

**Exploring the lived experience of Chinese young adults who
were 'left-behind' in rural China: a qualitative study**

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Abstract

Left-behind children in China refers to an estimated 61 million children being separated for an extended period of time from one or both migrating parents. Little is known about the long-term impacts of being a left-behind child as people enter young adulthood. The absence of this knowledge prevents progress in policy and practice around parental migration and child protection and well-being in China.

The aim of this thesis was to expand knowledge about the phenomenon of left-behind children by learning from young Chinese adults who were 'left-behind' as children and / or adolescents. The study sought to capture and understand their experiences and the ways in which their present and anticipations of the future may be shaped by having been 'left-behind'.

This study employed a single point, online timeline interview methodology, with twenty young Chinese adults (aged 18-25yrs) who had been left-behind children. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study analysed in depth their experiences as children and their perspectives on those experiences as they become adults, with particular attention to their psychological well-being. Outcomes were interpreted using attachment theory and the literature on adverse childhood experiences.

The analysis generated five themes reflecting the subjective experience of participants, namely turning point – the initial separation; pushes and pulls of family layers; family dynamics & the meaning of home; warmth and hope; and love-hate parent-child relationships. The following key findings are discussed in this thesis (i) the way parental separation occurred had a profound and enduring impact on participants; (ii) caregiving in extended kin was affected by monetary remittance, the number of left-behind children in the same household and adults' feuds; (iii) it mattered who the children were left with in their family and where they could call home; (iv) the search for signs of love never ceased and informed views on themselves and relationships; (v) as developmental changes took place, the meaning of being separated changed, and resentment grew.

Findings suggest that being a left-behind child can be considered an adverse childhood experience often characterised by initial and enduring trauma. The psychological and relational legacy of being a left-behind children are significant to those who are left. Critical to the experience are the behaviours of the community with whom the child is left. Findings indicate the need for families, communities, schools, and government to acknowledge the profound impact of being a left-behind child on children and into adulthood, and the ways to mitigate the effects of trauma, given the likely ongoing cultural drive towards economic migration.

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Chapter 1 Introduction to the Thesis

Left-behind children refers to children and adolescents aged under 18yrs who have been left-behind in their rural China by their migrated parents for at least six months (Ye & Lu, 2013).

Left-behind children in rural China often experience poor physical, psychological, and emotional health. Very little is known about how young Chinese adults who were left-behind as children or adolescents have been affected. This thesis sets out to fill knowledge gaps about the experience of being a left-behind child from the perspective of those who were left-behind and who are now as young adults. The focus of this doctoral work is set on economic migration as the main reason for parents leaving their children behind. The intended impact of addressing this knowledge gap is to improve awareness and understanding of the left-behind children phenomenon from first-person perspectives so that future Chinese policy and practice for left-behind children is informed by those who experience it directly. The empirical work of this thesis involves an in-depth interview study, positioning first-person accounts as critical forms of knowledge which can work alongside other forms of knowledge in this space. This short opening chapter outlines the structure of thesis but begins with a reflexive statement.

Reflexive Statement

I was left-behind at 4y and had been cared for by different relatives at different times until I was 18yrs, so I have deep feelings and are likely to share similar experience of being left-behind with my participants. My home is in a small town in a rural area of Henan province, and because of the need to support the living expenses of the three children in the family (I am the youngest) both of my parents needed to migrate. Another reason is because 'One-child' policy', I had to be sent away for avoiding punishment (i.e. losing job and huge fine). They left me in the care of my relatives. Due to my relatives (caregivers) also went out for migration from time to time. As a result, I was left in the care of different caregivers in my early childhood. Family reunions were difficult for my me because of the fear of policy and the lack of time for parents. This caused me feeling like a ball being kicked around by adults, with no choice, I often felt there was no home for me as my life was not stable and unexpected. At that time, I didn't quite know what left-behind experience is, it probably started from when I felt there was no 'home' for me and blamed my parents. Many of my participants also had to live with different caregivers, and two participants also influenced by 'One-child' policy. They felt like their childhood selves were like a floating piece of flotsam with no home of their own.

I was sent by my parents to a faraway place to be taken care of by my grandma when I was 9yrs. I lived with my uncle's family, my aunt, and my grandma. This is where my understanding of what it means to be left-behind was increased to a deeper level. I also found myself had a deeper understanding of home; I found myself develop a strong desire of living with parents as normal families. Being a girl has increased my vulnerability within my extended family, it appeared every day. For example, I always had the least amount of meat in my bowl compared to my male cousin (uncle's son), limiting my TV time because my brother wanted to watch it. My cousin and I got good grades at the same time, and they always rewarded my brother but not me. These seemingly small events had huge influence on my personality, and the way in understanding extended family. These experiences have empowered me with a strong ability to empathise and understand participants with similar feelings. These participants often felt like they were "living under someone else's roof", saw themselves as unwanted, disappointed in their extended family, etc, which I, too, felt.

The desire of having a home and living with parents came true when I was 18yrs. However, neither my parents nor I knew how to get along with each other because we had been apart for so long. It seemed as if home was a place of special longing before this, but this longing was never realised on my own path of left-behind. I have been very upset about this and my relationship with parent. I can see the left-behind experience has affected me in a negative and complex way and it is difficult to resolve it. The reason I decided to do research on this topic as a way of personal healing and to give voice for people who were left-behind and are left-behind (see detailed in Chapter 4).

Thesis structure

Chapters 2 and 3 present and discuss key literature which highlights that the left-behind children experience must be articulated and interpreted within its historical, social, institutional, and cultural contexts, and in relation to wider political and economic structures. Chapter 2 sets out the global 'left-behind children' phenomenon before focusing on the 'left-behind children phenomenon' from internal migration in China. Chapter 3 examines the existing knowledge, and knowledge gaps, around the developmental outcomes of being a left-behind children in rural China. These two chapters set the context for the thesis rationale, aim and methodology.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach, explaining the rationale behind the chosen timeline data collection method and IPA data analysis methodology. This chapter also includes further reflexivity notes, documenting my personal growth learning throughout the research.

Chapter 5 reports the outcomes of the IPA and is broken into sub-chapters covering one theme each. Chapter 5.1 examines the initial separation from migrant parents and how it often felt by left-behind children. Chapter 5.2 details how extended family members can shape children's left-behind experience, presenting a complex web that considers the influence of culture, remittances, adults' conflicts, and the number of left-behind children sharing the same household. Chapter 5.3 portrays the effect of family dynamics under migration on the parents' role and their perception of 'home', emphasising the irreplaceable role of migrant fathers and mothers. Chapter 5.4 reports how left-behind children can be affected by the individuals in their immediate environment, and how they understand the role of gifts. Chapter 5.5 documents the long-term consequences on left-behind children's relationships with their parents as they transition into adulthood.

Chapter 6 synthesises and discusses the key aims, addressing research questions, findings and implications arising from this doctoral work. This chapter concludes with a reflection on the strengths and limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

The rationale behind theories employed in the thesis

The theoretical framework for the thesis has been constructed by integrating three prominent theories: ecological systems theory, attachment theory, and the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) framework.

Ecological systems theory, with its layered "onion" model, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted influences on a person. Ecological systems theory played a pivotal role in framing the literature reviews in Chapters 2 and 3. This theory resonates with the

significance of context and interactions between them in understanding the experiences of left-behind children. The ecological systems theory aligned with findings, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various systems, such as family, community, and cultural and political contexts. By exploring the influence of these multiple systems, this theory aided in comprehending how they interacted to shape the development and experiences of these children highlighting the vulnerable or unsupportive systems in which left-behind children live.

Both ecological systems theory and the ACEs framework offer valuable insights into understanding the complex dynamics of individuals' experiences, particularly in the context of adverse events. The intersection of these frameworks becomes evident when considering how adverse childhood experiences can be influenced by ecological factors. For example, a left-behind child's family environment, which falls within the scope of ecological systems, can significantly contribute to their exposure to adverse experiences, such as parental separation during migration, abusive caregivers after parents migrated. Likewise, the ACEs Framework can inform our understanding of how such experiences at the individual level may resonate within broader ecological systems. For example, a left-behind child who had a supportive family system, caring caregiver, responsible migrated parents, he/she might experience a less traumatic experience. By recognizing and exploring these intersections, the thesis gains a more comprehensive understanding of how participants' left-behind experiences are shaped by ecological factors and how these experiences, in turn, influence their development and sense-making processes. These two frameworks allow the analysis by considering the broader ecological context within which adverse experiences occur and their lasting effects that participants might experience.

Attachment theory is situated within the broader ACEs framework, which provides a foundational understanding of how early adverse experiences impact children's development. ACEs suggests that the impacts of ACEs are complex and that it may not be feasible to address all negative effects. ACEs framework helped to recognize the multiple adversities that left-behind children might experience, adding a context-specific form of ACEs to the broad literature on ACEs. The perspective that ACE brings therefore emphasises the importance of preventing ACEs, reflecting the need for a comprehensive support system to prevent children from being affected by ACEs. Attachment theory serves as a possible mechanism for explaining why ACEs may lead to adverse outcomes, particularly through the disruption of secure attachment bonds following adverse experiences. Attachment theory sensitized the data interpretation by underscoring the significance of early child-caregiver relationships and the potential multiple adversities because of disrupted attachment, leading to a further range of psychosocial challenges. ACEs framework offered a foundational understanding of how early adverse experiences influenced children's

development, and attachment theory highlighted the vital role of secure attachment bonds between a child and their caregiver in mitigating or escalating the adversity.

