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# “Children of Great Development”: Difficulties in the Education and Development of Rural Left-Behind Children

Lu Pan and Jingzhong Ye

*Abstract:* Over the past 30 years in China, the development ideology—a model of economic development that is characterized by urbanization, industrialization, and modernization—has brought about many changes and consequences, including increased migration by the rural population, sharp adjustments in urban-rural education policy, the decline of rural society, and a deteriorating educational context facing rural left-behind children. At the family level, labor force migrations have had a far-reaching impact on left-behind children. At the school level, the decline of rural education and urbanization trend have derailed the healthy development of left-behind children. At the community level, the deterioration of rural values amid rapid urban-rural changes has aggravated the developmental risks facing left-behind children. Among rural left-behind children, those who are older (post-compulsory schooling age) and girls, and from poverty-stricken backgrounds face more developmental risks. The authors take into consideration empirical research from regions such as Sichuan and Henan, provide an account of the educational and developmental challenges facing rural left-behind children, and reflect on the developmentalist ideology underlying societal changes.

**Keywords:** developmental difficulties, developmentalism, education, reflections, rural left-behind children

## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, driven by the dual influence of globalization and capital development, China started on the path of state-guided industrialization, urbanization, and marketization; it has promoted economic growth and integration into the global market. Along with the loosening of the urban-rural system, those from the countryside were permitted to migrate into the cities for work. This rural-urban migration has continued from its peak in the 1990s to today. According to reports, Chinese migrant worker employment continued to increase in 2012, as reflected in the estimated total of 263 million migrant workers, among which 163 million were migrant workers who had left home.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, China is relying on this “limitless supply” of rural

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labor to create its world-renowned GDP “miracle.” The binary urban-rural structure based on the household registration system has been weakened, as reflected in the migrants’ transition from peasant to industrial worker; however, the urban-rural structure still inhibits the government from systemically recognizing their status in the cities (Sun 2003; Chen 2005; Zhao 2007). Relying on the current household registration system, urban administration systems and labor, social security, and public education systems have not acknowledged these urban workers as “urban residents.” The result is that it is difficult for laborers who have left the countryside to obtain status, rights, and security equal to that of urban residents in the cities. As most can barely subsist of their cheap labor wages, their occupational and social living status can be characterized as marginal, transitional and unstable (Fu 2006; Ren and Pan 2007). Their marginalized predicament in the cities has also led to the formation of a “split labor force reproduction model” (Shen 2006), in which the rural labor force must surmount formidable obstacles to move their families when migrating to the cities for work. They must leave some of their family members (mainly women, children, and the elderly) in the countryside, thereby forming a separated family model; such a phenomenon is typical today in Chinese villages that are predominately composed of left-behind women, left-behind children, and left-behind elderly.

Among the rural left-behind population group, left-behind children have received much attention. Left-behind children initially garnered public attention in 2002 and especially after 2004. In the nearly 10 years since then, persistent unbalanced urban-rural development has hastened the trend of rural labor migration, thus normalizing and universalizing this migration phenomenon; the population of left-behind children has also increased. During 2004–2005, the majority of official discourse, academic studies, and media reports estimated the number of rural left-behind children at the time as 20 million (Pan and Ye 2009). By 2013, according to the “Research Report on the State of Chinese Rural Left-Behind Children and Urban-Rural Migrant Children” issued by the All-China Women’s Federation that year, there were already more than 60 million rural left-behind children in China.<sup>2</sup> Over eight years, the number of rural left-behind children doubled; the dramatic growth reveals the long-term trend and uniqueness of China’s rural labor force migration, as well as the enormous significance for studying left-behind children. Because the outcomes of “left-behind” status are closely related to childhood development, education has always been an important field in studying left-behind children. However, the past 10 years of developmentalist ideology and national development strategy toward industrialization, urbanization, and modernization has led to increasing rural population migration and split families, strong adjustments in urban-rural education policies and resources, as well as a decline and destitution of the countryside. Here, many social realities are intertwined, rendering the social ecology of rural left-behind children increasingly worse, and thereby leading the academic world to become increasingly concerned about rural education.

