‘Save the children!’: Governing left-behind children through family in China’s Great Migration

Xiaorong Gu
National University of Singapore, Singapore

Abstract
Existing scholarship on the lives and wellbeing of China’s left-behind children often frames the issues as a function of their parents’ migration, which leaves a significant gap in discussing the role of the state in shaping the institutional framework that these families operate within, cope or struggle with. Through critically interrogating public discourses based on articles from a mainstream newspaper and policy documents since the early 2000s, this article situates a sociological inquiry into the discursive and institutional framework addressing ‘the left-behind children problem’ in China within the problematic of the relationship between children, family, and the state. The analysis reveals seemingly ‘disingenuous’ articulations of left-behind children’s value in the mainstream media and official policies. On the one hand, there seems to be a prevailing concern over the welfare of left-behind children which has grave implications for the country’s future development. On the other hand, the dominant discourse attributes left-behind children’s ‘miserable’ plight to their ‘pathological’ family life, which translates into policy efforts to discipline rural migrant families according to a family ideology rooted in urban middle-class experiences. I argue that such inconsistencies should be contextualized in the state’s neoliberal-authoritarian governance of the migrant population in the post-reform era, which perpetuates a stereotype of ‘the pathological family’ to account for left-behind children’s disadvantages while evading, hence up until recent years avoiding to redress, the political-economic factors underlying their plight. I conclude the article by ruminating on the theoretical, social and policy implications of this study.

Corresponding author:
Xiaorong Gu, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Kent Ridge, AS8 #07-23, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent (S), 119260, Singapore.
Email: arigx@nus.edu.sg
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Introduction
At the turn of the century, after two decades of reform, China witnessed rapid economic development, but was also riddled with growing social tensions due to widening income inequality and various other social problems. The ‘three rural issues’ (sannong wenti), i.e. issues concerning agriculture development, village development, and peasants’ livelihood, emerged as a major concern among local bureaucrats, scholars, and other intellectuals alike (e.g. Wen, 2000). In particular, a unique social group – children left behind in rural villages whose parents have migrated to urban areas for work – has gained considerable attention, given the implications of their wellbeing for China’s long-term development. In 2006, issues related to left-behind children became a priority on policymakers’ agenda, anticipated by a seminar held by the Ministry of Education in May 2005 (Tan, 2011).

A large volume of literature, produced by scholars in and beyond China, has documented how parental migration might affect left-behind children’s educational achievement, cognitive development, socio-emotional functioning, health, and leave them open to risks of being victimized (see reviews in Ge et al., 2019; Tan, 2011). This literature has yielded valuable and comprehensive knowledge about migration and child wellbeing. However, the prevailing analytical frame treating issues related to left-behind children as a function of family structure renders the role of the state in shaping these children’s lives invisible or in the background, which is a significant gap given the prominent role of state policies in driving the internal migration in the post-reform era.

Through critically interrogating public discourses based on articles from China Youth Daily (hereafter CYD) and policy documents and initiatives, this article situates a sociological inquiry into the discursive and institutional framework addressing ‘the left-behind children problem’ in China within the problematic of the relationship between children, family, and the state. My analysis reveals seemingly ‘disingenuous’ articulations of left-behind children’s value in the mainstream media and official policies. On the one hand, there seems to be a prevailing concern over the welfare of left-behind children which has grave implications for the country’s future development. On the other hand, the dominant discourse attributes left-behind children’s ‘miserable’ plight to their ‘pathological’ family life, which translates into policy efforts to police and discipline rural migrant families according to a family ideology based on urban middle-class experiences. I argue that such inconsistencies and disingenuity should be contextualized in the state’s neoliberal-authoritarian governance of the migrant population, which perpetuates a stereotype of ‘the pathological family’ to account for left-behind children’s disadvantages while avoiding, hence avoiding to redress, the political-economic factors underlying their plight.

This study makes two theoretical contributions. First, by unraveling paradoxical articulations of children’s value in the nationalist discourse and ‘pro-family’ public policies, it transcends existing literature which has privileged an individualized perspective
towards valuation of children by examining exclusively parents’ calculation of perceived benefits and costs of childrearing (Arnold et al., 1975; Becker and Lewis, 1973; Trommsdorff and Nauck, 2005). In the Chinese case, I show that on the one hand, at the discursive level, the articulation of children’s value in line with nationalism in public discourse generates a sense of national crisis, which legitimizes an interventionist approach in policies to regulate, discipline, and police rural migrant families. On the other hand, policies promulgated by the state reflect an individualized logic that attributes challenges faced by left-behind children to their ‘pathological migrant families,’ rather than the underlying structural constraints, such as hukou-based discrimination and poverty issues. Such a ‘pro-family’ stance, in turn, justifies the state’s limited welfare spending in support of these vulnerable populations.

Second, joining a growing literature on China’s hybrid and multiple modes of governance (Bray and Jeffreys, 2016; Duckett, 2020; Harvey, 2005; Sigley, 2006; Zhang, 2018), the study contributes to the theorization of the cultural logic of social governance in post-reform China, which I term neoliberal-authoritarianism. I demonstrate that while the authoritarian citizenship structure underpinning the state development strategy shapes the materiality of rural migrants’ family life, neoliberalism as an ideological framework provides discursive legitimacy to the state’s low welfare expenditure without addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by left-behind children and their families.

The article is organized as follows. I first introduce the social group of left-behind children to set the background for the inquiry. I then contextualize the inquiry within two theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis. The following section sketches the method and data employed in this analysis. In the next section, I conduct a critical reading of media discourse and policy initiatives/documents targeted at left-behind children’s issues to unveil the neoliberal-authoritarian mode of governance of the migrant population. I conclude with a discussion of the social and policy implications of the study and directions for future work.

**Left-behind children in China’s Great Migration**

China’s economic performance since it embarked on economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s in transitioning out of a stagnant socialist planned economy on the verge of bankruptcy is often depicted as a miracle. An inconvenient truth leading to this miracle, however, is an urban development strategy that capitalizes on the seemingly unlimited supply of cheap rural migrant laborers while simultaneously limiting their claims in cities, which is called ‘planned informality’ by Philip Huang (2011) or ‘incomplete urbanization’ by Chan Kam Wing (2010). A central institution that enables such a development strategy is a hukou system that prevents rural migrants from fully enjoying welfare provided to local citizens in urban China, despite successive reforms.¹ Under this framework, while rural migrants are allowed to work in cities, their access to social benefits and services in host cities is restricted. As a result, millions of rural migrant families adopt a split-household strategy to separate economic production and family reproduction across geographic spaces (Gu, forthcoming).

Left-behind children (liushou ertong), who stay in rural communities under the care of one co-resident parent or of grandparents or other relatives while one or both parents work
away in urban areas for an extended period of time (six months or longer), are a rapidly growing demographic in this era of Great Migration. An accurate estimation of the size of the population of left-behind children prior to the 2000s remains unknown, as national-level statistics recording this information are not available. According to census data or large-scale surveys, in 2000, left-behind children aged between 0 and 14 reached about 20 million (Duan and Zhou, 2005) and those aged between 0 and 17 years old numbered about 24.43 million (Duan and Yang, 2008); in 2005, those in the age bracket of 0–14 numbered 48.49 million and those aged 0–17, 58.61 million (Duan and Yang, 2008); and according to the 2010 Population Census, 61 million children under 17 were left behind in rural areas (ACWF, 2013; Duan et al., 2013).

