Xiaoya did not exhibit excitement or happiness with her mother back after a long year. Mother Liang's voice was full of disappointments when she talked about her daughter's reactions to her return.

> I had been longing to see my daughter, but she didn't seem to miss me at all. I wanted to sleep with her during the precious few days I could be home, but she never agreed. She always chose to sleep with grandma. She didn't like to go shopping with me either. (Xiaoya's mother, personal communication, February 1, 2009)

The distance and alienation in the mother-daughter relationship was obvious. Without the "sleeping together in one bed" intimacy that many Chinese mothers and daughters accept as the norm, the relationship between Xiaoya and her returnee mother got more intense in their face-to-face confrontation instead.

> In the first two days after I was back, she refused to talk to me, and she wouldn't allow her dad and grandma to talk to me. When I saw her play all the time and not doing homework, I thought to talk to her, but she immediately fought me back: "I don't work hard? With your absence for so many years, how have I passed all those examinations?" Then she scolded me as "old and ugly and uncultivated… delivering without raising, and not being a responsible mother," things like that. (Xiaoya's mother, personal communication, February 15, 2009)

*Long with Two Migrating Parents: "We Are in Two Different Worlds"*

At the time of the study, Long's parents were working as construction workers

with unstable incomes and low salaries. "We earn more when we find more work and earn nothing if no work." Long's parents would call him every two weeks and inquire about his life, but his mother felt that their relationship was not as close as before. "Most of the time it was me doing the talk. He said very little." In January 2009, Long's mother bought him a cell phone, but he rarely used it to call his parents. Most of the time, he used the cell phone to have online chats with friends or exchange text messages with classmates. He rarely told his parents about the problems and difficulties he had. When his parents returned home for the New Year, he would stay with them for some time, but then he went to hang out with his classmates for the rest of the holidays. "I played with my pals, they played with theirs. We are in two different worlds."

Although Long and Xiaoya grew up with different family backgrounds, they both became alienated from their migrating parents due to the physical distance between them. However, mother Liang and mother Zhao could recall that in the initial years after their migration, their children were able to keep intimate relations with them. They were talkative over the phone and were eager to share happy or sad moments with the faraway parent(s). However, such parent-child relations changed over time. The relationship between Xiaoya and her mother changed after she entered the middle school, whereas Long's transition started when he was in the fifth grade and after his beloved grandmother died. As children grow older and pass into adolescence, many may naturally become less attached to their parents and sometimes close their hearts to them. However, to the left-behind children like Xiaoya and Long, the changed parent-child relationship was intertwined with the long-time absence of their migrating parents. Moreover, the parent-child alienation in the more affluent Liang family seemed to be more intense than that in the financially stricken Zhao family. The following discussion intends to unfold the underlying dynamics involved in the left-behind children's unique socialization processes by comparing and contrasting the parent-child relations in the Liang family and the Zhao family.

## Children's Lens: What Does It Mean to Be Left-Behind?

### *Forced Independence, Hidden Emotions*

When approaching the two left-behind children to understand why and how

parent-child alienation emerged in their socialization process, this study found that compared with their peers, Xiaoya and Long were self-consciously hiding emotions beneath their independent outer appearance, a common phenomenon reported by other researchers as well (Parreñas, 2001).

> I am independent. I don't need mom or dad to pick me up. I always ride a bicycle to school alone. Our school is very far, so I leave home before the day breaks and come home at night. There are many cars on the way, pretty frightening, but I don't tell mom and dad such trivial things, like other classmates. (Xiaoya, personal communication, March 2, 2009)

> In general I solve all the problems by myself, and only turn to my parents when I truly have no way out, such as in the big things like school transfer. Over phone calls, they only ask me how is the food, how much sleep I have and how much I grow. They just ask me to learn to take care of myself and to study hard. I of course wouldn't let them worry about me. (Long, personal communication, May 7, 2009)

Xiaoya and Long both believed that they were self-reliant and could take care of themselves so that their faraway parents did not have to worry about them. In addition, they were proud of being "self-disciplined" and behaving more like grown-ups than their peers. However, Xiaoya once expressed her longings for having somebody to watch her and supervise her, which revealed her true feelings towards the faraway mother. "Mom and dad at home would at least monitor our behavior. In fact, I felt warm when my mom was home and scolded me for watching too much TV, even though I didn't say it" (Xiaoya, personal communication, July 11, 2009).