The amalgamation of ecological systems theory, the ACEs framework, and attachment theory has yielded a multidimensional and comprehensive framework from a broader context to a centred familial (child-caregiver) level, through layer to layer, for understanding the complex phenomenon of left-behind children in China and interpreting the data obtained from this study. This theoretical framework enables us with a holistic lens to explore and comprehend the multifaceted experiences and narratives of the participants.

Chapter 2 Left-behind Children Globally and in China

This chapter sets out briefly the phenomenon of left-behind children globally and then in China. Left-behind children in China refers to children and adolescents aged under 18yrs who have been left-behind in their rural hometown by their migrated parents for at least 6 months (Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Rural Left-behind Children, 2017). This chapter aims to show how the Chinese social, political, and economic context produces the left-behind children phenomenon. Appreciating the complex context around this phenomenon in China is critical to the collecting, interpreting and application of findings from the main study in this thesis. This chapter therefore first sets out the ecological systems theory as an overarching framework of the thesis. By examining the influence of multiple systems, such as family, community, and cultural and political contexts, the theory helps to understand how these interconnected systems interact to shape the development of these children.

2.1 Ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecosystems places proposes that a child's development is influenced by a complex system of relationships from their personal make-up, immediate family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs and change over time (Paat, 2013) referred to as micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). The microsystem is theorised to be the most influential level in ecosystem theory (Paat, 2013). This includes the intraindividual influences on development, such as genetic predispositions and personality as well as relational and contextual influences from parents, relatives, teachers, school, community and peers, and the things that happen in one's life in these domains (Magnavita, 2012). For example, if a child has a strong nurturing relationship with her/his intermediate environment, this is argued to have a positive effect on the child, whereas an unsafe or psychologically harsh environment will have a negative effect on the child.

The mesosystem comprises the interactions between the child's microsystems, such as the interactions between the child's parents and teachers, or between extended families, peers, and siblings, which is also argued to be influenced by the next level of the system (Paat, 2013). According to Bronfenbrenner, interaction, and events in one social setting could influence the kind of social process and interaction in another, thus leading to a joint effect of which the individual is a part (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). For instance, a left-behind child could be part of the migration family, extended family, school, peer group, or communities, and these settings together could influence their experiences and outcomes.

The exosystem includes the neighbourhood, community, and the mass media, all argued to have a distal but important cascading influence on issues such as norms, expectations and possibilities for action (Härkönen, 2001). The macrosystem focuses on how the broadest cultural elements influence children's development, such as socio-economic status, wealth, poverty, and ethnicity (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). In these ways, the ecological systems theory argues that any experience, or aspect of human development, is never a product of one single influence and recognizes the role of immediate (or person-near influences) such as parents and peers, as well as distant (person-far) influences context social, economic, cultural, political factors. By employing the ecological systems theory as a framework, the analysis transcends singular influences and considers the dynamic interaction between these multiple layers. It is therefore using this theory as a framework sets out the layers which are argued to influence the experience.

This chapter therefore attends to what is already understood about some layers of the influencing systems on the phenomenon of left-behind children. It starts by placing the issue in a global context, mapping out the phenomenon and its scope. This chapter then focuses on the specific context of rural China, highlighting the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to the emergence of this phenomenon. The goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue, its origins, and the changes it has brought to migrant families in rural China. This sets the stage for the rest of the thesis and provides a foundation for understanding the complex interplay of factors that may be influencing the experiences of left-behind children.

2.2 The global phenomenon of left-behind children

The rise of migration, both within country (internal) and across countries (international), has resulted in an increasing number of families and individuals living in multiple locations and being separated from their families. In today's globalised world, the number of migrants is higher than ever before and continues to increase rapidly (Cohen, 2006). Migrants are individuals or groups of people who have left their homes and travelled to new locations. The estimated number of internal migrants together with international migrants is more than a billion globally, which means one out of seven people in the world is a migrant (Aubry et al., 2016). The United Nations reported that there were nearly 281 million international migrants globally in 2020, reflecting 3.6% of the global population (International migration | United Nations, 2020). Many people migrate for economic reasons, i.e., to secure work, better pay or better conditions. People migrate as individuals, couples and/or families and migration typically involve leaving a place or

people of significance. Often, parents migrate to provide their children with a better future (Ye & Lu, 2011). The migration of parents for economic reasons sets the key context for this doctoral work, and specifically the fact that many such parents (either one or both) migrate without their children – meaning the children are ‘left-behind’ in their birth hometowns. Migrants are normally confined to long-term contracts from firms, which take them away from their own countries for an average of 30 months (Cortes, 2015; Bakker et al., 2009). This often means that their children cannot live or be with their parents for several years (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009).

The phenomenon of left-behind children, stemming from parental economic migration, is seen in many countries worldwide, meaning a large number of children grow up without one or both parents. For example, in the Philippines, an estimated 6.09 million Pilipinos worked overseas during 2018 to 2020, leaving 9 million children in their hometowns (International migration | United Nations, 2020). In Thailand, in 2011, more than 3 million children (about 24%) were left-behind by both parents (Bank et al., 2011; Thailand Report, 2015). In Kyrgyzstan, at least 10% (259,000 children) were left-behind by their parents for at least 3 months. In addition to Asia, the phenomenon has also been observed in Europe and Latin America. For example, in Romania, an estimated 170,000 Romanian children had one or both parents working abroad (Bilefsky, 2009). Similarly, Save the Children (2006) reported that around 1 million Sri Lankan children are left-behind by their migrated mothers (Ukwatta, 2010). The World Bank (2016) reported that the high number of international migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, 23.2 million to different countries, has inevitably meant that large number of children are left-behind (Aubry et al., 2016). In most cases, these children are ‘left-behind’ with their grandparents and / or other relatives (Cortes, 2008; Graham et al., 2012). Not being able to live with parents can have significant impacts on children's development and has attracted extensive research interest (Adhikari et al., 2014; Graham & Jordan, 2011).

While international migration has been on the rise in recent years, internal migration within one's country of birth or residence is much more common and affects a larger number of people. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the issue by restricting mobility and leading to unprecedented immobility worldwide. According to International migration (2020), internal migration is the most common type of migration, which means an increasing number of children are being left-behind, especially in countries like China (International migration | United Nations, 2020). The next section explains how the rise of left-behind children in China is a result of multiple factors, including government policies, economic drives and cultural traditions.

2.3 The definition of left-behind children in China

In 2013, the term 'left-behind' was officially coined to describe the 61 million children estimated to be living without their parents due to in-country migration in China (Ye & Lu, 2011). The term of 'left-behind children' has occurred in a variety of literature in China since early 1990s (Liu, 2014). However, the literature, from the beginning, on this special group did not form a universally accepted definition, nor is there general agreement amongst researchers and government in China (Wang, Ye, & Murray, 2011). Left-behind children first appeared in the Chinese literature in 1994, referring to those young Chinese children / adolescents living in their hometown with one or both parents migrating to other places for work for an extended time period (Xiao, 2014).

There has been a rapid increase in research nationwide conveying many issues on this special group in China since 2005 and trying to offer different definitions of them. For example, Jingzhong Ye as the first scholar in China focusing on and studying the issue of rural left-behind children, defined that left-behind children refers to 'those children who under 18yrs and whose father and/or mother have migrated for work and are taken care of by father or mother, someone from the older generation, and/or others' in rural China for more than 6 months (Ye, 2006; Ye & Lu, 2011). This definition was not widely adopted by researchers until 2010 when China's 6th census adopted it and reported that there were 61 million left-behind children for more than 6 months in rural China, which has drawn widespread attention and concern from the public (Ye & Murray, 2005). Although the central government in 2015 tried to narrow the definition so that the term 'left-behind child' only referred to those under 16yrs (Ye, 2006), the academic definition has always referred to rural children who have been left-behind in rural areas by their migrated parents for more than 6 months a year who are under the care of one parent, grandparents, others or no one else, and are 18yrs or younger (Biao, 2007; Ye, 2011). This definition is the one used in this doctoral work. It highlights three key points of this population, i) parents and children are from poor rural China, ii) children who under 18yrs; iii) children have been left-behind for more than half of a year.

2.4 Left-behind children in China

This section aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of left-behind children in China, focusing on broad social, political, and economic influences, as well as family dynamics and environment. The analysis is organized into four parts: a) the wider context driving parents to leave children behind; b) family culture and roles, with emphasis on changes due to migration; c) the surrounding environment, including education, community, and local influences on children's experiences; and d) alterations in family structure, such as the roles of grandparents, communication, relationships, and effects on children's well-being. This detailed background helps to establish current knowledge about left-behind children in China, where there are research needs and the implications in relation to policy and practice.

2.4.1 Key dimensions of the social-political-economic context in China

The 'left-behind children' phenomenon is largely determined by its socio-political-economic context. It has led to a large number of children being left-behind in rural China (Biao, 2007). In 2010, large-scale rural-to-urban migration increased the number of children left-behind in rural areas to 61 million, accounting for 38% of children in rural areas in China and 22% of all Chinese children (All-China Women's Federation, 2013; Zhao, et al., 2017). In the 2015 census, nearly 69 million children were left-behind in rural China, which is equivalent to 30% of children in rural areas (Xie & Duan, 2021). Due to its unique social-political-economic context, the phenomenon of left-behind children in China has attracted wide social media coverage and academic attention globally (Fellmeth et al., 2018, Zhao & Yu, 2016).