In 2004 the research team “Left-behind Population in rural China” in College of Humanities and Development studies of China Agricultural University began researching the population of rural left-behind children. To better understand China’s developing rural society, the research team examined a wide research field, while accounting for the complex and changing social reality on the field. From 2007 to the present, the research team conducted action research in four rural communities and 13 rural schools in Sichuan, Jiangsu, Shaanxi, Anhui, and Hunan. It organized school activities and community activities to promote child-centered education; during this process, it conducted sustained academic observations and research focusing on

topics ranging from rural communities to education. In 2013, the research team performed “Poverty and social impact analysis: gender dimensions of social exclusion in sending areas” in four villages in Gushi County and Xin County in Henan Province; in its social on-site research, it accomplished 177 in-depth interviews with different stakeholders, including the left-behind population, ordinary villagers, and county and township cadres, thus resulting in rich qualitative data. It provides an analytical account of the deep impact that nearly 30 years of continuous population migration has had on rural production, social care, population concerns, family livelihood, and community development. Here we analyze the interviews and cases from the aforementioned action research and on-site research as the data.<sup>3</sup> We analyze and reflect on problems of education and development for rural left-behind children from perspectives of sociology and developmental studies. Under the backdrop of urbanized, industrialized development, the education field has been deeply influenced by developmental ideology, while education policy and practice reflect economic reasoning that prioritize efficiency, effectiveness, and quantity, thereby creating problems for “rural education” (Liu, Liu, and Lin 2012). Furthermore, the penetration of developmental thinking into daily life has challenged and undermined the nonschool education provided by families and communities to left-behind children. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the education and development costs borne by rural left-behind children in this era of tremendous growth, we apply a macro framework of developmentalism to investigate the developmental encounters of left-behind children in school education, family life course and rural transformation.

### RURAL FAMILIES: GENERATIONAL REPLACEMENT OF LABOR FORCE MIGRATION HAS A FAR-REACHING IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

Families are the main sites for children’s socialization and thus play an important role in the development and educational growth for children. Parents leaving home for work cause an absence and interruption in parent-child education, which has a far-reaching impact on the development of left-behind children. Similar accounts of the importance of family education have become a consistent finding in studies of left-behind children. This importance has resonated among many urban workers, which explains the high degree of societal attention targeted to the problem of migrant children’s urban integration and education. However, left-behind children group also exist as a vulnerable population and are even increasing in number, thus situating family education as an important factor affecting a generation of rural children. From the emergence of left-behind children in the early 21st century until now, there have been enormous changes in the structural makeup of rural labor force’s migration; such changes have generated an important impact on the population structure, family structures, and family life cycles of rural families, which have caused deep changes in the environment for family education and development of left-behind children.

Urban-rural migration by the rural population began in the early 1980s. After 30 years, this phenomenon has evolved from an economically-motivated behavior into a normalized way of living that has deeply penetrated rural Chinese society. Using Gushi County and Xin County in Henan Province as examples to understand migration changes of the rural labor force, labor force migrations first started in villages with very low man-land ratio and those villages in

extreme dire straits; this phenomenon gradually expanded to various rural regions of different types and with different resources. The demographics of the migrants group expanded from the pioneering peasants who journeyed into cities with an attitude of risk-taking and testing one’s luck, to ordinary rural residents with the ability to labor; similarly, it expanded from predominately strong, young men to male and female villagers of a broader age range. While the migration strategies of laborers initially relied heavily on specialized regional networks and social relationships for employment, they evolved into diverse occupational distribution that encompassed the entire country and even other countries. Table 1 shows the changing trends in population migrations in Dagu Village, Gushi County, Henan Province. Table 2 shows changes in the number of left-behind people in four villages in Jinzhu County, Sichuan Province. Collectively, both tables reflect the constant and intensifying trend of the rural labor force migrating for work.