Xiaoya, like all teenagers, longed for the care and guidance from her mother in her inner heart. However, because her mother was absent from home, she had to find solace in the fact that she was self-reliant and could overcome all her difficulties by herself. The "forced independence" was converted to hostility towards her mother's supervision when she was indeed back home.

Hiding true feelings was typical for Long as well. In contrast to Xiaoya who was extrovert and expressive with frequent emotional outbursts, Long was an introvert, a shy boy who tended to suppress his emotions. At home, he was silent most of the time and seldom talked to the not-so-close grandmother about school

or anything. The grandmother also believed that so long as she took care of Long's daily needs, she had completed her important "task." "I cook three meals a day for him and wash his clothes. Isn't that all? He has never said anything else to me. Even if he told me what happened at school, I wouldn't understand" (Long's grandmother, personal communication, August 6, 2009). Occasionally, Long would call his brother to chat, only to find that "He just told me to study hard and not to make adults worry about me" (Long, personal communication, September 2, 2009). With the death of an intimate caregiver, the distance from a brother and the life with an unfamiliar relative, Long was forced to be reticent and grew accustomed to hiding his feelings and longings. As time went by, Long closed himself off and grew indifferent even to his parents' presence in the family.

With the parent(s) missing from the family since an early age, the two left-behind children in the study were forced to be independent and mature beyond their biological age. Even though they were entrusted to caregivers who could take care of their basic living needs, they were eager to draw emotional and moral support from adults. As Hoang and Yeoh (2012) pointed out: "While the 'caring-for' can be easily provided by people other than parents, there is less certainty about the 'caring-about' " (p. 311). The emotional needs of the left-behind children were severely neglected under the disguise of self-reliance and independence, which in the long run led to parent-child alienation in migrant families.

*Long-Distance Communication*

Communication is essential to maintain interpersonal relationships. In migrant families characterized by physical separation between family members, parent-child relations are often maintained by means of long-distance communication, typically phone calls, which turn out not as effective as expected in providing emotional exchange and linking the migrant parents and left-behind children (Hoang & Yeoh, 2012). As the above discussion demonstrated, when the Chinese left-behind children were upset, they were not inclined to vent their emotions over the phone and let their parents know their true feelings for fear that they would worry for them. The migrant parents, on their part, were not accustomed to expressing deep feelings verbally on the other end of the phone.

Researcher: You had your birthday yesterday? How did you celebrate it?

Long: Nothing.

Researcher: But your mom called you for sure?

Long: Yeah, every year it was a phone call. Nothing special. I am used to it.

Researcher: Didn't she wish you happy birthday?

Long: Nope. She just asked me if I had enough money and if I had eaten anything delicious. (Long, personal communication, June 8, 2009)

The most prominent characteristic of the family as a primary socialization agent is the long-term, direct interaction among family members, during which parents and children express their emotions and feelings. The rural families in the Chinese tradition are even more this way in the sense that Chinese culture emphasizes implicitness and "inward-lookingness" in interpersonal relationships (Fei, 1992). Nonverbal clues are often more important than the language itself. The rural Chinese are not eloquent in talking and shy to express their affections in an explicit way. Although cohesion in Chinese families is valued more than anything else, it is not achieved through verbal exchanges (Fei, 1992; Pan, 2011). It is true that cell phones are inexpensive and have become widespread in Chinese rural families in the past decade, but developed ICT infrastructures are not powerful enough to satisfy their emotional needs over physical distance. Most of the time, these parents and children merely exchange information about their daily routines and trivialities (food, clothing, money etc.) over the phone.