There are three main reasons that contributed to the internal migration phenomenon in China. First, China's 'Reform and Opening up Policy' in 1978 is considered a major driver that encouraged peasants' migration. China's economy had previously been dominated by agriculture but speeding up industrialisation then became a major concern for the government in the late 1970's (Biao, 2007; Ye & Lu, 2011). After proposing reform policies, the government expropriated the agricultural land from peasants for commercial use to build transportation, expand mid-sized cities, and establish industrial factories on a large scale (Seto & Kaufmann, 2003). However, the loss of agricultural land threatened farming jobs, which forced peasants to seek different jobs. The number of internal migrants in China increased from about 30 million in the late 1980s, to between 150 and 180 million in 2009 (Fan, 2009, Liang & Ma, 2004). In the 2015 national census, the migrant workers had reached up to 376 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In

addition, the government started to open up to foreign investment, giving permission to entrepreneurs to work in China, and encouraging private sector businesses to stimulate economic development (Heilmann, 2008; Nee, 2000; Jefferson & Rawski, 1994). As a consequence, city-based labour became the essential force for China's leap forward towards industrialisation (Jefferson & Rawski, 1994).

A second reason relates to the initial household registration system, known as the Hukou system, which was established in the 1950s to prevent mass movement of people between rural and urban China (Biao, 2007; Liu, 2015). The system determines what social welfare a person may receive, including education, housing, pension, employment and health care based on the registered address. However, in the early 1980s, with the increasing demand for labour force in cities, the government made changes to the household registration policy to encourage free movement from rural to urban areas under the tremendous pressure brought by the economic reforms (Chan & Zhang, 1999). With the increased economic needs, people feel compelled to leave farming behind and migrant to cities (Chan, 2010, 2021). By the end of 2017, nearly 286 million rural workers had migrated to cities seeking better paying jobs (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017). However, due to the Hukou system, residing outside of their home registration place means that rural workers do not have access to the same employment and social rights as citizens who work in their registered residential place (Afridi, Li, & Ren, 2015; Cheng & Selden, 1994). Moreover, the majority of rural workers who migrate are not well-educated, and many of them only have a middle school diploma (Ye & Lu, 2011; Wong, 2011). Therefore, the only jobs available for them via migration are those requiring low levels of education and skills, i.e. industrial labour, or construction and mining workers (Guang & Deng, 2019; Hu, 2012; Wen & Lin, 2012). These jobs offer low wages without job security (Guang & Deng, 2019, Wong, 2011). Most migrant workers are engaged in low-paid, dirty, highly physically demanding, or dangerous jobs and are not entitled to access basic public services. In most cases, these jobs demand long working hours and short holidays. They usually see their left-behind children once or twice a year during Chinese Spring festival holiday and prime farming season. However, they cannot stay for long as they usually will be given only a one-week vacation per year (Wen & Lin, 2012).

Third, within the consistent restriction of the Hukou system, and social-economic drive to industrialisation, the children of such migrants were, and continue to be, prevented from enrolling in urban (city) schools where their parents have moved to work. Therefore, parents leave their children with grandparents, siblings or relatives, who remain in the rural hometown (Ye & Lu, 2011; Guang & Deng, 2019). However, recently the Chinese government has modified the Hukou system to encourage city schools to enrol children of migrant parents. Some left-behind children are able to migrate with parents and can have access to public urban schools.

These left-behind children are also called ‘floating children’ as they will eventually have to go back to their Hukou registered place to continue their education and become left-behind children again. Some of my participants in the thesis had a few floating experiences and are referred to as floating children whilst all of the other participants others were all continuous (non-floating) left-behind children. Parents, however, during this floating experience, still must pay extra fees often in the names of ‘sponsorship’ (education endorsement fees, also *zanzhu fei*) to get school places for their children in a public school (Démurger & Xu, 2015; Lai & Chen, 2010; Xiang, 2005). These fees are extremely high compared to their income and so only a few migrant parents are able to afford to send their children to such schools.

In addition to this, most of these schools require daily commutes, which adds more difficulty for busy and long-working migrant parents to manage, constituting a further barrier to keeping their children with them (Chang, 2006, Gu, 2022). Some private-based schools have been set up in areas where migrant parents are working (Liang & Chen, 2007). Unfortunately, such private schools for migrant children are often inadequate with poor facilities, unqualified teachers, and limited financial resources (Hu & Szente, 2010; Liang & Li, 2021). Additionally, the curriculum in migrant cities varies from curriculums in their Hukou registered place, requiring children to return to their hometown to take high school / university entrance exams if they wish to continue their education (Cao, Ji, & Liu, 2023;). Intersecting educational, employment and financial influences are thus key factors in shaping the decision for many parents to leave their children in their rural hometown.

In sum, economic migrants are from the most disadvantaged social groups, and they have limited choices for making a living. Whether both parents migrate, or only one, leaving their children behind for better income is the only means by which they can provide a better education for their children.

2.4.2 Family roles under joint Chinese cultures

The goal of this section is to understand the impact of Chinese culture on family roles and children, and, to observe how family roles are evolving with the changing context of migration. Family is the foundation of Chinese society and culture, providing individuals with important relationships and cultural values, and forming the basis of all social organizations (Chuang et al., 2018). The phenomenon of left-behind children in China cannot be fully understood without looking at their family environment. The ecological systems theory highlights the significance of family as the immediate environment of these children. This perspective helps to understand the family roles and their expectations under joint Chinese cultures.

Chinese families and Chinese culture are interdependent and shape each other (Li et al., 2006; Xu & Hamamura, 2014). Chinese culture, one of the oldest and most richly developed cultures in the world, is shaped by influences from Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and regional customs from ethnic minorities (Feuchtwang, 2015; Scroope & Evason, 2017; Wong, 2001). Despite the changes and influences from modern times, traditional values remain deeply ingrained in contemporary Chinese communities and continue to shape the everyday lives of many Chinese families (Murphy, 2020). The family is the cornerstone of Chinese culture and is considered the most central and important institution (Scroope & Evason, 2017; Yeh, 2003). Family in China is largely understood through Chinese culture; family relationships are defined by core traditional values, such as Confucian filial piety, and family members are given specific roles and responsibilities that form the foundation of social organizations (Li et al., 2010; Yeh, 2003). At the same time, Chinese culture influences family dynamics and shapes the attitudes and behaviours of family members (Xu & Hamamura, 2014). Despite some Western influences, certain traditional values, such as filial piety, continue to play a significant role in shaping family dynamics in contemporary Chinese communities (Ye & Lu, 2011; Yeh, 2003; Ye, 2011).

Traditional Chinese families often prioritize maintaining harmony, preserving the collective good of the family, and upholding patriarchal values and authority structures (Chen, 2015; Gao, 2022; Lee & Mjelde-Mossey, 2004). Harmony is a central value in traditional Chinese families and is seen as essential for ensuring the overall well-being and prosperity of the family (Chen & Fan 2010). The emphasis on harmony in traditional Chinese families has both positive and negative impacts. On the one hand, it helps to maintain stability and prevent conflicts from escalating (Chen, 2002). On the other hand, it can also lead to suppression of emotions and difficulty in resolving conflicts effectively and causing cascaded conflicts (Lim, 2016; Murphy, 2020). For example, once harmony is disturbed, the way of dissolving family conflicts is through compromise, or to smooth the matter rather than to fuss over it and create further dissent. However, parents and children are taught to avoid direct confrontation and outright expression of what is on their mind (Chen, 2002). It is important to find a balance between preserving harmony and openly addressing and resolving conflicts to ensure the overall well-being of the family.

In traditional Chinese families, the group's interests are typically prioritized over individual interests and the reputation of the family unit is considered of utmost importance (Hall & Ames, 1995; Zhang & Harper, 2022). Family decisions, such as migration, often are made based on the well-being of the entire family. In contrast to the individualistic cultures of Western Europe and North American, Chinese family is collective-oriented and is considered to have a reputation to manage and uphold (Müller, 2012; Scroope & Evason, 2017). This collectivist mindset results in

a strong sense of family solidarity and support, as well as sharing family interests (Chen, 2000; Stark & Bloom, 1985). However, it also puts pressure on individuals to conform to family expectations, which results in a greater emphasis on cooperation and compromise (Chen, 2000). Therefore, family members are expected to work together and make sacrifices for the benefit of the group. For example, in migration family, parents are expected to secure finances and grandparents take responsibility for childrearing even if they are old, and children are asked to obey their grandparents and take care of them if needed. This cooperation and compromise is often seen as essential for maintaining the family's reputation and achieving goals (Li & Lamb, 2017).