How parental migration affects the wellbeing of this particular social group has become a hot topic in media reports and academic research since the late 1990s, in and beyond China. Media discourse and earlier studies based on small-scale surveys documented an emerging dominant discourse which depicted left-behind children as a vulnerable group characterized by academic underachievement, victimhood to violence and crime, social isolation and psychological fragility (Liu, 2012; Ye and Pan, 2011; Zhang, 2010; also see reviews in Ge et al., 2019; Tan, 2011). Recent years have seen more nuanced findings based on large-scale representative survey data with comparable reference groups (Murphy et al., 2016; Ren and Treiman, 2013; Xu and Xie, 2015; Yeung and Gu, 2016). It is found that: (1) left-behind children are not a monolithic group, and their cognitive and emotional outcomes differ by the demographic composition of the households they live in; and (2) the overriding gap is between those living in rural and those in urban environments, rather than the migration statuses of family members (Yeung and Gu, 2016).

As noted, the dominant framing of left-behind children’s wellbeing as a function of parents’ migration in existing literature leaves a significant gap in discussing the role of the state in shaping the institutional-disciplinary and ideological-nationalist context that families operate, cope or struggle with. This is a task that this study takes up.

**Children, governance, and state–migrant relations in contemporary China**

This study engages with two bodies of literature, i.e. the literature on social governance of childhood and children, and on state–migrant relations in China, to examine how the ‘left-behind children problem’ is articulated and addressed in public discourse and policies.

**Children and the state**

Previous literature on the value of children has privileged an individualized perspective by examining exclusively parents’ calculation of perceived benefits and costs of childrearing, whether in economic, social or emotional terms, which reveals that parents increasingly cherish the emotional satisfaction rather than (future) economic gains in childrearing as societies modernize (Arnold et al., 1975; Becker and Lewis, 1973; Schultz, 1973; Trommsdorff and Nauck, 2005). While these individualized logics also
took into consideration larger country-based contexts including changes in income, employment, and education, the absence of a more focused discussion on social policies and state interventions produced a discourse of a deterministic relationship between parenting and child welfare. It is therefore imperative to redress this problematic framing.

Most modern states have a vested interest in cultivating younger generations’ human capital development through concerted efforts to invest, nurture, and support their growth, which is ‘ubiquitously cited as the main motor of nationalism and the source of patriotic allegiance’ (Bryant, 2001: 583). As historians and childhood scholars have found, the child figure lies at the center of a nationalist discourse of social reform and modernization in China’s modern history since the twentieth century (Anagnost, 1997; Bai, 2008; Jones, 2002; Woronov, 2009). Behind this collective strain of the valuation of children lies a social evolutionary thinking that holds an ahistorical view of teleological social progression and a social Darwinian ethos of ‘survival of the fittest’ (Bai, 2008; Jones, 2002). As such, the child figure has been consistently vested with a social imaginary of rejuvenating an ancient civilization to compete with other global powers.

In the early twentieth century, China’s fateful defeat by Western imperial powers in the wake of the First World War contributed decisively to the social Darwinist interpretation of historical development among cultural and political elites, which then became a key component of Chinese nationalism (Bai, 2008). It further prompted two cultural moments of collective self-reflection among the elites. First, there emerged a hard reckoning with the country’s ‘backward’ traditional culture, which was believed to be the root cause of the country’s downfall in the global arena. The New Culture movement, led by cultural figures based in elite institutions such as Peking University, launched harsh criticisms of Confucianism for its suppression of youth and idolization of seniority, which had allegedly led to social stagnation. For instance, Lu Xun (1919), the cultural warrior of the time, through a first-person narrator, i.e. ‘the madman,’ chanted a resonating slogan of ‘saving the children’ (jiujiu haizi) from the Confucian cannibalistic culture. Meanwhile, other prominent figures also advocated for a radical break with Confucianism by instilling democratic and scientific ideas in young people’s minds as part of a new nation-building process (Anagnost, 1997: 202–203; Jones, 2002). As such, a new discourse about childhood and child development became prevalent: children were the youthful hope of an old empire and their education held the key to the survival of the nation and to the creation of a new China (Bai, 2008). In other words, for an ancient civilization like China to restore its past glory on the global stage, a new populace embodying ‘progressive’ elements such as civility and democracy was to be cultivated.

Less is written about childhood and the child figure in the politically tumultuous Mao era, largely due to limited access to first-hand materials by international researchers and the almost complete halt of higher education during the Cultural Revolution. However, autobiographical works of authors who grew up in Maoist China and government-propagated model citizens such as Comrade Leifeng suggest a revolutionary discourse of childhood and youth, whereby youths’ passions were channeled towards pledged loyalty to the party and its supreme leader Mao. Such politicized passions were mobilized to challenge individuals and institutions in authority positions – the symbols of a Confucian social order (Whyte, 2003: 9).
Since economic liberalization in 1978, the state ideology has shifted from an excessive political repertoire of class struggle to the depoliticization of ordinary life (Jacka, 1997: 40). With an economy increasingly integrated in global capitalism, the state and its educated elites ‘refract the evaluative gaze of global capital that sees Chinese labor as cheap but undisciplined by modern standards of labor quality’ (Anagnost, 1997: 214). Meanwhile, a discourse on *suzhi* (literally translated as ‘quality’), centering around the child figure, emerged among government officials, scholars, and other cultural elites to cast the child as an evolutionary force to change the national fate in global competition (Anagnost, 1997; Woronov, 2008, 2009). In this discursive frame, for China to be globally competitive, the ‘inferior’ *suzhi* of its population is in urgent need of improvement. Children, especially those from urban middle-class families, embody limitless potential which requires intensive investment for the nation’s future (Anagnost, 1997, 2004). As such, child-centric intensive parenting (mothering in particular) has increasingly become normalized in Chinese families, particularly among the urban middle class (Fong, 2004; Goh, 2011; Kuan, 2015; Yang, 2018). In this context, alternative family forms and practices are stereotyped, stigmatized, and labeled as ‘non-normative’ family life, as will be shown in the case of left-behind children’s families.

**Governance and state–migrant relations in post-reform China**

China’s transition to ‘a socialist market economy’ has been accompanied by significant changes in how the state, itself under considerable transformation, governs an increasingly complex society. Following Althusser (2014), I conceptualize the state to include not only the repressive apparatus which governs through the administration of violent repression (laws and regulations, the police force, and so on), but also the ideological apparatus which governs via the production of dominant hegemonic ideas or state ideology through various institutions and mechanisms (including the press, publishing and distribution industries, cultural events and organizations, etc.). Examining these two dimensions of the state apparatus in contemporary China, I engage with a growing literature that has documented the hybrid nature of social governance in the post-reform era, i.e. the emergence of neoliberal forms of governance in an authoritarian regime (Bray and Jeffreys, 2016; Duckett, 2020; Harvey, 2005; Sigley, 2006; Zhang, 2018). I characterize this hybrid governance mode as ‘neoliberal-authoritarianism’ and use it as an analytical concept to guide the analysis that follows.