With the intensification of labor force migration, the composition of migrant workers transitioned from the first generation to a new generation of migrant workers. The “2012 Development Report for China’s Floating Population” issued in 2012 by the National Population and Family Planning Commission emphasizes that China’s urban population ratio had already surpassed 50%, the size of the floating population had reached historically high numbers, and deep changes have occurred in the volume, direction, and composition of the floating population. The report indicates that the average age of China’s current floating population is around 28 years old; the new generation of migrant workers born in the 1980s already account for nearly half of the working age floating population.<sup>4</sup> The following year, the “2013 China Floating Population Development Report” further emphasized that 75% of the new generation of floating population had left home in their 20s.<sup>5</sup> In Gushi County in Henan Province, an agricultural county that was the first to join the migrant labor trend, the first generation of migrant laborers (who had started moving in the 1980s) gradually lost its urban working capabilities and returned to rural agricultural work. Some second-generation migrant workers born in the 80s were maintaining separated family structures as part of their family members were left-behind. For unmarried young migrants, the separation from agriculture and the countryside was even more severe; they also possessed a stronger identification with and attraction for urban life.

With the intergenerational composition changes of the rural floating population over time, many new generation of migrant workers who grew up under the migration-motivated, left-behind split-family model again utilized the same family separation in creating a new generation of left-behind children. Online, one news article title, “Foshan Female Migrant Born in the 90s Started Work Early, Married Early, Had Child,” used the phrase “second-generation

TABLE 1  
Changing Trends in Population Migrations in Dagu Village, Gushi County, Henan Province

	<i>Total population (people)</i>	<i>Labor force population (people)</i>	<i>Migrant labor force (people)</i>	<i>Main labor force migration destination</i>	<i>Working income proportion of economic income</i>
2007	3,370	2,100	1,300	Guangdong	70%
2013	3,341	2,065	1,400	Guangdong, Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin	80%

Data source: compiled from empirical research results.

TABLE 2  
 Changing Trends in Number of Left-Behind People in Four Villages in Jinzhu County, Sichuan Province

	<i>Total households</i>	<i>Total number of people</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Left-behind women</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Left-behind children</i>	<i>Elderly</i>	<i>Left-behind elderly</i>
2011	3,515	11,158	4,043	389	1,767	462	1,656	385
2014	3,155	9,715	3,716	1,015	1,212	617	1,428	965

Data source: compiled from empirical research results.

left-behind,”<sup>6</sup> a phrase that still has not been accepted in academic circles and raises more concerns about family rearing of the “second-generation left-behind.” On the one hand, the new generation of migrant workers culturally identifies with urban consumerist values. Some young, unmarried workers even have become part of the “moonlight clan,” which feels “it is healthy to eat and use up everything you have” and valuing individualist material pursuits more than family responsibility. On the other hand, a considerable proportion of the new generation migrant workers have childhood memories of being left-behind children. Their parents’ absence left a noticeable lack of love and care experiences during their childhood. The left-behind experience of separated parent-child has made many children feel lonely and isolated, even negatively impact their character formation, worldviews, and life views. Today, the new generation of migrant workers who experience being left behind are currently facing or are about to face the test of “how to be parents.” Their views on family and life formed in their childhood years impact their own rearing behavior, which determines the family context for the new generation of left-behind children and whether they develop into a troubled group; such worries are not entirely unwarranted. In Houchang Village of Gushi County, Henan Province, as one women’s representative told us, over the past 3 years in the village more than 90% of newborns could not get breastfeeding by their mothers. The mothers of these children returned home from the cities right when they were about to give birth; they immediately set off and migrated away for work when their children were a 100 days or even just a month old. The children were entrusted in the care of the left-behind elderly, who fed the babies with milk powder. In Houchang Village, a girl who was about to temporarily return home to prepare for her wedding had similar plans for raising her own children in the future.