Patriarchy, in which men hold primary power and control, is a global phenomenon that has been present in many cultures throughout history, including China (Zhang, 2013). Patriarchal systems place a high value on the role of men and fathers, and assign a lower status to women via domestic roles. The father is typically viewed as the authoritative figure in the family (Arnold & Zhaoxiang, 1992; Li & Lavelly, 2003; Zhang, 2010). Although these beliefs and attitudes have evolved over time and are no longer as widespread or influential as they once were, they continue to have some impact in the contemporary Chinese family (Chen et al., 2002). Fathers are expected to work to earn money as breadwinner, while the mother manages the money and covers the family needs, as women are considered much better at managing resources (Albertson & Norrie, 2019; Ho, 1987). In some cases, mothers will do some side-line activities to earn more money in addition to her other duties that include housework and raising children. However, the roles of men and women may vary a great deal among regions (Le Blanc, 2009, Murphy, 2020). Nevertheless, Chinese women under the patriarchal system are still treated as outsiders after they get married and they are assigned responsibility to take care of their parents-in-laws (Zhang, 2015). The wife becomes also an outsider to her biological family and becomes a member of the husband's family (Zhang, 2015). Also, their children are by default carriers of the paternal but not maternal lineage and are commonly cared for by the paternal family (Wu, Lu, & Kang, 2014). Hence it is common that the child being cared by elderly no matter they are left-behind children or not in China.

Patriarchy also influenced who will get benefits of financial support from elderly. First-born sons or sons are entitled of getting financial resources in the family. When elderly gets old, the whole family often involves a traditional practice, called 'fen jia' (Murphy, 2020). 'fen jia' is a traditional practice in Chinese families, where a married son takes a share of his parent's property or financial resource for financial support; and in turn, and being influenced by Confucianism, a married son will have to take care of or support the elderly financial and / or mentally, the elderly should also will need to offer support where possible, such as sharing house chores and take care of their grandchildren. The property and resource are normally divided among the married sons

and results in the elders relying on and living with the oldest married son (Cohen, 1993; Croll, 1987, Murphy, 2020). This is a common stage in the lifecycle in rural Chinese families, despite to some extent against the harmony concept (Cohen, 1993). Tensions, however, can arise between the generations over the division of resources and property, and sometimes these tensions can be passed down to the children, causing further rifts (Yan & Sorenson, 2006).

In addition to the joint principles of Chinese culture, there are specific norms within Chinese families that will be briefly introduced here, with a more detailed review in Chapter 5.2 Central to these norms is the value of filial piety, which emphasizes respect for one's parents and ancestors (Gu, 2022). This creates an obligation for the middle generation, particularly married sons, to care for and support the elderly. Children are expected to show respect and obedience to their elders, while parents have the responsibility to nurture and protect their offspring (Ye & Pan, 2011). In many cases, the elderly resides with and are cared for by their married sons' families, a situation that can lead to reduced power and influence for the elderly, particularly when they are financially and mentally dependent on their adult children (Tang, 1995). This dependency can sometimes cause tension between wives and mothers-in-law. Despite these dynamics, the high value for the elderly remains a significant aspect of traditional Chinese family life (Zhang, 2015).

To summarise, in traditional Chinese families, there is a strong emphasis on harmony, collectivism, and patriarchy. Family roles are well-defined, and individuals are expected to adhere to cultural traditions. Males and the elderly are held in high regard. Family division and living with adults children can lead to tension. It is common for grandparents, especially the paternal ones, shared childrearing role with parents in traditional Chinese family.

Modification of Family Roles and Practices Under Migration

As following the joint culture in rural Chinese families, the process of migration is often viewed as a necessary investment for future wealth and social status for the whole family. Nowadays, almost all healthy and capable laborers in rural China are involved in migration and attract more younger generation to migrate (Zhao, Liu, & Zhang, 2018). Migrants often marry either someone they meet in their new city or someone they are introduced to during a return visit home, arranged by a matchmaker (Murphy, 2020). Following the birth of a child, some migrant women return to their husband's village to raise their child, while others send their baby or older child to be cared for by their husband's parents (Murphy, 2020). Some parents choose to migrate after parenthood, leaving their children behind in the village with their husband's parents (Chen, Liu, & Mair, 2011; Ye & Lu, 2011).

Investing a significant portion of their incomes in the construction of large houses in their home villages has become a way to show migrant family's achievement and prosperity (Hu & Tian, 2012). Owning a large house in China is also seen as a symbol of high social status and honours their ancestors as it can attract potential brides for migrants' sons and facilitate a patrilocal residence (Chen, 2020; Wang & Fan, 2006). This displays the passing down of care responsibilities from one generation to the next within families. A migrated couple eventually return to their hometowns when their physical condition deteriorates, and they have to carry on a new care role for their grandchildren (become left-behind children) while their adult children (where were left-behind children) migrate (Hu & Tian, 2012; Murphy, 2020; Ye & Lu, 2011). The large house they have built allows both migrant parents, the elderly, and left-behind children to live comfortably and provides enough space for the family (Hu & Tian, 2012).

Money

With the rise of labour migration, increased financial independence via migration has brought increased power and roles change in migrant parents. Migrant sons, no longer needed to rely on elderly for financial support (traditional practice 'fen jia') and find themselves in more influential roles within the family due to this increased financial independence (Murphy, 2020). In turn, the elderly may face even more diminished power in the family, retaining a dependence on the support of their migrant sons (Ye & Lu, 2011). In similar ways, with more mothers in China are entering the workforce, resulting mothers have increased authority in not only childrearing but also in family decisions (Chen & Liu, 2012). Nevertheless, migrant fathers are often observed to remain as the principal decision-makers within the family (Murphy, 2020). When one parent migrates, remaining parent, normally alongside with the elderly, automatically take on additional responsibilities, including childcare, farming, and household tasks.

In many ways, certain traditions and norms have undergone modifications and adaptations under migration in China (Silverstein & Zuo 2021; Zhang et al., 2016). For example, as a result of economic development, the meaning of filial piety has evolved. What was once an absolute obligation to support elderly parents has transformed into a more reciprocal relationship centred on mutual family benefits (Cong & Silverstein, 2008, 2011). This often takes the form of "time-for-money", where the elderly provide labour and care for left-behind children while the migrating parents provide financial support through remittances (Zhang et al., 2016). These remittances from migrants not only cover child-rearing expenses but also serve as compensation for the grandparents' efforts as surrogate parents. This "time-for-money" exchange is a reciprocity strategy that not only helps ensure the economic prosperity of rural migrant families in China but can also improve the grandparents' psychological and physical well-being (Murphy, 2020; Silverstein & Zuo 2011).

However, in some cases, conflicts over child-rearing practices or resentment over the division of child-care and house task responsibilities between migrant parents and the elderly may offset any positive effects of financial support (Cong & Silverstein, 2008). This normally happens between remaining mothers and their mothers-in-law when fathers have migrated, which sometimes can be very complex and challenging for both of them (Liu, 2014; Ye & Lu, 2011). Furthermore, in some instances, remittances can even become a source of conflict between the migrant parents and the elders, and this might pass down to the left-behind children (Murphy, 2020). For instance, if the elders are too old to provide physical care, they cannot reciprocate and might need to rely on their own means for survival. This means that the support between the elders and migrated parents in migrant families is not a one-way street, but instead resembles a two-way exchange of resources over the long-term (Zhang et al., 2016).

2.4.3 Care arrangements for left-behind children

While the number of left-behind children in rural areas has increased, their internal family structure has also changed dramatically. Parental migration has resulted in several care arrangements for left-behind children. Children either live with one of their parents (father/mother-migrating family), or if both parents migrate, they either live with grandparents or other relatives in some rare cases (both parent-migrating family), they live on their own (without any caregivers). Father-migrating and both parents-migrating families are the most common types of migration pattern. According to the recent national survey, among left-behind children in migrant families, a significant majority (59%) live with their grandparents, 35% are in the care of the other parent, 4% live with other relatives, and the remaining children stay at boarding schools (Kong & Meng, 2010). The mean separation period for left-behind children was 2.39 ± 2.26 years, with 44.6% separated for 1-2 years, 34.0% for 3-5 years, and 21.4% for 6 or more years (Tang et al., 2018).

Mothers will automatically take on additional responsibilities, including childcare, farming, and household tasks in father-migrating families. When both parents migrate, grandparents, usually paternal grandparents, are the first choice by both migrating parents to take care of their children (Cao, 2005; Ye & Lu, 2011; Dai & Chu, 2018). However, these patterns are dynamic and shifting. For example, the father usually migrates first and then the mother, which usually happens when the mother is past breastfeeding or when they think the child is seen as independent enough. Mother-migrating families are the least common but occurs when there is strain within the family or when the father is unable to migrate due to health reasons (Fan, 2003; Li, 2007). This is because it against gender expectations in Chinese context where men as breadwinner and mother as nurturer (Murphy, 2020).

Being cared by grandparents

Left-behind children being cared for by grandparents has become more common in Chinese migration family due to a combination of cultural norms and adaptations. Intergenerational bonding tends to be stronger in these families, as the separation from parents sometimes leads to feelings of anger and distance, causing children to form more robust connections with their grandparents. There are advantages and disadvantages of being cared by grandparents for left-behind children. On the one hand, grandparents are natural kinship in the whole family and sometimes act as a bridge to provide both parents and children support and emotional consolation (Ye & Lu, 2011). With their valuable experience, especially grandmothers, they contribute positively to the well-being of their grandchildren and the nuclear family. Beyond addressing essential needs such as food and clothing, they may offer emotional nurturing, mitigating the loneliness that left-behind children might feel (Wen & Lin, 2012; Silverstein & Zuo, 2021). Though nurturing, grandparents usually don't replace parents but encourage children to recognize their parents' sacrifices (Murphy, 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). On the other hand, there are significant challenges tied to being cared for by grandparents. Health problems and limited education among grandparents can hinder caregiving and educational supervision (Murphy, 2020; Ye, 2011). Left-behind children may even become caretakers themselves, taking on substantial responsibilities like agricultural work (Ye & Lu, 2011). Relationships within extended families may grow contentious, with potential conflicts over money or disagreements on childrearing methods, particularly in impoverished areas where mothers-in-law may exert substantial authority (Wu & Ye, 2016; Zhang, 2015). Such conflicts can foster emotional distress in children (Murphy, 2020).