Admittedly, the concept of neoliberalism is controversial among China studies scholars. Kipnis (2007), for example, critiqued a ‘reified’ and expanded use of neoliberalism among *suzhi* discourse analysts (e.g. Anagnost, 2004; Yan, 2003) and argued that ‘neoliberalism should be particularized to show exactly which policies, or traditions of thoughts, or discursive actions the author is defining as neoliberal’ (Kipnis, 2007: 388). In the present study, by neoliberalism I refer to a logic or ideology of governing the relationship between the state and the family, reminiscent of the anti-welfare discourse articulated in the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and like-minded politicians in Western societies in the 1970s and 1980s (Harvey, 2005). The family remains crucial in this neoliberal ideology, which maintains that (1) the state should pursue fiscally conservative policies
in favor of individual (and family) responsibility to avoid creating welfare dependencies; 
(2) the family is supposed to function as a self-sufficient unit to propel continued eco-

nomic success; and (3) the family ought to be defended as ‘a haven in a heartless world’ 
in a market economy, hence the promotion of moralized ‘family values’ (Brecher, 2012). 
Indeed, ample evidence indicates that the Chinese state’s welfare position could be 
described as neoliberal. First, China operates a system of ‘welfare residualism’ (Gao 
et al., 2010) in which the state plays a residual role and the family (nuclear or extended) 
is regarded as the main welfare provider to support individuals (Croll, 1999; Davis, 
1989; Shang and Wu, 2003). Second, it is also a system characterized by fragmentation 
and unequal access based on individuals’ ‘deservingness’ defined by their hukou status/ 
type/location, the family provider(s)’ employment status and job sector, and so on. 
According to Duckett (2020), as China deepened its pro-market economic reforms in the 
1990s, which pushed a growing population into the private market, its social provision 
programs became ever more regressive to benefit privileged social groups such as pro-

fessionals, middle management, and workers with formal labor contracts. Moreover, 
embedded in this neoliberal discourse of individual (and family) responsibility is a domi-
nant ideology of ‘the normal family,’ which entails a child-centric and co-resident nuclear 
unit, performing gendered intensive parenting (i.e. mothering) to raise ‘successful’ chil-
dren for a competitive society. This, not coincidentally, echoes the state’s articulation of 
children’s value in terms of human capital development, as described earlier.

By authoritarianism, I refer primarily to the state’s approach towards labor manage-
ment and control based on an authoritarian citizenship system (Wu, 2011), i.e. the hukou 
registration system which excludes, restricts, and increasingly differentiates rural migrant 
workers’ social and economic rights in host cities where they may well be de facto long-
term residents. This system legitимиizes institutionalized deprivation of rural migrants’ 
civil and social rights via practices and policies implemented by the repressive state 
apparatus (such as the police force and the state bureaucracy at local levels). Such a ‘low 
liberal and low welfare model’ (Qin, 2008) has facilitated China’s cost-effective trajec-
tory of ‘incomplete urbanization’ (Chan, 2010) in terms of public provision. However, 
for the rural migrants’ families, this constitutes the political-economic condition for their 
coping strategy of splitting households to de-spatialize and re-spatialize their family’s 
productive and reproductive activities (Gu, forthcoming), hence the large population of 
left-behind children.

As such, through the concept of neoliberal-authoritarianism, I unveil the fundamental 
logic behind the seemingly contradictory and inconsistent modes of governance in con-
temporary China as far as the rural migrant population is concerned: while authoritarian-
ism in the background underpins the political-economic structure that shapes the 
materiality of rural migrant families’ lives, the neoliberalism foregrounded as an ideo-
logical framework provides discursive legitimacy to the state’s low welfare expenditure 
in addressing the challenges faced by left-behind children and their families. This is 
consistent with Duckett’s (2020: 527) observation: ‘the Chinese Party state has been able 
to implement neoliberal-looking economic policies and regressive social policies in part 
because of its authoritarian political institutions and already extensive mechanisms of 
social control.’
Interrogating media discourse and policies as mode of governance

This study conducts a critical discourse analysis of the underlying ideologies and logic behind the Chinese state’s valuation and governance of rural left-behind children. As an analytical approach, critical discourse analysis emphasizes the constitutive nature of language in producing social hierarchies and dominant ideologies (Fairclough, 1992). As Ruth Wodak (2011: 53) suggests, the language used and the discursive framing adopted to discuss specific issues inform one about ‘opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control.’

This article draws on two sources of data. The first includes media reports on left-behind children (news, investigative reports, social commentaries, and op-eds) from a major newspaper, i.e. China Youth Daily (zhongguo qingnianbao) (hereafter CYD), which is the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League of China, targeting the youth community in mainland China. According to Wang et al. (2018), CYD could be categorized as ‘popular official’ media, which refers to its operation as an official paper enjoying commercial success and a wide audience, especially among highly educated readers. By analyzing its role performance based on the published materials, these researchers also reveal the paper’s hybrid practices of combining the ‘watchdog’ model (via critical and investigative journalism), the ‘loyal facilitator’ model (via propaganda), and the ‘infotainment’ model (via ‘tabloid’ materials) in reportage, straddling the binary of ‘official’ press and ‘market oriented’ press conventionally described in media studies (e.g. Lee, 2000). It should be noted that such diversified models are used to perform more subtle ideological work for the Party-state by providing more convincing and sophisticated messages (Stockman and Gallagher, 2011). Recognizing the potential limitation of examining the discourse in one outlet, I tried to identify alternative sources of data among print media that could triangulate CYD as a source, but in vain, which could be related to the broader constraints that print media operate under in China. Social media and internet platforms (blogs or microblogs) could be alternatives, but they are in general fragmented and require a different set of analytical tools, hence beyond the scope of this study.

As a leading title on education and child development-related topics, CYD has been consistently pursuing reportage and news-making of topics related to left-behind children. By searching keywords such as ‘left-behind children’ (liushou ertong), ‘migrant family’ (mingong jiating), and ‘skipped-generation family’ (gedai jiating) on its official website, I gathered 132 articles published from January 2005 to January 2019. The selection of this time frame was based on two considerations. First, 2005 was the first year that CYD went online alongside its print edition, which makes data collection more feasible. Second, 2006 marked the year when ‘the left-behind children problem’ became a policy area. Covering the period 2005–2019 thus allows me to at least at a descriptive level ‘observe’ the whole process of how the ‘left-behind children problem’ is discursively constructed and addressed by policy, without being selective in data collection. I rely on these articles to unveil the dominant discourse on family practices in left-behind children’s households. Overall, there are a few observable trends in the discourse over the observation period. First, since 2012, the number of articles on related topics has
grown rapidly. Of the 132 articles in my data, 108 were published after 2012, with several peaks: 11 in 2012, 19 in 2015, and 24 in 2016, corresponding to tragic cases involving left-behind children, including the group suicide in 2015, which will be elaborated on later. Second, there is also an increase in investigative reports and feature stories over time which delve into the characters’ everyday lives in sensational details. Last, while the dominant frame of left-behind children as a social problem remains, more balanced framing has become more prevalent in recent years. For example, education scholar Xiong Bingqi wrote in 2016 that ‘labeling left-behind children is not the right way to care for them’ (30 August 2016).

I also interrogate a second type of data to understand the logic of governance underpinning social policies in addressing the ‘left-behind children problem’ since the early 2000s. These data include policy documents and circulars (often labeled as ‘opinions,’ ‘guidelines,’ ‘notices,’ and ‘spirits’) issued by the central government and its various ministries, as well as public speeches by government officials between 2006 and 2019. Here I identify major themes in these documents and initiatives, mapping out the broad parameters of how left-behind children’s welfare has been conceptualized by the Chinese state.

‘The left-behind children problem’: Whose problem? Whose responsibility?