#### Case: Zhang Yulan, Female, 20 Years Old, Works at a Factory in Kunshan

She had just returned to her village two days prior when Lu Pan saw her. Before the New Year, she was going to marry a young man from a neighboring village; after marrying, they would migrate together for work again. Zhang Yulan’s father worked away from home throughout the year. When Zhang Yulan was 16 years old, she also started working away from home in places like Kunshan and Guangdong; then a relative introduced her to a garment factory job in Kunshan. She never wanted to work in agriculture at home, “I have never planted a field. If I can’t plant a field how can I be a farmer at home?” She believed she would certainly continue to work: “If I don’t work, I will have nothing to eat.” When she has a child, she would be like the others in her village by leaving the child in the care of her elders and migrate to work away from home. She said, “We are in a money-oriented society now, everything requires money...you can’t gain something

without giving something up. You can't make money without giving up your child. Leaving my child at home and going away to work is out of family need, so others won't blame me."

Young parents working away from home have more hope in the cities they set down roots in, but the life pressure and uncertainty they face in the cities also makes it easier for them to decide to leave their children in the village. This also means that children will be left behind at younger ages and the left-behind cycles will be prolonged. In response, rural families can only raise their left-behind children during longer guardianship periods by older generations; in this process, the biological nurturing of the left-behind children is achieved, but social nurturing is weakened. Even though research has not yet conducted systematic follow-up observations on the "second-generation left-behind" children's development, we can anticipate that the increasingly lack of parents' education at an early age will create severe parent-child alienation; consequently, social relations, parent-child interaction, and even the development of healthy character and psychology will be impacted. We can say that the negative effects of rural labor force migration on left-behind children's development are continually accumulating, with a far-reaching impact on the entire rural population's development.

#### RURAL SCHOOLS: THE DECLINE OF RURAL EDUCATION AND URBANIZATION TREND HAS UNDERMINED LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

To a certain extent, parents working away from home weakens the education that families provide; the role of schools in the educational and development outcomes of left-behind children comes to the forefront. Generally, the migrant parents and guardians of left-behind children hope that rural schools will offer more education and supervisory services to improve students' academics, while providing a rich school life to compensate for the weakened family structure. Left-behind children themselves also carry many hopes of their schools' teaching condition, education concepts, and teaching environment. However, in a context that emphasizes the political thinking of developmentalism and prioritizes the economy above all else, rural school education is marginalized to be inferior to urban education; as it functions as a reproductive mechanism to produce the urban labor force, it cannot cultivate children's comprehensive development nor develop children's full potential. Under the combined influence of policies (such as urbanization and adjustments in the distribution of rural educational resources) and increased allocation of rural resources to the cities (e.g., education and population), rural education has been influenced by marketization and urbanization processes. Education has been marginalized by the economy and dominated by the doctrine of "urban-centrism." Currently, the value orientation, goals, content, evaluation systems, and resource distribution of rural education reflect an urban-bias in development. With the bias toward urban values, rural world values have been relegated to low status. Striving toward achieving urban-biased values has become the dominant pursuit of rural schools (Li 2013). Exam-orientation, emulating the cities, and encouraging students leaving the countryside (Hongyu 2005). Under the pressure of linking up with and competing with urban education, rural educational goals disregard the realities of rural economic development, educational development, and individual students' development, thus forming an atmosphere that blindly pursues students' admission rate into higher schools. The admission rate has become the sole criteria to evaluate rural education. To many rural schools, particularly rural secondary schools, the admission rate is also the rationale for their



existence during rapid educational urbanization. “No elementary schools at village level and no middle schools at township level” is a school consolidation principle reflected in policies that adjust the distribution of rural schools in many locales. For its education plan, Jinzhu County in Sichuan Province presented a plan with only two town/township secondary schools in the entire county by 2016. Faced with the constant, intense conflict between urban and rural education, the rural secondary schools that survive the fierce competition must resort to methods such as stricter campus discipline, polarized students classification based on their examination performance, and encouraging low achieving students to be sorted to vocational schools before graduation to increase admission rate and ensure their own survival.

#### Case: Partial Routine Record of Linhe Secondary School in Jinzhu County, Sichuan Province

6:35—wake-up bell rings, speaking is strictly forbidden before the wake-up bell, quickly get out of bed after the wake-up bell rings, heels of shoes point outward, toothbrushes and toothpaste are placed on the second square toward the bathroom, handkerchiefs may not be left about, the floor is swept first and then mopped with no water stains allowed.