Being cared for by other relatives is typically the last choice when grandparents are not able to provide care (Murphy, 2020). As with living with grandparents, despite offering basic care, relatives may not opt to, or be able to, offer high quality support and supervision of the left-behind children. Sometimes, these relatives may also be burdened with caring for their own children and financial difficulties. The lack of adequate remittance to relatives from the migrant parents may also affect the living quality of the left-behind children (Zhang et al., 2015).

This section elucidates Chinese joint culture and traditional norms/practices in Chinese families, and its modifications and care arrangements under migration. It highlights the common caring roles of grandparents in migration families, which recognize being cared by extended kin is not always beneficial. All of above is relevant to understanding the changes and dynamics that occur within families before and following migration which can shape the reason for, and experience of, leaving children behind.

2.4.4 Education

Ecological systems theory suggests that the school environment is an important factor in the development of children. Education is highly valued in China and as a way to improve the social status of migrant families.

This section discusses i) the significance of education in China for migrant families; ii) the introduction to the general education system and the emergence of boarding school in rural China; and iii) the responsibilities of boarding schools in the lives of migrant families.

2.4.4.1 The importance of education in China

In China, education is seen as a key means of upward social mobility and transforming one's life and career prospects (Liu & Morgan, 2016; Sim, 2005). This emphasis on education is rooted in Chinese culture and has shaped the country's educational system for thousands of years (Eno, 2003; Ng, 2009; Huang & Gove, 2015). In ancient times, the imperial examination system allowed individuals from all social classes to rise to government positions through hard work and academic achievement (Bahtill & Xu 2021). This reinforces the cultural belief that success in education is the path to upward mobility (Huang & Gove, 2015). To this day, education remains a critical aspect of Chinese culture, with a strong emphasis on hard work, academic achievement, and the pursuit of knowledge (Liu, Peng, & Luo, 2020).

The impact of education extends to multiple levels, including society, family, and the individual (Liu, Peng, & Luo, 2020; Yuan & Zhao, 2013). Within the family unit, education is not only perceived as a responsibility but also an opportunity for parents to provide their children with knowledge, skills, and a path to achievement (Xu & Bahtilla, 2021). It's a process that fosters personal growth, character building, and future success (Mei-Ching Ng, 2009; Xu & Bahtilla, 2021). The concept of 'feeding but not teaching' (Yangbujiao fuzhiguo) from The Analects of Confucius exemplifies this attitude (Zhang et al., 2015). This means that merely providing for a child's physical needs without attending to their moral and educational development is a failing in parenting. It's seen as inadequate and irresponsible, reflecting an essential understanding of education in traditional Chinese culture. The idea is built on Confucian principles that emphasize the importance of nurturing not only the body but also personal growth, focusing on the overall development of the child.

Given the cultural and societal importance placed on education, it is common for families to view it as a valuable investment (Bahtill & Xu 2021). Parents are willing to invest time and resources into their children's academic success, even from a young age (Bahtill & Xu 2021). The focus on grades and academic performance is a common cultural trait, with high expectations placed on children to be top students and secure well-paying jobs in big cities (Gao, Huang, &

Zhang, 2019; Huang & Grove, 2015). This emphasis on education and grades is rooted in the belief that grades are the most effective way to judge academic success (Huang & Grove, 2015). Achieving success in education is also seen as a source of pride for the parents and their families ((Stevenson & Lee, 1996). For generations, Chinese parents have been very demanding of their children's education and less concerned about social development as in Western education (Gao, Huang, & Zhang, 2019). Moreover, pressure is seen as a positive force in achieving goals (Sun, Dunne, & Hou, 2012). As a result, it is normal for Chinese parents to apply pressure and expectations on their children and demand their academic excellence.

In rural China, particularly among migrant families, the pressure to succeed in education is even greater (Murphy, 2020). This is due to the unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural areas and the recognition that education is the key to accessing better resources in cities and improving their lives (Koo, 2012; Yuang, Huang, & Liu, 2014). Migrant workers or parents understand the correlation between educational achievement and social class and salary and believe that obtaining a university degree can break the cycle of migration and provide better opportunities in cities (Gao, 2012; Zhao, 2017). Due to their lower levels of education, these migrant families are often confined to low-paying, demanding, and low-skilled jobs (Gao, 2012). They often regret not continuing their education and being stuck in the migration cycle (Murphy, 2020; Ye, 2013). Thus, migrated parents have high expectations for their children's education, viewing it as the only way to break the cycle of migration and have a better life in a city (Murphy, 2020). Some parents lower their expectations and simply ask their children to obtain a university degree, knowing that this will provide them with more options and a better working environment than their own (Yiu & Yun, 2017).

This intense focus on educational success often creates significant stress and tension in migrant families. Parents feel a sense of obligation to support their children's education and push them to study hard, while children often feel that they must work hard to repay their parents for their sacrifices (Murphy, 2012, 2020; *On the Road to School*, 2016). In many cases, the decision to migrate is made specifically for the sake of the children's education, and children are frequently asked about their academic progress during phone calls with their migrated parents (Yue, Liang, Wang, & Chen, 2020). According to a survey conducted by Murphy (2020) of 1010 children in four field counties in China, over 75% of the respondents stated that they wanted to earn at least an undergraduate degree, as they recognized the hard work their parents put into their education. *The Road to School in China 2016* reported that, compared to children who were not left-behind, those who were left-behind expressed significantly less satisfaction with their grades, highlighting their heightened desire for parental recognition through academic achievement (*On the Road to School*, 2016).

However, the excessive emphasis on educational success sometimes leads to a strained relationship between the children and their migrant parents. For the parents, high levels of academic achievement for their children means better future prospects and a higher quality of life (Wen & Lin, 2012). From the children's point of view, they often feel that their parents are only interested in bragging about their grades to relatives and lack concern for their well-being, (Cheng & Sun, 2015; Gao et al., 2020). Additionally, no time spending together may also exacerbate the issue because migrated parents typically visit their children once or twice a year during the Chinese Spring Festival, with only one week off per year (Cheng & Sun, 2015; Gao et al., 2012; The State Council, 2016).

2.4.4.2 The emergence of Boarding School in rural China

The focus of this section is to provide context on the current education system in China and how it emerged under migration. The structure of education in China spans from primary school to university, encompassing a free nine-year compulsory education from grades 1 to 9, implemented since 1994. Beyond this period, which includes senior high schools, vocational and technical schools for adults, colleges, and universities, parents are responsible for tuition and other fees (Hong, 2017; Oyeniran & Uwamahoro, 2017). During the nine-year compulsory education, Chinese families are exempt from tuition or miscellaneous fees, provided that the students enrol based on their household registration area (Hukou system). However, should they choose to enrol outside their registered area, such as in urban schools, extra fees are incurred (China.org.cn, 2015; Hong, 2017). This dynamic has made boarding schools a vital solution for left-behind children who are bound by the limitations of the Hukou system, forcing them to attend schools within their registered area (Liu & Villa, 2020; Murphy, 2020). In a concerted effort to meet the educational needs of an estimated 61 million left-behind children, the Chinese government initiated the construction of rural boarding schools in 2004. By 2018, this effort culminated in 9.35 million students in rural China attending boarding schools (All women Federation, 2013; Ministry of Education of China, 2018).

The emergence of boarding schools in rural China is the result of a combination of macro and micro factors, largely connected to the needs of left-behind children. At the macro level, the government's objective has been to expand the nine-year compulsory education system in rural areas, ensuring both enrolment and completion rates among school-aged children since the early 1990s (Chang, Cheng, & Ji, 2011; Dixon, 2019; Liu & Villa, 2020). This initiative sought to raise educational standards and quality for rural students, while also alleviating financial pressures on migrant parents by offering free education (Murphy, 2020; Ye & Murry, 2013). Moreover, to

combat the challenges linked to long commuting distances and the merging of rural schools, the government launched the Rural Boarding School Construction Program in the early 2000s, closing 280,000 smaller rural schools to create more centralized boarding institutions (Liu & Villa, 2020). This provided a convenient and safe solution for left-behind children to attend school. By 2015, approximately 100,000 boarding schools in rural China were accommodating around 33 million children, with nearly 22% of rural Chinese primary and junior high school students living in boarding schools (Dixon, 2019; Roberts, 2015). At the micro level, boarding schools have relieved the burden on grandparents, who might lack the physical or educational means to supervise left-behind children adequately. By providing a structured environment with more support and guidance, boarding schools compensate for the absence of caregivers and migrant parents. To sum up, the rise and establishment of boarding schools in rural China stem from the government's urban economic development ambitions and the vital need to address the educational requirements of millions of left-behind children.

2.4.4.3 The impact of boarding school in migration family

Boarding schools provide left-behind children a full-service environment, including bedding, meals, and life skills training (Fengtai County Education Bureau, 2022). Boarding schools offer a consistent routine, quality education, and social interaction, lessening the impact of parental absence (Hong, 2017). Left-behind students are allowed to go home for school breaks but may also have to stay at school if they have nowhere else to go. Communication with families is limited but some schools arrange for video calls (Fengtai County Education Bureau, 2022). Migrant parents are permitted to visit their left-behind students at the school, bringing food and clothing, which has been a nice experience by left-behind children (Ye & Lu, 2011). Left-behind students are managed in a uniform manner with a daily schedule and are fully in charge taught by both academic and life teachers. However, this increased responsibility leads to some teachers not fully fulfilling their duties (Luo, 2016).