Through analyzing the 132 CYD articles in the dataset, I reveal seemingly ‘disingenuous’ articulations of left-behind children’s value in the mainstream media. On the one hand, portraying left-behind children in a predominantly negative light as a ‘social problem,’ journalists and social commentators demonstrate their genuine concern about the wellbeing of left-behind children, particularly in terms of their human capital development which has implications for the national future. On the other hand, left-behind children’s ‘miserable’ plight is largely attributed to their ‘non-normative’ family life, hence a discourse of ‘pathological rural migrant families.’ I argue that such inconsistencies and disingenuity should be contextualized within the state’s (and that of the ruling classes) neoliberal-authoritarian governance of the migrant population, which perpetuates an ideology of the undeserving family to account for left-behind children’s disadvantages while dodging responsibilities to redress the political-economic structures underlying the challenges faced by these children and their families.

Left-behind children as a national crisis

Table 1 identifies three keywords used in CYD articles about left-behind children, including ‘suzhi’ (or quality), ‘weilai’ (future), and ‘guojia’ (the nation/country/state). Previous research suggests that the suzhi discourse constitutes a powerful rhetoric in post-reform China by urbanities to justify their exploitation of migrants while maintaining class distinctions, and by migrants to push back against such a stigmatization (Qian, 2018; Yan, 2003), and also to link family investment in children’s education with education reform and national development/future (Anagnost, 1997, 2004; Woronov, 2008). In
the case of left-behind children, the *suzhi* discourse combines the two abovementioned logics to socially construct an image of lower-class children whose underdevelopment (or lower *suzhi*) is regarded as a negative force dragging down the total *suzhi* of China’s children. Thus, the lower *suzhi* of left-behind children inevitably poses a threat to the evolutionary destiny of the country in the global arena, thus warranting necessary state intervention.

In numerous articles, either news reports or social commentaries, authors described a similarly menacing picture: left-behind children’s low *suzhi* was constructed as a liability to China’s future development, calling for urgent and immediate policy attention. The following commentary piece published in September 2005 by Liu Xianshu, a veteran media professional, illustrates this well. The article began with the serious implications of left-behind children’s low *suzhi* for the national future from a demographic perspective:

> Many people like to complain about the poor quality of Chinese people, and simultaneously may be indifferent, indulgent and even involved in the creation of more ‘low quality citizens’ (*buliang suzhi gongmin*). Because today’s left-behind children who can’t grow up healthily may share the same field, the same road, the same train, and the same city with you in the future. Undoubtedly, they will live in the same social ecosystem as you and your children.

The author cited a statistic of 70 million from nowhere, which far exceeded reliable estimations during that time, which stood between 20 million and 24.43 million, depending on the calculation methods (Chan and Ren, 2018; Duan and Yang, 2008; Duan and Zhou, 2005). Likewise, the figure of an average five-year separation period between migrant parents and their children was not referenced from any reliable sources. However, based on these unreliable statistics, the author did not hesitate to make a dire prediction of left-behind children’s negative impact on the nation’s *overall quality*:

| Table 1. Frequencies of keywords on the ‘left-behind problem’ and national future. |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Number of times keywords appear in text          |
| 1. *Suzhi* or quality (overall quality/quality of Chinese people/*suzhi* education/*suzhi* imbalance/*suzhi* training/*suzhi* expansion) | 22                                          |
| 2. *Weilai* or future (future development/national future/future social stability/future generations/future of the society) | 43                                          |
| 3. Nation/country/the state (*guojia*) (national policy/the nation and its citizens/national future/state policies and initiatives) | 23                                          |

In China, we do not have one or two such children, but tens of millions. According to incomplete estimations, school-age left-behind children of migrant workers across the country have reached about 70 million, and they on average are separated from their parents for 5 years. From a macro perspective, whether they can grow up to be healthy adults is related to the *overall quality* (*zhengti suzhi*) of the next generation of our nation. (Italics added; 19 September 2005)
Similar to many like-minded commentators, Liu began with lamenting on the ‘poor quality’ of Chinese people and quickly cautioned that left-behind children bode ill for China’s future as ‘low quality citizens.’ However, he did not specify what he meant by left-behind children’s \textit{suzhi}/quality. Did he refer to their criminality, low academic achievement or psychological problems, or all combined? Such stereotypes were popular in the media discourse. An investigative report in 2016, for example, coined the term ‘the left-behind syndrome’ (\textit{liushou zonghezheng}), based on anecdotes from some scholar’s field notes or posts in an online forum with a majority youth following. According to the report, symptoms of ‘the left-behind syndrome’ include abusive grandparenting, loneliness, and other self-identified psychological deficiencies, such as inferiority complex and affective disorders (\textit{qingan zhangai}) (CYD, 23 November 2016). It is worth reiterating that such stereotypes are not fully confirmed by rigorous research (Gu, 2017; Murphy, 2014; Peng, 2018). However, stereotypes gained currency to promote a sense of urgency to ‘save the children,’ which reminds one of Republican era cultural elites like Lu Xun who similarly chanted this slogan of ‘save the children,’ though in today’s context, the children to be saved (i.e. the left-behind children) occupy a particular class position. Liu Xianshu, for example, sounded apocalyptic when ruminating on the scenario that left-behind children, China’s future ‘low quality citizens,’ will share ‘the same social ecosystem with you and your children.’ At this point, we can perceive the readership demographic that Liu was directly addressing (‘you’ and ‘your children’) – the educated and privileged elites in Chinese society. The underlying tone then became clear: to save the pitiful left-behind children for the nation’s (\textit{guojia}) future (\textit{weilai}), China’s elites need to act urgently to intervene in their ‘pathological’ family life and improve their \textit{suzhi}.

\textbf{Pathologizing rural migrant families}

Relatedly, as left-behind children entered the public discourse as a social problem, media representations pathologizing the rural migrant family have become mainstream through popular outlets such as CYD, in which cultural and social elites in the country express their deep concerns over the ‘unhealthy’ family environment left-behind children live in. My content analysis shows that ‘family’ as a keyword was referred to 345 times in the 132 CYD articles in my database, often used in phrases such as ‘family education,’ ‘family separation,’ ‘family environment,’ ‘family pressure,’ ‘family problems,’ and ‘family poverty.’ Three aspects of the rural migrant family are pathologized: (1) a ‘non-normative’ residential pattern that traumatizes children’s emotional status; (2) a structural deficiency indicative of parental negligence of guardianship responsibilities, especially in cases where mothers have migrated; and (3) grandparents as inadequate and inferior caregivers and guardians (see Table 2).

The first aspect pertains to the emotional trauma that left-behind children allegedly suffer as a result of their parents’ outmigration. In the CYD articles, authors and commentators, including journalists, government officials, experts, university students, and civil servants, frequently expressed their deep-seated sympathy for ‘\textit{qinqing queshi}’ (literally ‘the loss of family relations’) in left-behind children’s lives. ‘\textit{Qinqing},’ originally referring to close relationships among kin members, is here narrowly defined as the parent–child tie in migrant families, which seems to only exist in parent–child physical co-residence. Thus migrant parents’ physical absence is synonymous with a complete
loss of connection with their children. As such, children in this narrative are often depicted as tearful victims harboring a ‘hunger’ for a reconnection with their parents. Such a narrative, however, is challenged by a growing literature in migration studies that explores social media- and telephone-mediated communications between migrant parents and their dependants left behind in the sending communities (Peng, 2018).

Second, an attendant discourse frames parental absence due to migration as their negligence or abandonment of guardianship responsibilities (jianhuren zhize) altogether. Migrant parents, leaving their children behind in villages, are depicted as irresponsible parents who could not measure up against normative parenthood. This image of irresponsible parents is gendered. A case in point is the media reportage of a group suicide case in June 2015: four left-behind children (an eldest brother and three younger sisters) aged from 5 to 13, were found dead in Bijie, Guizhou, a poverty-stricken province. The deaths were ruled as suicide by pesticide poisoning. It would be fair to peel through multiple layers of problems in this case – domestic violence leading to marital dissolution, lack of care support among kin or through public assistance, migrant labor as the main livelihood in poor areas, and the absence of community and grassroots resources for child protection. The media, however, did not hesitate to frame it as a case of parental neglect (especially that of the mother).