7:40–8:20—breakfast, do not push or cause a ruckus; after breakfast, first graders fetch water.

12:40–13:10—lunch, line up and don’t cause a ruckus; after lunch, second graders fetch water.

17:00–17:50—dinner, after dinner-third graders fetch water; food may not be taken out of the classroom during meals; after the meal is finished, students may leave the classroom only after the life committee member inspection and consent.

21:30–22:00—bedtime, requirements: (1) have good personal hygiene; (2) do not run, jump, or make noise; (3) do not go anywhere the light does not shine. Entering others’ bedrooms is strictly forbidden, eating in bedrooms is strictly forbidden. Everyone in bed by 21:55, getting ready to sleep, doing anything affecting others’ rest is forbidden.

Apart from this, there are cameras for supervising student activities in the dorms; each dorm door has a transparent hole so teachers can monitor dorm discipline and hygiene at any time.

The examination-oriented school management method causes rural students to be lost and detest studying. Many students break the rules, choose to stay down, or drop out in resistance to the current education system. Not only does the urbanization of education disallow the fair development of urban and rural education, it diminishes mobility opportunities for rural students. In addition to churning out multiple cases of education failures, it also leaves psychological marks of deprivation and distortion on countless rural students. While discussing the educational patterns of her own family and students in her village, it is no wonder that a left-behind woman from Xin County in Henan said with surprise and emotion: “Parents work away from home, so children can go to school. Now our economic conditions are better and we can send our kids to school, but there aren’t any college students from the village anymore. The kids like school less and less, and there is a problem with the method of school education!” Motivating rural schools to care more for left-behind children so they can mitigate the weak family influence and insufficient care for rural left-behind children—such expectations are clearly more difficult to realize in the current trajectory of rural education.

The decline of rural education and urban-bias are reflected in the rural schools’ emulation of urban education and overall allocation of rural resources toward cities. As Qian (2006) says,



“Our rural education has fallen into misconceived ‘urban centralism.’ This is also an overall problem of Chinese education. Within China’s education system, rural education is situated in a neglected space. There is a severe lack of investment in rural education, as well as unequal distribution of education resources. All of these problems reflect an inclination toward urban centralism.” The concentration of rural education and resources in cities primarily relies on administrative processes to promote socioeconomic urbanization at the expense of socioeconomic urbanization. Rural students and families experience education urbanization as a dual-exploitation process: in the competition for high-quality educational resources, peasants must invest enormous financial and manpower resources in their children’s studies or be marginalized; the urbanization of education forces rural students to leave their villages for schooling at very young age, for left-behind children particularly it means further separation from their families after parents’ migration. The shifts in and urbanization of rural education has also facilitated the emergence of the “study companions” phenomenon. In Luyuan Town of Gushi County, Henan Province, about one-third of left-behind women who live in the county seat or towns/townships to accompany their children/grandchildren’s study. There are rental areas around the schools in the towns, townships, and county seat of Siguang Township, Xin County, Henan Province where left-behind women rent rooms for that purpose. Because they are too young, some left-behind children (whose parents both work away from home) even have their grandmothers come to the city to accompany them; being a “study companion” has become a heavy care burden for many left-behind elders. In rural communities, after the young and able labor force leaves, the population migration centered on children’s education further exacerbates the dispersal and destitution of villages.

Even though the rural school mapping and consolidation policies have already been halted, the shift of rural education resources to the cities has already occurred, thus solidifying and strengthening urbanization processes. On the one hand, the changes in rural schools have increased the education costs facing rural families, so families of left-behind children cannot continue to bear such costs; otherwise, children have to go far away from home for schooling with companion of left-behind women or elderly, facing further family separation. On the other hand, education urbanization has diminished mobility opportunities for rural children; the intensification of a grade-oriented, exam-focused education system smothers the children’s development potential and makes it harder for left-behind children to obtain holistic support and care through schooling. Because they cannot adapt or face obstacles to succeed in the urban-oriented school education, many left-behind children discontinue their studies and older left-behind children are prematurely pushed into society before they form positive values, to become reserves among the rural labor migration.