The impact of boarding schools on left-behind children has been a subject of debate in the academic community. While some studies have found that boarding schools are associated with poor mental health, poor academic outcomes, and risky behaviours (Barclay, 2011; Henderson et al., 2007; Moswela, 2006; Ruben Gabriel, et al., 1998; Schaverien, 2004; Wang & Mao, 2018), others have shown that boarding schools provide a positive environment, addressing the educational needs of left-behind children (Chen & Jiang, 2019, Zhang et al., 2021). This is particularly beneficial for left-behind children from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Liu & Villa, 2020). Additionally, being with classmates and teachers can provide comfort to children

separated from their parents (Chen & Jiang, 2019; Gao, 2022). Research showed that boarding left-behind children see their classmates and friends as the most important source of social support, and sometimes even more important than their mothers (Zhang et al., 2016). However, other research has found that living in boarding schools often increase feelings of loneliness and tend to have more nutritional problems (Li, 2021; Luo et al., 2009; Wang & Mao, 2022; Wang, Dong, & Mao, 2017). Boarding schools can also result in a secondary separation from families, as children miss the love and care from their grandparents (caregivers) (Ye, 2005; China Youth Daily, 2016). Furthermore, there are reports that boarding schools lack adequate teaching resources and facilities, with classes taught by one teacher for up to 90 students and poor school infrastructure (Wang et al., 2010).

In sum, boarding schools are increasingly seen as a crucial solution for parents and the government to meet educational needs. The schools offer a comprehensive environment with social support and reduce the burden on migrant parents and caretakers. However, the fact that children are separated from their parents remains unchanged and they may face new challenges such as adapting to a new environment, experiencing a secondary separation from their parents, and having nowhere to go during school breaks. Despite its mixed effects on left-behind children, the lack of alternatives often leaves parents, children, and schools with little choice within the context of migration.

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of left-behind children both globally and specifically within China. Beginning with the application of the ecological systems theory, this chapter conceptualizes how different environmental factors interact to influence the development of children. The phenomenon of left-behind children is then examined on a global scale, shedding light on its prevalence and characteristics across various countries. Shifting focus to China, this chapter offers a precise definition of left-behind children, reflecting the unique cultural, social, and economic context of the migration in China. A thorough examination of the situation of left-behind children in China is provided, with an analysis of the key dimensions of the social-political-economic context that shape their experiences. The family's role within the joint Chinese cultural setting is explored, along with an emphasis on education, which is particularly significant in China as a means to improve social status, especially within migrant families. However, there is knowledge gap in understanding the complexities laying down in adaptive family roles under migration, such as how migration has changed the power dynamics between migrant mothers and mothers-in-law, and how fathers' migration shifting that power dynamics. Overall, this chapter sets the stage for a deep understanding of left-behind children, encompassing international perspectives and the specific nuances in the context of China.

Chapter 3: The Long-term Effects of being a Left-behind child

As outlined in Chapter 2, left-behind children in China are mainly from the most vulnerable and economically disadvantaged groups in rural China. This chapter examines the evidence about the impact of being a left-behind child in rural China, with a particular emphasis on physical, academic, emotional, and psychological outcomes of childhood experiences. Through the lens of the ecological systems theory as a framework, this chapter highlights how families, extended family members and schools are the most proximal social systems that shape the individual's development. As such, this chapter discusses how the experiences of left-behind children are connected to and influenced by different levels of their psycho-social-cultural environment following the migration of their parents.

3.1 The health status and the health-related behaviours of left-behind children: parental migration status, and child age and gender

This section reports what is known about the impact of being left-behind on the physical health and behaviours of these children. A substantial amount of research into left-behind children has attempted to determine the effect of being a left-behind child on both childhood and adolescence. Following government guidance for the protection of left-behind children, such as White Paper on the Current Reading Situation of Urban and Rural Adolescents, there have been increasing numbers of organizations helping these children since 2010, donating household items and providing health checks to reduce their risk of poor health (White Paper on the Psychological Situation of Left-behind Children in China, 2021; Lin et al., 2020). Research has focused on left-behind children's physical health, like nutrition and disease risk, as well as the extent to which they engage in behaviors that are deemed risky for health.

To date, evidence about the health status of left-behind children in rural China is conflicting. On the one hand, some studies have demonstrated that material benefits and greater income security from parental remittances can support left-behind children's health. For example, a recent study reported that there is no significant difference in physical development between left-behind children and non-left-behind children; the height and weight of these children is even slightly higher than that of their peers (Zhang, 2021). Additionally, Chen and Zhao (2012) and Fellmeth et al. (2019) reported similar levels of physical illnesses between left-behind children and non-left-behind children. Furthermore, Tang et al. (2019) found no significant differences in illnesses such as fever, cough, respiratory difficulties, diarrhea, and physical functioning between left-behind children and their peers. Jia et al. (2010) also reported no differences in physical functioning between two groups.

On the other hand, most research suggests that left-behind children experience poorer physical health compared to children who live consistently with their parents. For example, studies have shown that left-behind children are more likely to have poor eating habits, which makes them more susceptible to health issues and chronic illness such as anemia (Li et al., 2015; Ye & Liu, 2011). A study has shown a 20% increased risk of illness for left-behind children compared to non-left-behind children; and the risk is even greater when both parents are absent, compared to one parent is absent (12.9% VS 7.09%, N=441) (Li, Liu, & Zang, 2015). Left-behind children are also prone to health-related risky behaviors such as smoking and alcohol consumption (Gao et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2015). Left-behind children who have both parents absent are likely to eat high-fat foods, skip meals, spend long hours on internet games and TV, drink alcohol and smoke tobacco (Gao et al. 2010; Zhou et al. 2015). Some left-behind children who are raised by grandparents often do not get a good diet due to their poor economic status, lack of nutrition knowledge and poor cooking skills (Ye & Lu, 2011, Zhang et al., 2018). There is a need to fully understand the pathways leading to these mixed reports of outcomes. Despite the conflicting evidence, the health characteristics of both left-behind and non-left-behind children in rural areas fall below the standard for child development, highlighting a disadvantage in the overall health status of children in rural China (Biao, 2007; Murphy, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021).

3.1.1 Age and gender

The age and gender of left-behind children in rural China is often considered important when considering health outcomes. The focus is on understanding the relationship between the age at which the children were first left-behind and the duration of separation from their parents, as well as how gender differences shaped by cultural norms play a role in health outcomes.

There is limited consensus on the extent to which age and gender affect their health outcomes and if these outcomes are linked to other contributing factors. Research suggests that younger left-behind children (under 7yrs when their parents migrated) tend to grow up with nutritional deficiencies, while older ones are prone to have poor eating habits (Gao et al. 2010; Robson et al., 2008). However, there is evidence that younger left-behind children (aged 2-6yrs) are less likely to suffer from poor nutrition when they are taken care of by their grandparents (De Brauw & Mu, 2011; Mu & De Brauw, 2015). Left-behind children under 7yrs are estimated to consume less nutritious food such as meat, fruits, and vegetables, but to have more high-fat snacks, which increases their risk of obesity and poor health (Li, Liu, & Zang, 2015). However, left-behind children aged 7-12yrs are more likely to be underweight (De Brauw & Mu, 2011).

Being left-behind in early childhood also tends to have long-term impacts on a child's growth and health, such as height and weight. For example, a study found that children who were left-behind in their early years (0-5yrs) tend to be 2.8 cm shorter and 5.3 kg lighter than their peers by 14yrs (Zhang, Becares, & Chandola, 2015). Additionally, another study revealed that adolescents who are left-behind (7-12yrs, or between 13-18yrs) tend to have better health, even when both parents are not present (Li, Liu, & Zang, 2015). However, the study did not address the age at which the separation occurred. Furthermore, left-behind adolescents also tend to develop unhealthy eating habits such as skipping breakfast and smoking tobacco, putting them at higher risk of becoming overweight (Gao et al., 2010).

Similarly, studies have shown disparities in the health outcomes between left-behind girls and boys. Studies suggests that girls are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours such as consuming junk food, excessive substances, and smoking tobacco (Gao et al., 2010), while boys are more likely to become addicted to the internet (Ge, Se, & Zhang, 2015; Yujia et al., 2017). However, without proper supervision and guidance, both girls and boys have a tendency to spend unhealthy amounts of time on the internet and tend to get addicted (Guo et al., 2012).

Cultural norms play a significant role in determining the health outcomes of left-behind boys and girls. This is particularly true in rural areas where traditional son-preference norms result in great physical workloads for left-behind girls than that of boys (Ye & Lu, 2011; Ye, 2011). As demonstrated in a study by Chang et al. (2011), the migration of one parent led to an increase in domestic work by 5.1 hours per day for girls aged 7-14yrs and only 1.2 hours per day for boys of the same age. However, cultural norms may also pose risks to the availability of resources for left-behind boys. Grandparents, especially on the paternal side, are typically expected to take on the responsibility of caring for their grandsons, even without remittance from the migrant parents (Li, Liu, & Zang, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016). However, this may result in a lack of financial support for the boys during their early childhood (Zhang et al., 2016). These findings demonstrate that cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping the health outcomes of left-behind children. Further research is necessary to thoroughly examine the impact of cultural norms on the disparities in health between left-behind girls and boys.