Three days after the news broke, a journalist with CYD published a report featuring interviews with a witness and family relatives in the village. The report began with a description of the chaotic scene in their family home: dilapidated leather sofas, a strong pungent smell, littered mattresses, bedding, children’s clothing and shoes, and a half page of an English textbook reading ‘You call your mother “mom”?’ The suggestive detail of the English sentence was particularly poignant, almost as if the children were leaving a posthumous accusation of their mother for failing in her maternal duties. Quoting a distant relative, the report also provided an account of the family history: the father began migration work about 10 years ago and later the mother had an affair, which led to ‘broken affections’ (ganqing polie) and the mother’s walking out on the family (CYD, 12 June 2015). This insensitive and biased account obscured the problem of domestic violence, as revealed in a follow-up report, where the devastated mother, Ren Xifen, described her personal experience of struggling between her husband’s violence and her maternal guilt. In this follow-up report in which her tearful confession of ‘I’m sorry and I didn’t fulfill my responsibility!’ was the headline, Ren Xifen apologized profusely for her failure as a mother: ‘If I were given another chance, I would not leave like

| Table 2. Frequencies of keywords on the ‘left-behind problem’ and the family crisis. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| **Number of times**                                           | **keywords appear** |
| **keywords**                                                  |      | **in text** |
| Family (family education/separation/environment/pressure/life/ | 345  |
| problem/resources/poverty)                                    |      |             |
| Loss/hunger of family relations/family companionship          | 83   |
| Guardianship responsibility                                  | 249  |
| Skipped-generation guardianship/education (gedai yangyu/jiaoyu) | 19   |
this, however violent he [her husband] gets. I would rather die myself. Whether we divorced or not, I would care for my children’ (CYD, 14 June 2015). This second report was widely circulated in the online portals of major news outlets. However, a sketch of the other central figure, the victims’ father, Zhang Fangqi, remained unavailable in media (print or online). It would be presumptuous for me to second-guess the reasons for the father’s complete silence, but it is hard to miss the uneven media exposure by parents’ gender and the eagerness of the local government to put the spotlight on the mother. It was reported that government officials went to great lengths to contact Ren, picking her up during her bus ride back to Guizhou, and chauffeuring her to Bijie for interviews (Tencent News, 2015).

The image of irresponsible migrant parents also has a generational dimension: migrant parents of the younger generation (those born after 1980) are described as more irresponsible than their parents’ generation. In 2018, Wang Jinhua, a senior official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, commented on the Bijie tragedy along this generational line. According to him, first-generation migrant parents often prioritized family (gujia) over earning money (zhuanqian), and ‘viewed their children as more important than anything else.’ In contrast, young parents today harbor urban settlement dreams and are reluctant to stay in rural hometowns; hence, their lack of family commitments (Wang, 2018). This generation argument, however, is not supported by recent research examining intergenerational dynamics in rural migrant families. Peng (2018), for example, finds that, compared to their older counterparts, young migrant mothers endeavor to foster closer emotional ties with their children. Gu’s (forthcoming) study also reveals tremendous sacrifices that migrant parents undergo to support their children.

Third, besides scrutinizing migrant parents (mothers in particular) against normative parenthood ideals, the media also promote a discourse of inadequate grandparenting. Due to limited public care provision, grandparents have become an important source of informal childcare support in Chinese families, in either rural (Chen, 2004; Cong and Silverstein, 2008) or urban settings (Chen et al., 2011; Goh, 2011). However, the media often depict grandparents in skipped-generation households as a negative influence on their grandchildren. Alleged problems include insufficient attention to children’s education and cognitive development, their inability to discipline children and to initiate stimulating interactions, and their ‘unscientific’ parenting in the form of excessive indulgence of children or physical punishment. Nineteen articles in my CYD dataset described grandparenting in such a manner and the following quote illustrates some common complaints:

First, the skipped-generation guardians and children do not have deep interactions and the guardians have a shallow understanding of their roles. Due to their physical fragility and limitation in knowledge, most focus only on children’s basic needs such as food and clothes, but not their education. Some guardians passively accept their role and hold a negative attitude towards the children, ignoring their need for communication and thoughtful exchanges, and resorting to physical punishment or verbal abuse. The skipped-generation guardianship does not provide a healthy environment for intergenerational communications and left-behind children lack the necessary family education atmosphere. (20 January 2005)

The excerpt is from a CYD article about a policy proposal by a government body affiliated with Chongqing Municipality. To build their case, the government body set up
a research team to conduct an investigative study of poor students in a rural school. The quote summarized one of the three major problems the research team had identified. Leaving aside issues of sample representativeness and research rigor, the writing itself was clumsy and imprecise: multiple sweeping statements were made against grandparents as a homogeneous group, with no substantial evidence but general and vague expressions such as ‘they’ and ‘some.’ Furthermore, a deep-rooted bias against rural elders permeated the report: regardless of their individual personalities, natural abilities, and experiences, they were described as a negative asset. Their lack of knowledge and access to information was equated with inferior childrearing techniques, and even their support of their grandchildren’s education was suspected. I add a caveat here: challenges in childrearing may exist in grandparent-headed households given the multiple disadvantages rural elders encounter, but they may simultaneously possess valuable qualities such as resilience and perseverance which could benefit their grandchildren’s lives. In other words, impressionistic and over-generalized conclusions as illustrated in the excerpt may overestimate grandparents’ negative impact on the children’s lives. Grandparent effects could also be heterogeneous. For example, my fieldwork research between 2014 and 2015 in a rural township in Hunan finds that in cases of strong intergenerational bonds, adult guardians (including parents and grandparents) form a coalition to strategize the care arrangement and mobilize educational resources within their reach to enhance children’s study (Gu, 2017; Gu, forthcoming).

As shown above, I capture a consistent bent in a mainstream media outlet towards pathologizing migrant families and moralizing the challenges they face in raising their children. The various dimensions of rural migrants’ family lives, including parent–child separation, lack of intensive parenting, and grandparents as sole parenting figures, are problematized for failing to live up to a hegemonic family model based on urban middle-class families’ experiences (Kuan, 2015; Yang, 2018). In a striking resemblance to the culture of poverty thesis in the US (Katz, 1989), which framed poverty, particularly among minority groups, as a way of life passed down through generations (Lewis, 1959) or a ‘tangle of pathology’ in the family (Moynihan, 1965), the dominant discourse in China adopts a neoliberal narrative to assign the blame of left-behind children’s plight to the moral failings of individuals (or more specifically their mothers), rather than the structural inequality conditioning their disadvantaged positions. In this context, alternative ways of ‘doing’ and ‘being’ family are rendered unnatural and stigmatized.

**Addressing the ‘left-behind children problem’: Public policies**

In this section, I examine policy documents and initiatives since the early 2000s to understand politics and governance through the work of the repressive state apparatus, drawing on Althusser’s (2014) work. In particular, my analysis extends to not only the practices of active intervention and regulation that these documents and initiatives promote, but also what is beyond the scope of governance as revealed in these texts. In other words, non-governance is regarded as part of the governance mode under study.