#### Case: Students’ classification and the flow of students in Linhe Secondary School in Jinzhu County, Sichuan Province

In 2014, there were around 1,200 graduates from the third year of middle school in the entire county, and the county high school only accepted 400 students in Jinzhu County, Sichuan Province. As the only remaining rural middle school in the county, each year there would be around 20 students qualified to enter into high school from Linhe Secondary School. In 2014, the middle school third year graduating class originally had 53 students; after the winter

break, this was reduced to 36 students. Of the students who left, 11 went to vocational school, while 6 chose to drop out and migrate for work. Right before the spring semester begins each year, the Jinzhu County vocational secondary school begins recruiting students. To ensure there are enough students for the secondary vocational school, the county education bureau gives the county middle school a student quota and includes student recruitment in the school's evaluation. According to teacher Zhang, the head teacher of the middle school third-year class, that year's class had a quota of 15 students, with 12 for spring recruitment and 3 for fall recruitment, but at that time one quota had not yet been met. "Just when the spring semester started this year, parent and school relations were very tense and there were major conflicts. The parents believed that the secondary vocational school was as good as the advertisement by school teachers and their children did not study well after going there; they felt they were tricked by the school." Very few students who go to secondary vocational school can make it to graduation. Most leave to work elsewhere after only studying for one or two months or just hang on until they get a diploma. Among the original 53 people in the class, apart from around 20 who were lucky enough to go to ordinary high school, more than half of them had to leave to find work after middle school graduation or one or two years after middle school graduation.

These students are in a critical period in their life: transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. For them, the physical and psychological development, changes in social interaction and networks, and encountering of life incidents would very likely generate feelings of confusion or loss in this transitional time, thus necessitating more parental care and school guidance. However, this transition coincides with the dual absence of parents' guidance and school education for left-behind children, which renders them to psychological, behavioral, or social adaptation troubles. Some left-behind children have become village "troublemakers" and problem adolescents. The older left-behind children, who have discontinued their studies, have started to drift to the margins of the city and countryside—urbanized education has caused them to lose a sense of belonging to their villages, and to cities they are nothing more than sojourners contributing their labor.

#### RURAL COMMUNITIES: THE LOSS OF RURAL VALUES AMID RAPID URBAN-RURAL CHANGES HAS INCREASED THE RISK FACTORS THAT AFFECT LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Rapid urban-rural social changes and the trend of the rural labor force's migration have mutually reinforced one another. Not only have social changes driven by economic growth motivated the separation of rural families and emergence of left-behind children, they have also weakened the family structure and deteriorated education; these processes have fundamentally shaken the basic value norms that held rural society together. Traditional rural society and villages comprised relatively closed communities founded on economic and clan blood ties. Individuals from rural societies maintain close relations through economic production processes, social interactions, and political activities, thereby developing strong cultural and psychological ties with a rural community. The social norms, personal networks, and social ties that formed the foundation of rural communities also became an important source for rural left-behind children to obtain social support at the community level. After reforms opened up China's economy, peasants and rural households exercised agency for economic self-determination and

independence, individual mobility gradually increased, and the rural communities no longer were isolated, close-knit communities. At the same time, the intensification of population migration weakened rural residents' identification and sense of belonging toward their rural communities; the consequent identity crisis manifested as deteriorating ways of production and living that had traditionally integrated villages. Due to rural residents' diminishing sense of belonging to their rural hometowns, reallocation of resources, deterioration of value norms, and economically fueled large-scale population migration, rural society is being "left behind" and marginalized. Traditional villages where people had previously looked after one another have transformed into hollow social communities.