This pattern of communication is confirmed by the two cases in my study. Mothers Liang and Zhao both reported that in the early years after they migrated, the young Liang and Zhao were more willing to express their feelings and longing for their faraway parents. However, as the two children entered adolescence, they grew more reserved and started to hide their true feelings. In the case of Xiaoya, missing her mother was transformed into open hostility and insolence over the phone, "Go ahead with what you want to say, or cut it off," whereas Long was reduced to passive responses to his mother's petty talk. The socialization of the left-behind children to culturally normal communication styles made their parents believe that the children were no longer attached to them. For example, mother Zhao interpreted "growth" as the most important reason for Long's silence over the phone and the parent-child alienation in her family. "Boys are like that. They are shy to open themselves to parents. When

they were younger, they didn't feel ashamed to hang onto mom. But now he is older and he understands things. So it's natural that he is not close to me" (Long's mother, personal communication, September 2, 2009). The emotional thread connecting the migrant parents and the left-behind children grew more and more tenuous as the latter grew up without the physical presence of the former.

For the Spring Festival of 2009, Xiaoya's mother came back home. In the beginning, Xiaoya was very cold. But several days later, after Xiaoya's mother cooked and washed clothes for the family, i.e., after "being there," Xiaoya started to talk to her and they went shopping together once. "Except for being an annoyance once in a while, my mom is in fact not bad to me" (Xiaoya, personal communication, March 2, 2009). Xiaoya had felt love and affection from her mother's actions and efforts to make her happy. However, one month later, mother Liang went back to work. Xiaoya reverted to her old tones and attitudes in her long-distance phone calls with her mother.

## Discussions

### Differing Left-Behind Experiences: Xiaoya vs. Long

*Gendered Parental Role Expectations*

In comparing and contrasting the two left-behind children, this study found that although Xiaoya was more advantaged in terms of family income and was lucky enough to have a loving grandmother and father at home with her, her relationship with a migrating mother exhibited higher degrees of alienation and conflict.

> My grandma is old now and always sick, but has to cook for me and wash clothes for me, things she [my mum] should have done. When the school had parents' meetings, when my dad was busy and wouldn't go, grandma went to those meetings. If she were home, grandma wouldn't have gone a long way to school… (Xiaoya, personal communication, July 11, 2009)

Xiaoya's words revealed her affection and sympathy towards her grandmother

who had become a substitute mother to a certain extent, which made her resent her mother even more. At the same time, Xiaoya had a good relationship with her non-migrant but often absent father. In addition to a busy work schedule, Xiaoya's father frequently sought entertainment outside and did not come home until late. Xiaoya attributed her father's improper behavior also to her mother's absence from home. "If my mom was home and could rein him in, he wouldn't have loved playing cards so much…"

In rural Chinese families, mother and father played different roles with the mother in charge of raising and educating the children and the father earning money for the family. However, in the Liang family, the father and grandmother took over the mother's responsibilities at home, taking care of Xiaoya's daily needs and providing her with motherly affection and communication. Although Xiaoya's mother contributed a large part to the family income by becoming a migrant worker, the expectations towards her roles as a wife and mother had not changed in Xiaoya's mind, which reflected the values and norms in the rural society of China in which she grew up.

Compared with Xiaoya, Long was more understanding of his mother's migration partly due to the financial difficulties in his family. On the other hand, as Hochschild (1983) has argued, emotions do not exist in a vacuum, but exist in the context of social structures in society. "Emotion is a sense that tells about the self-relevance of reality. We infer from it what we must have wanted or expected or how we must have been perceiving the world" (p. 85). It is true that Xiaoya's feelings of abandonment were caused by an absent mother, but these feelings were undoubtedly intensified by the culturally and ideologically inscribed duties for the mother in the family, which were made more conspicuous by the presence of the father.

*Peer Reference Groups*

Parsons and Bales (1998) argued for the importance of peer group in creating a sense of belonging and non-adult acceptance for the children in their socialization process. Another factor that contributed to the high intensity of alienation between Xiaoya and her mother was the peer reference group that she socialized with. With only a few of Xiaoya's friends at school being left-behind children, she openly confessed her jealousy about friends whose parents lived at

home.