To sum up, health issues among left-behind children varies in gender and age; separation occur at early age tend to have more physical health issues, culture norms play a great role in shaping their domestic work activities. Although there have been numerous studies exploring the impact of these factors and others on the health of left-behind children, there is a lack of uniformity in the measurement and selection of study participants, which may detract from the validity of the results.

3.2 Academic effects

This section analyses the existing research on the influence of being a left-behind child on their educational outcomes and how it is linked to their mental health. To date, there has been little agreement on the magnitude of effects on education performance among left-behind children and whether there is a direct casual relation. While some studies suggest that there is no difference between being left-behind children or other children in terms of grades and major academic interests (Lu, 2012; Wang et al., 2019); other studies report that these children encounter more education-related problems, i.e., higher rates of absence and dropout rates (Gao et al. 2010; Zhou et al., 2015). Although evidence suggests that most left-behind children hold a positive attitude to school education, school performance tends to be worse than non-left-behind children, especially when both parents are absent (Zhou et al., 2015; Zhou, Murphy, & Tao, 2014). For example, a large-scale study based on 8,627 rural students in 10 Chinese provinces showed that children who lived with their parents had the best academic performance, while left-behind children who lived with only one parent, especially those who lived with their fathers only, had the lowest grades (Yao & Mao, 2008).

Increased farm work and low quality of home academic supervision appeared to be associated with left-behind children's poor academic performance (Gao et al., 2010). The increased responsibility and workload in farmland, as a result of parental migration, has been identified as a factor that limits the time available for schoolwork and negatively impacts educational outcomes (Ye & Lu, 2011). That most rural grandparents are illiterate compounds the lack of academic support for these children (Ye & Lu, 2011). Some officials and teachers have criticised grandparents' lack of support of children's educational needs, even as they recognise that childcare by grandparents (Murphy, 2020). Furthermore, the fact that a significant number of rural grandparents are illiterate exacerbates the lack of academic support available to these children (Wang et al., 2010). Left-behind children often express their dissatisfaction with the lack of homework supervision in their absence of parents, which leads to a lack of motivation for their education (Ye & Lu, 2011).

It has been established that the academic performance of left-behind children is intimately linked to their psychological and emotional well-being. Research has indicated that parental migration often leads to feelings of depression and loneliness in children, which in turn has a negative impact on their academic performance (Ye & Lu, 2011). Being left-behind somehow dampens the children's interest in school, and in some cases, results in a loss of motivation to study. The money and gifts they received from their migrant parents often leads them to a desire to explore city life and earn money, further reducing their motivation to pursue higher education after

completing nine years of compulsory education (Wen & Lin, 2012; Ye & Lu, 2011). Additionally, left-behind children growing up in migration households often have access to information and social networks that are helpful for future migration, and this may further reduce their motivation to continue their education (Lu, 2012). However, it is important to note that parents do not typically expect or prepare their children to become future migrant workers, unless their children are unable to continue their education (Ye, 2011; Murphy, 2020).

The extent and cause-and-effect relationship of the impact of being a left-behind child on their academic performance is uncertain. The relationship between being left-behind and academic performance appear to be indirect, with mental health and the lack of support from illiterate grandparents often serving as mediating factors that reduce motivation for continuing education. These findings indicate that being a left-behind child not only has a negative effect on their emotions, but can also hinders their access to academic support.

3.3 Left-behind children's behaviour problems

Some studies have found that left-behind adolescents who live away from their parents are more likely to have behavioural issues compared to non-left-behind adolescents (Hu et al., 2014; Jia & Tian, 2010; Wen & Lin, 2012). Other studies have shown that left-behind adolescents exhibit higher levels of problematic behaviours, such as fighting with peers or teachers, or stealing money (Fan et al., 2010; Gao et al., 2019; He et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2014). One study reported that left-behind children have an 18% increased risk of having behavioural problems compared to non-left-behind children (Hu et al., 2018) whereas others have not found significant differences in the levels of problematic behaviours between left-behind children and non-left-behind children (Liu et al., 2015; Tao et al., 2014).

When they do occur, behavioral problems in left-behind children appear to be influenced by various factors, such as gender and age. For instance, children who were left-behind before 9yrs showed less prosocial behavior, and boys were found to be more hyperactive than girls (Fan et al., 2010). Left-behind children between aged 6-11yrs are at the greatest risk of exhibiting behavioral problems (14%), while those between aged 12-18yrs (11%) are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, such as skipping school or quarrelling with peers (Qu et al., 2018; Zhao, Liu, & Zhang, 2013).

Studies have also investigated the relationship between parenting styles, teacher-child relationships and behavioral problems in left-behind children. Children with good teacher-child relationships were more likely to develop prosocial behaviors (Liu et al., 2015). A stable marital status of parents and a harmonious family relationship were also found to be positively

associated with better behavioral outcomes in left-behind children (Hu, Lu, & Huang, 2014; Zhou et al., 2015). Parents with supportive parenting styles were found to reduce the risk of behavioral issues, such as suicide and violence, while neglectful parenting styles were linked to increased behavioral problems (Hu et al., 2018; Liu, 2020).

These findings imply that the behavioural problems of left-behind children are not just related to their nuclear family, but also influenced by broader factors such as their relationship with teachers, showing that the system levels influencing left-behind children. Yet, most importantly, these findings suggest that left-behind children are more prone to behavioral problems compared to children who live continuously with their parents.

3.4 Psychological and mental health problems outcomes

An increasing body of research into left-behind children has attempted to explore the effect of being left-behind on child and adolescent mental health. Little is known about the effects of being a left-behind child on their later adult psychological well-being. Most of the work in this area has been quantitative and has focused on identifying the extent of poor psychological outcomes and mental health problems in these children. This section examines the evidence about the influence of being a left-behind child on their well-being.

Studies on the mental health of left-behind children have primarily used standard surveys and scales to assess the prevalence of mental health issues compared to their peers who live with their parents. These studies are typically collecting self-report data and ask two groups of children to rate their feelings on a scale over a limited period of time. The results have shown that left-behind children are more susceptible to emotional problems and poorer mental health compared to their peers. For example, some cross-sectional studies found that left-behind children are more likely to experience unhappiness, panic, sadness, loneliness, and have lower self-esteem (He et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2015). Left-behind children are 2.5 times more likely to suffer from loneliness and 6.4 times more likely to be very lonely (Jia & Tian, 2010). Another cross-sectional study of 1663 left-behind children and 1683 of their peers, aged 12-16yrs, from 16 rural high schools found that 43.4% of the left-behind children had mental health problems, compared to 30.8% of their peers, and the prevalence of severe psychological distress was three times higher among the left-behind children (12.1% vs. 4.8%). The levels of panic and depressive symptoms were also relatively higher among the left-behind children (32.4% vs. 22.1%; 26.5% vs. 16.3%) (Tang et al., 2018). However, other cross-sectional studies have not identified any significant differences in mental well-being between left-behind children and their peers who live continuously with their parents (Guan & Deng, 2019; Tao et al., 2013). In fact, some studies have pointed out that unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural areas is putting

the mental well-being of rural children at risk overall (Biao, 2007; Guan & Deng, 2019).

Additionally, some studies have conducted systematic or meta-analytic reviews to examine the prevalence of mental health issues among left-behind children. For example, a meta-analysis by Wu et al. (2017) found that the prevalence of serious mental health conditions was 2.7 times higher in left-behind children (8%) compared to non-left-behind children (3%). Another meta-analysis by Zhao and Yu (2016) of 32 studies on psychological well-being among rural left-behind children under 18yrs concluded that left-behind children reported more mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression symptoms, as well as lower self-concept compared to non-left-behind children. Systematic reviews have also produced similar findings. For example, a systematic review of 20 studies on depression and anxiety among left-behind children showed that the prevalence of depression ranged from 12.1% to 51.4%, while the prevalence of anxiety ranged from 13.2% to 57.6%. These variations in prevalence may be due to the use of different measures (Cheng & Sun, 2015). Another systematic review of 19 studies reported that left-behind children had a lower self-concept score and more psychological problems, such as loneliness and anxiety, compared to their peers (Wang et al., 2015). Taken together, these findings suggest that the mental health status of left-behind children are more likely to experience poor mental well-being and psychological issues. Additionally, despite the deepening understanding of the disparities in mental health between left-behind children and their peers, the studies often employ a variety of instruments which are not standardized or comparable.

Numerous studies have sought to expand beyond basic comparisons of mental health among children who have been left-behind by migrant parents. Researchers have analysed various variables associated with the mental health of such children, including self-esteem, psychological resilience, self-concept, and relevant characteristics such as age, gender, and duration of being left-behind. Studies have found that low self-esteem is associated with an increased risk of depression (Tang et al., 2018), while high psychological resilience serves as a protective factor against depression, low self-esteem, and loneliness (Ai & Hu, 2016; Wu et al., 2017; Zhao, Fu, & Zhou, 2020). The mental and emotional development of these children has been found to be influenced by their age, gender, and duration of being left-behind, with left-behind girls often exhibiting lower self-concept, anxiety, and life satisfaction (Wang et al., 2015) and being at higher risk of developing emotional problems, particularly if they are left-behind early in life for longer periods (Fan et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2015).