The deep penetration of state and postreform social changes has gradually transformed rural communities from "acquaintance societies" into "semi-acquaintance societies" (He 2002). It is difficult for informal rural traditions and trust relations to maintain the order, norms and social cohesion of rural communities, particularly with the increased influence of formal systems and state bureaucratic systems. On top of this, continuing migration trends by the rural populace are further changing the rural "semi-acquaintance society" into a "stranger society." Strong factors for migration have undermined the social foundation needed for trust and familiarity within the rural community, while year-round migration has turned community members into strangers. In Qianlou Village of Gushi County, Henan Province, most young people only remember classmates from their village; they don't even know the names of many middle-aged villagers and neighbors. The transformation of an "acquaintance society" to a "stranger society" has also hastened the fall of traditional culture and ethics. Baseline social norms, such as respecting elders and caring for the young, have been severely threatened and challenged; the function of rural neighborhood in educating, caring and hazard warning for children has further weakened, thus increasing the developmental risks for left-behind children at the community level.

Due to the weakening of informal community norms, left-behind children's inadequate guardian supervision makes it easier for this vulnerable population to become victimized because of deteriorating social values. Now there are more than a thousand hits on Chinese domestic search engines for news reports on the sexual assault of left-behind girls; it is painful that most of the perpetrators of these incidents are male villagers, elders, and even relatives. These sexual assaults of left-behind girls continually trample on the moral baselines of rural society and, more seriously, reveal the enormous development risks that left-behind children face in the rapidly changing social environment. These left-behind children often suffer from heavy psychological pressure due to their guardian's supervisory negligence. They also face public opinion pressures in rural communities, thereby causing them enormous psychological harm. On the other hand, the decline of moral norms in society has made it easier for left-behind children to individually go astray or engage in problematic behavior, such as gambling, stealing, racing cars, Internet addiction, early pregnancy and even criminal actions. In rural communities such as those in Sichuan and Henan, the phenomenon of young mothers has especially attracted notice.

**Case: Xiaoli, Female, 16 Years Old, from Ge Village, Jinzhu County, Sichuan Province**

According to a county women's federation worker and the village women's representative Ms. Luo, Xiaoli's parents work away from home throughout the year, and Xiaoli lives with her

maternal grandparents. While at secondary technical school, Xiaoli met a young man outside of school and they developed a relationship, but their elders were not aware. After she was several months pregnant, Xiaoli's family found out. Her mother rushed back home to take care of Xiaoli's child. Now Xiaoli's mother is taking care of the child at home, while Xiaoli has dropped out of school and works away from home with her boyfriend.

#### Case: Li Tianming, Village Secretary from Dagu Village, Gushi County, Henan Province

"There used to be a lot of single people in the village because the villagers were poor and couldn't find partners. Now the problem is not that they can't find partners, but that young people are getting married and having kids earlier. The young people meet each other when they are working away from home, get pregnant and married while living together. Now the middle school and high school students in the village are having abortions, and the phenomenon of girls getting married and having kids early is more severe—they are having kids at 17 and 18."

The phenomena of minors getting pregnant before marriage and young mothers is integrally linked to the weakened family structure. However, changes in the overall rural social atmosphere and weakening of social norms may also be important contributing factors to young people engaging in premarital sex and teenage pregnancies. In conjunction with the entire country's prioritization of economic development and economic rationality, commodification and monetary ethics have gradually changed rural communities. In Dagu Village of Gushi County, Henan, villagers use the simple, direct phrase "laugh at the poor, not at prostitutes" to describe changes in the current rural social atmosphere and social attitudes, where material money is pursued at the cost of lowered moral standards. In community public opinion, situations of young women getting pregnant before marriage is nothing more than village small talk; no longer is this topic a moral taboo that requires public reflection. Due to the weakening of community moral standards, villagers no longer consider it unusual for minors to marry and have kids early; sometimes, they even view it as a part of the culture created by population migration. The rural community context is directly linked to the healthy development of left-behind children. But in the current educational context for left-behind children, urbanization and marketization processes are weakening the educational role historically carried by rural culture and traditional morals of rural communities. In conclusion, the rapid urban-rural change is responsible for the general decline in rural culture and communities.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of rural left-behind children lies in the continual urbanization of the countryside in response to a developmental ideology and an economic development model, which is guided by urbanization, marketization, and commodification. This ideology and model draw from rural resources to realize modern economic growth at the cost of rural families' happiness. The weakened family structure initially faced by rural left-behind children is itself a heavy social cost