> Their moms and dads are with them, especially Sun's mom. She is so nice to her. Her family moved from a village to the township just for her to go to school. Her mom often comes to school to bring her lunch, give her keys or get her an umbrella if it rains. My mom only comes to my school once a year. (Xiaoya, personal communication, July 11, 2009)

In addition, Xiaoya had a close cousin of her own age but with parents who were not away. The two of them often competed in academic performance. Xiaoya's cousin was usually not as good as her in school performance, but she passed the middle school entrance exam smoothly. Xiaoya attributed the progress of her cousin in academic performance to her conscientious parents who were there to support her. She, on the other hand, could not receive that kind of help and monitoring with a migrating mother. Clearly, in Xiaoya's eyes, her mother prioritized her work ambitions over family obligations and escaped responsibilities for child-raising by going to work in Shanghai. All of these things intensified Xiaoya's negative attitude towards her mother.

Long's peer reference group was totally different. On the one hand, Long tried to emulate his self-reliant brother who was always able to solve problems by himself in Long's mind. On the other hand, Long was from the low-income village of Changling before he moved to the township. Many of the villagers went out to work, creating a large number of left-behind children in the village. Since childhood, neighborhood peers and classmates constituted an important part of his life. After Long enrolled in the No. 1 Middle School in the township, he was again surrounded by a group of left-behind classmates who were in the same boat as him. "I have eight nominal sisters, all without kinship. I called them sisters not because we had fun together, but because their parents went out to work as well and we all live near the school. So we will get together and chat" (Long, personal communication, June 8, 2009). When the left-behind children were together, they rarely talked about their parents. They all knew little about their faraway parents, some of them not even knowing what occupations their parents were engaged in. The group of left-behind children reinforced one another in maintaining a distant relationship with their migrant parents. The only topic about parents was "to see whose parents sent the largest sums of money

back" (Long, personal communication, June 8, 2009). Parreñas (2001) used the term "the commodification of love" to refer to this type of parent-child relations. As a result, Long was able to reconcile his circumstances of being left-behind and did not perceive himself as being as neglected and unfortunate as Xiaoya did.

*Academic Expectations: Intergenerational Value Conflicts*

An important theme that recurred in my fieldwork was academic pressure that rural Chinese children commonly experienced in their daily life. Both Xiaoya and Long repeatedly complained about the long school day (typically from 6 am to 9 pm for rural middle school students who have to compete extremely hard to get into a good high school), lack of entertainments and extracurricular activities, difficult and boring subjects in the textbooks, etc. Without the necessary support and guidance of available parents, these pressures sometimes became unendurable for the left-behind children. More disturbingly, migrant parents and their left-behind children held conflicting values for life due to the lack of a common "social space," which shaped their different academic expectations.

The value conflicts were best manifested by the divergent views between Xiaoya and her mother with regards to which high school she should attend in the future:

> I would like to attend No. 2 High School because I can go there for free. But mom wants me to get into Xinyang High School. I have to pay extra tuition, about 18,000 RMB a year. I think it's stupid to pay so much money to go to a high school. I can use this money to travel to Beijing. (Xiaoya, personal communication, September 1, 2009)

Influenced by her rural surroundings, Xiaoya was intimidated by the exorbitantly high fees that the good urban school charged and doubted the cost-effectiveness of going there. Xiaoya's mother did not think the same way. Because of her urban experiences, Xiaoya's mother was keenly aware of the importance of knowledge and credentials to individual development and social mobility. After working in Shanghai, Xiaoya's mother got to know many highly educated people with well-paid jobs, which confirmed her determination to help her daughter achieve academic success.