Table 3 presents a list of policy documents and initiatives adopted by the central government and relevant organs to address issues facing left-behind children, covering the
| Year   | Domain       | Policy documents/initiatives                                                                                     | Key positions                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2006   | Work plan    | Plan on the establishment of a special workforce for rural left-behind children                               | A special workforce was established, with 14 government organizations and ministries on task: to establish a long-term mechanism for the work on left-behind children (hereafter LB children); to conduct in-depth investigations and improve legal and regulatory systems and policies; to promote a monitoring network of schools, families, and society, and create a good environment. |
| 2006   | Policy       | Ministry of Education policy on implementing ‘Several Opinions of the State Council on Solving the Problem of Migrant Workers’ | Mobilize the education system to organize various vocational schools, adult schools, training institutions, community schools, and primary and middle schools to actively carry out vocational skills training for migrant workers and ensure that their children receive equal compulsory education. |
| 2007   | Campaign     | ‘Sharing the Same Blue Sky’ national program for rural left-behind and migrant children led by the All-China Women’s Federation and 13 other departments | To support consolidation of government actions: (1) government policies, regulations, and legislation; (2) investment in key projects; To defend migrants’ children’s rights (implement the legal system of guardianship over minors; enforce Minor Protection Act and Compulsory Education Law; provide legal services to victims; crack down on crimes that violate the rights and interests of LB children); To initiate ‘caring actions’ (experiment ‘substitute parents,’ ‘family phone-call value-adds,’ as well as mutual aid activities among students); To create a healthy environment for LB and migrant children through mass media and propaganda projects. |
| 2007   | Policy       | Notice on implementing the central government’s instructions and actively caring for LB and migrant children  | Call for provincial-level governments and affiliated departments to facilitate the work: to fully recognize the importance of the issue; to carefully resolve educational management issues related to LB and migrant children; to enhance hukou management and rights protection for LB and migrant children; to improve social assistance for LB and migrant children; to gradually promote medical care services for LB and migrant children; to enhance care and support for LB and migrant children; to strengthen the Party’s leadership over the work for LB and migrant children. |
| 2010   | Campaign     | National family education guidelines                                                                          | Guidance on family education for newlyweds, pregnant women, parents/guardians of children under 18 (by child developmental stages: prenatal, 0–3, 4–6, 7–12, 13–15, 16–18). |
| 2013   | Legislation  | PRC Law on the Protection of Minors: latest amendments                                                        | Article 10: prohibit domestic violence against minors; Article 12: parents or other guardians should learn about family education, properly perform guardianship duties, and raise and educate minors; relevant state agencies and social organizations should provide family education guidance to minors’ parents or other guardians; Article 16: if the parents are unable to perform the guardianship of the minors due to migrant work or other reasons, they should entrust the guardianship to other adults who have the ability; Article 53: if a parent or guardian fails to perform guardianship duties or infringes the legal rights and interests of the minor under guardianship, and does not change after education, the people’s court may revoke his/her guardianship based on the report of the relevant person or unit, and designate another guardian by law. |

(Continued)
| Year | Domain | Policy documents/initiatives | Key positions |
|------|--------|------------------------------|---------------|
| 2014 | Policy | ‘Opinions on Further Promoting the Reform of the Household Registration System’ | Objectives: to further adjust the hukou migration policy, unify the urban and rural hukou registration system, fully implement the residence permit system, and steadily expand basic public services in cities and towns to cover all permanent residents; to achieve the transfer of about 100 million agricultural population and other permanent residents in urban areas. *Hukou* conversion policies: remove restrictions in settlement towns and small cities; reduce restrictions in medium-sized cities (500,000–1 million) in an orderly fashion; reasonably set the conditions for settlement in big cities (1–3 million); strictly control the population size of megacities (>5 million). |
| 2016 | Policy | State Council’s ‘Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas’ | Principles: (1) Enhance family responsibilities. To carry out family guardianship responsibilities, guardians must perform their duties in accordance with the law, and first consider the interests of children in family development; strengthen the supervision and guidance of family guardians and entrusted guardians to ensure that children are properly guarded and cared for. (2) Enhance government leadership. Care and protection of LB children in rural areas constitute important work for governments at all levels; implement county and township people’s government territorial responsibilities; strengthen the supervisory responsibility and guidance of relevant departments such as civil affairs; improve LB children’s care services and assistance protection mechanisms; and effectively protect the LB children’s laws, rights, and interests. (3) Adopt a whole-society approach. Make the best use of village (resident) committees, group organizations, social organizations, professional social workers, volunteers, etc., and strive to resolve the difficulties and problems encountered by LB children in their lives and growth, and form a caring society; provide good atmosphere for LB children. (4) Address both the symptoms and the roots. Based on the current situation, a commitment to improve policies and measures, improve working mechanisms, and focus on resolving outstanding issues such as the lack of guardianship for LB children. A commitment to take a long-term view and coordinate urban and rural development to fundamentally resolve the problem of LB children. |
| 2016 | Campaign | Ministry of Civil Affairs, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Public Security carry out ‘touch-bottom investigations’ (modi paicha) on left-behind children in rural areas | Redefined the concept of ‘LB children’; released an updated statistic of the LB children population. |
| 2016 | Policy | State Council’s ‘Opinions on Strengthening the Care of Children in Difficult Conditions’ (kunjing ertong) | Cover four categories of children (orphans, disease/disabled children, children in poverty); establish a three-level government network: county, town, and village (community); coordinate inter-departmental mechanisms; encourage participation of professional groups/organizations and social forces. |
| 2019 | Policy | ‘Opinions on Further Improving the Care Services for Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas and Children in Difficult Conditions’ | Earmark funding for social care of LB children and other children in difficulties; specify the roles/responsibilities of Juvenile Rescue and Protection Agency, child welfare supervisor, and child director. |
same observation period, from 2006 to 2019, as in the media discourse analysis earlier. I roughly divide the policy into two phases, with the first phase focusing on policing rural migrant families and the ongoing second phase adopting a pluralistic approach, besides disciplining the families. A caveat is that given that policies adopted in the second phase are still in their early stage of implementation, the current analysis of them is largely based on the underlying rationale, which remains consistent with the earlier phase.

Regulating and disciplining the rural migrant family

By and large, we observe a pattern of perpetuating ideal notions of family and childcare which elude migrant families, thus rendering them deviant from the state’s view, which is consistent with the dominant media discourse shown in the previous section.

As noted, 2006 marked the year when left-behind children became a policy priority (Tan, 2011). The State Council Agricultural Work Office set up a special working group to address related issues, bringing 13 different government organizations and ministries on task. Up until the early 2010s, many ‘opinions,’ ‘notices,’ and guidelines were issued and multiple campaigns were organized to address ‘the left-behind children problem’: in 2006 the Ministry of Education reaffirmed their commitment to building more rural boarding schools to accommodate left-behind children; in 2007 the All-China Women’s Federation launched the campaign ‘Sharing the Same Blue Sky’ to care for left-behind children, and to conduct evidence-based research on their lives; national family education guidelines issued in 2010 detailed age-specific child developmental milestones and parenting guidelines; the second amendment to the Law on the Protection of Minors was enacted in 2013, whereby Article 16 specified: ‘If the parents are unable to perform the guardianship of the minors due to migrant work or other reasons, they should entrust the guardianship to other adults who have the ability,’ and Article 53 further specified:

If a parent or guardian fails to perform guardianship duties or infringes the legal rights and interests of the minor under guardianship, and does not change after education, the people’s court may revoke his/her guardianship based on the application of the relevant person or unit, and designate another guardian according to law.