borne by rural children and families in the pursuit of modern development. However, it is regrettable that with family separation and the weakening of family education for left-behind children, the persistent promotion of an urban-centered development model has intensified the rural hollowing in many communities and detachment of rural education resources; this has caused the complete collapse of the family, school, and community environments in which left-behind children live, resulting in a severe loss of educational progress and developmental difficulties among this vulnerable group. In families, the urban-centered economic model for development motivated increasing numbers of the rural labor force to leave their villages, thus leading to even younger left-behind children, longer periods of grandparents raising the children, and an extreme lack of family education. Along with the intergenerational replacement of labor migrants, it is likely that the negative impact of the left-behind experience on children may be reproduced in future generations. In schools, urbanization of education reflects an economic development model that allocates more resources into cities under policy directives; the consequent imbalanced urban-rural education has caused families and students themselves to assume huge economic pressure. For rural students, the existing education system allows a minority of elite test-takers into the cities, but leaves behind the majority, particularly left-behind children. In communities, the urban culture's focus on individuals and the commodity economy has weakened and devalued rural cultural norms based on agriculture and villages. Hallowed rural villages find it harder to provide social support to left-behind children, instead provide a distorted sociocultural context in which left-behind children face more developmental risks.

In response to the severe predicament facing left-behind children, all sectors of society must deeply reflect on the vulnerability of left-behind children subgroups: left-behind girls, older left-behind children, and left-behind children in remote, impoverished regions. In addition to sexual assault incidents on left-behind girls that the media has widely reported in recent years, there is an increasing trend of unmarried older left-behind girls becoming pregnant in rural communities; since some "young mothers" are forced to drop out of school and migrate for work because they cannot cope with their new role as parent, their own children soon become a new generation of left-behind children, thus repeating the vicious cycle of being "left behind." Whether older left-behind children can successfully transition from childhood to adolescence in the environment of absent parents, as well as weakened educational and traditional norms has direct bearing on their future family regeneration, social integration, and adaptation in urban-rural development. In impoverished mountainous regions and Western rural border regions, the left-behind children phenomenon is often linked to other societal problems caused by poverty. Not only does poverty motivate labor migration, but also it leads to unstable marriages and split families that rob left-behind children of family care; some "impoverished left-behind children" face challenging contexts simply to survive. Poor child nutrition, low education levels among elder caretakers, poor rural educational conditions, and other poverty-linked factors intersect to negatively impact the physical and mental development of left-behind children.

The educational dilemmas and prominent development obstacles faced by left-behind children present serious challenges. But looking at China's long-term development strategy, the government is continuing to pursue modernization through urbanization and industrialization. Consequently, it is anticipated that even more of the labor force will leave their hometowns, even more resources will be targeted to the cities, even more villages will hollow out

and become destitute in the urban-biased development process, and educational problems will intensify for left-behind children. Improving the education for left-behind children and mitigating the developmental risks of left-behind children are urgent matters; to do so requires the coordinated efforts of actors in the education domain and social science researchers, as well as deep reflection on the development model of economy supremacy with the outcome it has brought to the development of hundreds of thousands of left-behind children in China.

## NOTES

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2. All China Women’s Federation News “Woguo nongcun liushou ertong, chengxiang liudong ertong zhuangkuang yanjiu baogao (quanwen)” (Research Report on the State of Chinese Rural Left-Behind Children and Urban Migrant Children (full text)), <http://acwf.people.com.cn/n/2013/0510/c99013-21437965.html> (May 10, 2003).
3. The names that appear in the text have been changed for the townships, towns, villages, and people and the rural school in Jinzhu County, Sichuan.
4. China Population News, “Zhongguo liudong renkou fazhan baogao 2012” (Chinese Floating Population Development Report 2012) issued by the National Population and Family Planning Commission. [http://www.china.com.cn/renkou/2012-08/07/content\\_26155072.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/renkou/2012-08/07/content_26155072.htm). (August 7, 2012).
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