> Those white-collar workers in Shanghai live an easy life just because they have more knowledge and more experience. I believe it's worthwhile to invest in study, no matter how much I have to pay. Good schools help people succeed. (Xiaoya's mother, personal communication, March 1, 2009)

However, Xiaoya's mother failed to transmit her own knowledge and experiences about life to her daughter since the latter had internalized values and roles of rural culture and was unable to identify with her migrant mother's values and behavior due to lack of participation in urban life.

The generational conflict in academic expectations took a different form in the case of the lower socioeconomic Zhao family. With little education and few financial resources, Long's parents worked as manual laborers in Shanghai. To them, those who made more money were people who mastered a skill, such as driving, haircutting or decorating. They did not attach great importance to school learning, but believed that skills were the key to better job opportunities and financial security. "People with skills can make money wherever they go" (Long's mother, personal communication, September 2, 2009). Therefore, they did not have high expectations towards their son's academic performance and simply hoped for him to learn a technical skill after he finished school. The parents' lower educational expectations relieved Long of a heavy academic burden and lessened intergenerational conflicts to a certain extent, but at the same time prevented him from striving to be a good student. In my talks with Long, I found that he was eager to learn and hoped to achieve school success, but his parents rarely asked about his study and did not know that he needed extra tutoring to overcome academic difficulties. Restrained by the lack of parental support and academic help, Long often chose to give up difficult academic tasks. "I want to have good test scores to make my parents happy, but the schoolwork is too difficult and my parents don't care that much" (Long, personal communication, September 2, 2009).

## Conclusion

Comprised of case studies of two left-behind children in rural China, this study depicts how and why parent-child alienation has emerged in these rural migrant families and demonstrates that the degree of parent-child alienation differs for the

two children based on their different social contexts. In general, the findings of the study highlight the emotional needs of left-behind children who grew up with distant parent(s) and argues that parent-child alienation has arisen out of family separation. Most poignantly, it affirms the emotional cost of female migration, as documented in various other studies (Parreñas, 2001; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002). Given the role expectations of the female parent in rural Chinese society, having a migrant mother may have a devastating impact on the socialization of her left-behind children.

However, in mapping out the emotional wounds imposed by geographical distance on left-behind children in Chinese rural households, I do not mean to imply that these wounds can only be healed by the return of the migrating parents, especially mothers. Nor do I mean to suggest that parents are to blame for seeking job opportunities in the cities and leaving their children behind. Rather, I agree with Parreñas (2001) in her argument that "the root causes behind these wounds extend beyond individual migrants to larger structural inequalities that constrain the options that they have to provide their children with material, emotional, and moral care to the fullest" (p. 386). In the Chinese context, these inequalities include school access policies based on household registration (*hukou*) that limit rural migrant children's opportunities to attend urban schools, job insecurity, long working hours, and low pay for migrant workers who find no time to take care of children in the cities, as well as the social stigma attached to rural children by urban residents (Chen, 2005; Li, 2004), all of which prompt migrant parents to leave their children behind.

With the structural inequalities yet to be solved in the long run, parents, educators and policymakers should pay more attention to parent-child relations in migrant families in the meantime. Through comparing and contrasting the differing experiences of two left-behind children, this study has sought to provide a more nuanced analysis of the "contextualized" child development process and parent-child relations in migrant families. While previous research has largely treated left-behind children as a monolithic group (Pan & Ye, 2009), neglecting differences between and among them, my study illustrates that individual left-behind children situated in different social strata and facing different life events experience different degrees of parent-child alienation. In showing this, my study supports Suarez-Orozco et al. (2002)'s assertion about the crucial role of caregivers in shaping parent-child relations during family separation. The

emotion work performed by resident kin members or caregivers to keep family ties alive despite spatial and temporal separation is crucial. The triangular rapport between caregivers, migrant parents and their children could minimize the harm brought about by separation where parents and caregivers can work cooperatively as co-parents to alter the "nuclear family" framework or to counter gender ideologies in the family. Educators and policymakers for their part could make a difference if they provided more counseling and guidance to the left-behind children and fostered supportive peer groups for them to draw mutual help and encouragement rather than solely emphasizing school achievements and leaving the children to deal with negative peer pressure.

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