As seen here, by focusing on policing rural migrant families against normative parenting ideals and threatening to punish migrant parents for their inability to be physically involved in their children’s lives (i.e. by stripping their guardianship roles), such policies, based on an individualized and moral definition of the problem, betray a strong anti-welfare neoliberal stance.

Moreover, characterized by various political campaigns featuring formalistic (often empty) slogans, numerous policy initiatives attempted to ‘educate’ rural migrant families by normalizing urban middle-class parenting and family practices, while ignoring the socio-economic realities that migrant families confront in carrying out everyday life. A case in point is the family education guidelines of 2010, which aimed at equipping parents and substitute guardians with ‘universally applicable’ and ‘scientific’ parenting skills. In a section under the title of ‘family education guidance for special families,’ households with left-behind children were singled out for ‘guidance’:
Parents/guardians are guided to enhance their sense of guardianship responsibilities and carefully fulfil their obligations: 1) as far as possible, one parent should stay at home to take care of children. If conditions allow, migrant mothers with infants should bring their children along to ensure that infants are breast-fed and well cared for; 2) the left-behind parents or entrusted guardians in rural areas should be instructed to pay attention to children’s education, communicate more with children, and give full attention to children’s moral development and spiritual needs.

By issuing such ‘instructions,’ the authorities assumed a pedagogical role in ‘guiding’ how migrant parents and their substitutes should raise children. They imposed on rural migrant families a set of hegemonic urban middle-class parenting (especially maternal) ideals that privilege the mother–child bond, the ‘natural’ way of breastfeeding, and education-oriented socialization. Meanwhile, the guidelines ignored structural constraints that make such ideals unattainable for rural migrant families: lack of employment opportunities in rural areas that necessitate migration as a livelihood strategy, entrenched hukou-based discrimination in cities that make family life and migrant labor incompatible, and the challenges in raising grandchildren faced by elderly guardians. Such willful ignorance of structural constraints is consistent with the dominant moralist discourse that pathologizes rural migrant families, as described earlier. Due to these limitations, such ‘educational’ projects were unlikely to achieve their intended effects. With more peasants joining the migratory workforce, the population of left-behind children grew larger: according to the 2010 census, 61 million children under 17 could be defined as left-behind children (ACWF, 2013; Duan et al., 2013). The crisis discourse around left-behind children did not abate.

Even in recent years as the government has begun to experiment with new models, the stance on disciplining and policing rural migrant families remains firm, if not more aggressive. In 2016, a report released by the Department of Civil Affairs after a ‘touch-bottom investigation’ (modi paicha) claimed that there were only 9.02 million rural left-behind children in China (MCA, 2016). The drastic reduction in number was largely derived from a far narrower definition, which maintained that: (1) a child counts as a left-behind child only if both parents are migrants or one parent has migrated while the other is ‘not capable of performing guardianship duties’; and (2) he/she is not over 16 years in age, rather than 18, which is the legal definition of adulthood in China (MCA, 2016). This restricted definition, however, fits the narrative of ‘the pathological rural migrant family,’ which legitimizes stronger, often authoritarian, state intervention. Such an approach is further reflected in the ‘Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas’ (hereafter CPLBC), which aims to strengthen migrant parents’ sense of responsibility: (1) by encouraging them to ‘bring along underage children to where they work or entrust relatives or other adults with guardianship capabilities’; (2) by advising them to ‘always keep in contact with their left-behind children to better understand their life, study and psychological conditions, and provide more emotional support’; (3) by meting out punishment to ‘promptly advise and stop’ parent guardians or their substitutes failing in their duties. A year after this policy became effective, MCA published a follow-up report, claiming that a total of more than 680,000 left-behind children were in secure guardianship, mainly through reassigning guardians
or persuading one parent (presumably mothers) to return home. Furthermore, stricter enforcement of punishment (through legal or administrative channels) of deviant parenting behaviors has been adopted: more than 90,000 ‘negligent’ (shizhi) parents were subject to ‘criticism and education’ and 282 to ‘public security administrative penalties’ (zhian guanli chufa), 16 ‘negligent’ parents were held criminally responsible, and another 17 were stripped of custody of their children (MCA, 2017).

**Beyond the scope: What remains to be fully addressed**

As noted, the situation of left-behind children until the mid-2010s did not improve significantly, despite numerous policies and campaigns. The measures focusing on disciplining and educating migrant families seemed to have limited effect. Extreme cases such as the Bijie suicides in 2015 cast a new spotlight on this social group and stirred intense public emotions, which prompted the government to enact multiple measures such as hukou reform, community support, and professionalization of welfare provision, besides continued family regulation and education. For example, in February 2016 the State Council issued the CPLBC document, i.e. ‘the first policy response and institutional arrangement for the increasingly severe left-behind children problem’ (Wang, 2018). Later in June, the ‘Opinions on Strengthening the Care of Children in Difficult Conditions’ was promulgated, which specifically targeted four types of children in difficulties (kunjing ertong), left-behind children included. With the acknowledgment of the challenges that families face caring for vulnerable children, a comprehensive system comprising ‘four lines of defense’ (sidao fangxian) was proposed: the family’s role as the major guardian and caretaker, the role of local governments to develop feasible policies and ensure their enforcement, the role of schools in educating children, and the role of social forces (shehui liliang, including village or residential committees, social welfare organizations, professional social workers, and volunteers) in mobilizing social resources (Wang, 2018).

Despite these recent initiatives and policies, the central pillar of the state’s apparatus underpinning migrant families’ structural positioning in society, i.e. the authoritarian hukou system, is yet to be fully dismantled. The new hukou reform announced in 2014 aiming to reduce barriers for hukou conversion in urban areas in cities is found to be multi-tiered and differentiated by the host cities’ positions in China’s urban hierarchy. Popular migration destinations (large cities and extra-large cities) implement points-based systems to selectively incorporate migrants in public provision of services (State Council, 2014). According to Zhang (2018), the emerging mobility/citizenship regime in extra-large or first-tier cities based on the points-system ‘introduces dense stratifications that seek to facilitate the mobility of the privileged few and immobilize or displace – no longer directly through administrative commands but through the market – others.’ In other words, instead of blatantly excluding migrants in host cities as was practiced in the past, the points-system screens out low-skilled rural migrants through a neoliberal logic that differentiates individuals’ deservingness of social citizenship based on seemingly ‘meritocratic’ criteria, including educational attainment, skills level, estate ownership, etc. Such a system creates a de facto marginal status for rural migrants and their dependants. A case in point was the eviction of 150,000 residents in Baishizhou – the largest ‘urban
village’ (chengzhongcun) in Shenzhen – in July 2019, due to a government gentrification project (Zhang, 2019). Many were migrants worried about their children’s education, since the points-based system required students’ families to produce a rental deed showing an extended period of legal residence in the designated areas. Some of the children in these families would likely be sent back to their hometowns as new left-behind children.

It is easy to note the paradoxical roles designated to rural migrant families in the state’s imaginary: the economic strategy in urban regimes demands that rural migrant families re-spatialize their family life across geographic locations, while the state welfare system expects them to be the sole provider of care and support for their dependants, resorting to punitive measures to discipline their ‘deviant’ family practices.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have sought to analyze the discursive and institutional framework behind the Chinese state’s recent efforts in addressing the ‘left-behind children problem’ since the 2000s. I revealed seemingly paradoxical and ‘disingenuous’ articulations of children’s value in dominant discourses and public policies. On the one hand, a nationalist discourse, based on the social Darwinian ethos of ‘survival of the fittest’ in China’s modern history, views a socially constructed development crisis among left-behind children as a potential threat to national prosperity, hence the promotion of government interventions. On the other hand, a conceptualization of welfare provision by the state and its ruling elites makes ‘pathological’ migrant families singularly liable for providing a ‘normal’ family environment for their children’s development. Such inconsistencies and paradoxes derive from the state’s neoliberal-authoritarian approach in governing the rural migrant population, which legitimizes its delegation of the responsibilities of caring for the left-behind children to their ‘culturally deficit families’ without redressing the political-economic structures of the state’s own making in constraining the familial practices for these families.

Such a discursive and institutional environment, I argue, puts millions of rural migrant families in a bind: in a political economy that strategically exploits their disadvantaged position as second-class citizens in urban China and compels their split-household arrangements, dominant discourses and policies pathologize their family structure and practices, and aggressively discipline and police their family life in the name of developing their children for the nation’s future. This constitutes symbolic as well as substantive violence against the rural migrant population who have made enormous sacrifices for China’s post-reform economic miracle. As such, these families bear the double brunt of the inequalities and injustices generated in a capitalist system based on differential citizenship rights as well as a neoliberal welfare regime failing to address staggering social and economic disparities, which have been, and are being, reproduced across generations. For China to achieve more equitable and sustainable development, policy-makers and scholars will need to scrutinize, reflect, and reform the governance mode towards the rural migrant population that underpins current public discourses and social policies.

This study is also germane to future work on migration and left-behind children in various developing contexts. First, we showed that the state-imposed ‘pathological migrant family’ discourse obscures insights on the role of grandparenting and other
alternative ways of ‘doing’ family, widely practiced in Asian societies, in mitigating the disadvantage experienced by migrant families, which could be further explored in future research. Second, prospective work on transnational migrants and their left-behind families in other Asian contexts like the Philippines and Indonesia could similarly examine how state governance regimes (in both sending and receiving societies), in the context of the development of global neoliberal capitalism, interact with local family culture and structure in shaping the daily life of left-behind children.

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**ORCID iD**

Gu Xiaorong [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5479-9669](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5479-9669)

**Notes**

1. The *hukou* system was put in place in the 1950s to control population mobility. Since 1978, due to mass internal migration, the system has sparked intense public and scholarly debates. Since the 2000s, various experiments in *hukou* reform have taken place to decouple public services from *hukou* locality or open pathways of *hukou* conversion. A points-system in selecting economic migrants has been in place since the 2010s in popular migration destinations across China.

2. Unlike the ‘mouthpieces’ of the earlier Communist regime, the media in post-reform China have experienced a process of commercialization, where except for a few central official titles such as *People's Daily*, newspapers have been encouraged to initiate market-oriented reforms and generate revenue from advertisements. Media scholars document the emergence of two paradigms, i.e. the ‘official’ press and the ‘market-oriented’ press. Despite the diversification and commercialization, a better understanding of the media landscape should contextualize it within an institutional framework through which the Party-led state exerts a considerable amount of control over the organization, personnel decisions, and the editorial process of newspapers.

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Author biography

Xiaorong Gu is a Research Fellow at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Her research interests include childhood and youth studies, migration, family, education, gender, social stratification, China’s political economy, and mixed-methods research. She is Guest Editor of two forthcoming special issues of Child Indicators Research and Current Sociology, respectively, on the shifting valuation of children in contemporary Asian societies and the Global South at large.
Résumé
La performance économique de la Chine depuis la réforme pour récupérer une économie planifiée socialiste au bord de la faillite est souvent décrite comme un miracle, mais une vérité inconfortable menant à ce miracle est cette stratégie de développement urbain qui capitalise sur l’offre apparemment illimitée de travailleurs migrants des zones rurales bon marché, tout en réprimant leurs revendications dans les villes. Dans ce contexte, bien que les migrants ruraux puissent travailler dans les zones urbaines, leur accès aux prestations et aux services sociaux dans les villes d’accueil est limité. En conséquence, des millions de ménages familiaux migrants adoptent une double stratégie pour séparer la production économique et la reproduction familiale dans leurs espaces géographiques. Un groupe démographique particulier touché par cette migration de masse - les enfants ruraux abandonnés - a largement attiré l’attention des débats publics et des débats politiques. En interrogeant de manière critique les discours et les politiques publiques qui abordent « le problème de l’enfance abandonnée », cette étude aborde les arguments paradoxaux sur la valeur de l’enfance qui composent ces discours et politiques dans la Chine contemporaine. D’une part, un discours nationaliste se nourrit du récit négatif sur les suzhi ou enfants abandonnés et favorise un sentiment de crise nationale parmi les élites, ce qui justifie une approche hautement interventionniste de la part des politiques gouvernementales. D’un autre côté, les politiques publiques révèlent une forte position familiariste et anti protection sociale, basée sur une logique individualisante qui reproche aux « familles migrantes pathologiques » de ne pas assurer une éducation de qualité et de créer un environnement médiocre pour l’apprentissage des enfants légitimant ainsi la surveillance invasive, disciplinant les familles de migrants et limitant les dépenses sociales pour répondre aux besoins de ces enfants abandonnés. Au fur et à mesure que l’étude progresse, le rôle de l’autoritarisme néolibéral chinois dans l’articulation et la dissimulation simultanée des limites entre les responsabilités publiques et familiales pour la prise en charge des enfants vulnérables se révèle.

Mots-clés
Enfants abandonnés, valeur des enfants, discours, politique, Chine

Resumen
El desempeño económico de China desde la reforma para recuperar una economía planificada socialista estancada al borde de la bancarrota suele describirse como un milagro, pero una verdad incómoda que conduce a este milagro es esa estrategia de desarrollo urbano que capitaliza el suministro aparentemente ilimitado de trabajadores migrantes rurales baratos al tiempo que reprime sus reivindicaciones en las ciudades. En este contexto, aunque los migrantes rurales puedan trabajar en el medio urbano, su acceso a beneficios y servicios sociales en las ciudades de acogida está restringido. Como resultado, millones de hogares de familias migrantes adoptan una doble estrategia para separar la producción económica y la reproducción familiar en sus espacios geográficos. Un grupo demográfico particular afectado por esta migración masiva – el de los niños rurales abandonados- ha llamado la amplia atención de la discusión pública y los debates sobre políticas. Al interrogar críticamente los discursos y políticas
públicas que abordan “el problema de la infancia abandonada”, este estudio aborda los paradójicos argumentos sobre el valor de la infancia que componen estos discursos y políticas en la China contemporánea. Por un lado, un discurso nacionalista se alimenta del relato negativo sobre los suzhi o niños abandonados y promueve una sensación de crisis nacional entre las élites, lo que justifica un enfoque altamente intervencionista por parte de las políticas gubernamentales. Por otro lado, las políticas públicas revelan una fuerte postura familiarista y anti-bienestarista, basada en una lógica individualizadora que culpa a las “familias migrantes patológicas” por no dar una crianza de calidad y crear un entorno pobre para el aprendizaje de los niños, legitimando así la vigilancia invasiva, el disciplinamiento de las familias migrantes y la limitación del gasto social para atender las necesidades de esos niños abandonados.

A medida que avanza el estudio se revela el papel del autoritarismo neoliberal chino en la articulación y el simultáneo disimulo de los límites entre las responsabilidades públicas y familiares para con el cuidado de la infancia vulnerable.

**Palabras clave**
Niños abandonados, el valor de los niños, discurso, política, China.