In addition to these individual factors, other studies have focused on the role of the environment, in the mental health of these children. For instance, missing breakfast has been found to be related to their mental health, and this is more pronounced with left-behind girls (Liang, Chi, &

Chen, 2022); similarly, physical abuse while being left-behind has been positively associated with anxiety (Zhao et al., 2014), and life events and life satisfaction have been found to be related to stress and depression levels (Guang et al., 2017; Wang & Yap, 2020). Low perceived peer support has been found to be associated with depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Ren & Li, 2020), while a positive teacher-student relationship has been identified as a protective factor for emotional adjustment (Guo et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2015). The level of self-concept among these children has been found to be related to social support (Dong & Yuan, 2013, as cited in Wang et al., 2015). Left-behind children who are in the care of young caregivers or non-relatives with poor education and low socioeconomic status have been found to be at higher risk of poor well-being (Fan et al., 2010).

Despite the assumption that being left-behind is the only cause of negative effects observed among these children, the studies remain mixed as to the extent of the psychological problems faced by these children. For example, some studies have found little difference in the psychological well-being of rural left-behind children and their non-left-behind peers (Biao, 2007; Guan & Deng, 2019). Studies have found lower self-esteem and low levels of loneliness in left-behind children (Su et al., 2017, Tang et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2011). However, the majority of studies have agreed on certain factors that are most related to the psychological well-being of left-behind children (Cheng & Sun, 2015; Hu et al., 2012; Jia & Tian, 2010; Zhao & You, 2016), and these will now be examined in the next section, including care arrangements, siblings, timing of being left-behind, period of separation from parents, parent-child or caregiver-child relationships, social support, and the socioeconomic status of parents.

3.4.1 Care arrangements in left-behind children's families

3.4.1.1 care arrangements and mental health

The research on the impact of different guardianship types on the mental health of left-behind children in rural China has produced inconsistent results. Some studies have found that children who live with one parent or relatives have better mental health outcomes than those who live on their own or with grandparents (Jia & Tian, 2010; Wang et al., 2015; Zhao & You, 2016; Zhao et al., 2016). However, other studies have found that children who live with grandparents have worse psychological outcomes compared to those living with other relatives (Murphy, 2020; Sun et al., 2017; Ye & Lu, 2011). Yet, there are also studies that have found no significant differences in mental health outcomes between children living with one parent versus those living without parents, or between children living with relatives versus those living on their own (2014; Tang et al., 2018; Zhao et al.).

Some studies have specifically focused on the impact of a single parent's migration on the child's mental well-being. The evidence suggests that children growing up with absent mothers tend to have poorer psychological well-being (Liu et al., 2009), and that children living apart from their mothers are at a higher risk of depression and anxiety (Wu et al. 2011; Zhou et al. 2009). However, a study by Wang et al. (2015) found that children living with their mothers reported slightly higher rates of depression compared to those living with their fathers (22.7% and 22.9%, respectively). This questions the prevailing claims that children whose mothers migrate while living with father behind are at greater higher risk. Nevertheless, cross-sectional studies have found similar levels of depression and loneliness among children living with a single parent (mother or father) and those living without either parent (He et al., 2012; Zhao & You, 2016).

The impact of guardianship on mental well-being is influenced by several other factors, such as the child's demographics, family social status, and the situation of the caregivers themselves (Fan et al., 2010, Ge et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2011). For instance, a study by Fan et al. (2010) found that children who were left-behind for longer periods and were in the care of a single parent with low education levels were more likely to experience negative emotions. Additionally, the mental well-being of left-behind children is linked to the educational background and physical health of their caregivers, as these factors can have a collateral effect on their mental well-being (Ge et al., 2023, Xie et al., 2011; Ye & Lu, 2011). For example, if children are left in the care of grandparents who are less likely to supervise their homework, they may experience dissatisfaction with their academic performance and the feelings of distress (Murphy, 2020). Furthermore, some children have reported feeling disconnected from their caregivers who do not understand their emotional needs and provide only surface-level care (Murphy, 2020). This lack of effective communication often leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation, forcing the children to remain silent (Hong, 2003, as cited in Ye et al., 2010).

These findings suggest that the mental health of these children is influenced by not only the level of emotional care they receive, but also by the experiences they encounter in their daily lives. Despite the numerous studies that have explored the impact of guardianship on the mental well-being of left-behind children, there is a significant shortage of research that seeks to understand their experiences from children's own perspective. The lack of studies that focus on the subjective experiences of these children can limit our understanding of the challenges they face and the impact that being left-behind has on their lives. To gain a more complete understanding of the issue, it is important to consider the perspectives of the children themselves and to examine the experiences they encounter while being left-behind.

In conclusion, the relationship between guardian and the mental well-being of left-behind

children is not straightforward and often mixed with other factors, such as caregivers' educational level, family social status. Studies have produced inconsistent results regarding the impact of different guardians on children's mental well-being. This highlights the complex nature of being left-behind and the need for further examination of this issue from multiple angles to better understand its effects.

3.4.2 Age, gender, and siblings

In similar ways, the age at which their psychological well-being is assessed has produced mixed results. Studies have found that primary school-aged left-behind children are more prone to psychological problems (e.g. loneliness, anxiety) and negative emotions compared to middle and high school-aged ones (He et al., 2012; Jia & Tian, 2010; Qin & Albin, 2010). A cross-sectional study estimated that primary and middle school-aged left-behind children tend to have poorer psychological well-being compared to those in high school (Zhao et al., 2016). A meta-analysis comparing the mental health of primary, middle, and high school-aged left-behind children showed that the mental health of primary and middle school-aged children was significantly higher than that of high school-aged children, with no significant difference between primary and middle school-aged children (Zhao & Yu, 2016).

Studies have also focused on the age at which parents and children were separated and the duration of separation (Liu et al., 2009; Qin & Albin, 2010; Wu, Chen, & Zhang, 2011). A preliminary study of 1274 schoolchildren reported that being left-behind at the age of 3y was associated with more emotional symptoms (Fan et al., 2010). Liu et al. (2009) found that children separated from their parents at a younger age (less than 7yrs) tend to have more symptoms of depression and anxiety than those separated later in childhood. However, few studies have investigated the effects on psychological well-being of the length of time the parent and child are separated. Tang et al. (2018) reported that children separated from their parents for 6 or more years are more likely to experience depression and low self-esteem compared to those separated for shorter periods of time. Some cross-sectional studies have indicated that children left-behind for more than 6 years and with low frequency of visits are more likely to have poor psychological well-being than those left for shorter periods of time (Fan et al., 2010; Su, et al., 2013; Wang, Su, & Sun, 2014). The effects of duration of absence may vary depending on which parent is the migrant, but there has been no research on this.

There has been little agreement on gendered psychological outcomes among left-behind children. Gender often interacts with other factors such as the length of separation, age, guardian type, and age at separation from parents. For example, some studies have found that left-behind females experience more panic symptoms than males (Tang et al., 2018), while

others have found that left-behind girls are more likely than boys to experience emotional difficulty and social anxiety (Albin, Qin, & Hong, 2013; Zhao, et al., 2014). This difference in outcomes may be influenced by cultural norms and expectations of genders in China. Furthermore, a meta-analysis of 15 studies found that left-behind girls and boys have varying self-concept levels, with girls tending to have lower levels in aspects such as happiness, anxiety, and life satisfaction, and boys tending to have lower self-concept in aspects such as physical appearance, behaviour, and popularity (Wang et al., 2015). This means that the effects of parental migration may be different for left-behind boys and girls in ways that are associated with cultural norms.

Research on the impact of siblings on the mental well-being of left-behind children has also produced mixed results. In rural China, where a second child is allowed if the first is a girl, it is common for households to have more than one left-behind child (Murphy, 2020). Some studies have found that the child with siblings while being left-behind may receive less love, attention, material, and psychological support from caregivers than those without siblings, which could contribute to higher levels of anxiety (Tavares et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2014). On the other hand, other studies have found that left-behind children with siblings may have better mental health outcomes due to the support and companionship provided by siblings (Lu, 2012; Tong, Yan, & Kawachi, 2019). For example, Ye and Lu (2011) found that some left-behind children felt satisfied when spending time with their siblings. Research in other settings, such as the Philippines, suggests that siblings can play a significant role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of these children (Asis, 2006). However, only a few studies have specifically examined the role of siblings in the context of migration in China, and more research is needed to better understand the specific ways in which siblings can impact the well-being of left-behind children. This may include examining the quality of sibling relationships, as well as the cultural and social context of migration.

In conclusion, the varied evidence based about the well-being of left-behind children speaks to the complexity of this issue. Age, gender, and the presence of siblings, the relationship between the child and caregiver, and the level of educational support, for example interact and affect the trajectory of the child's well-being. Also, most of the evidence comes from quantitative surveys. and there has been little qualitative work which may shed light on some of the complexities further research is needed to better understand these complex relationships.

3.4.3 Parent-child relationships

This section reports the evidence to date about the role that nuclear families play in shaping the well-being of left-behind children. As the most significant and intimate support system

surrounding these children, the way that they are impacted by these families greatly influence the way they experience their life.

Studies have consistently shown that poor parent-child relationships are prevalent among left-behind children (He et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2009; Su et al., 2013; Zhou & Yu, 2016). On the one hand, a significant number of studies suggest that the negative impact of being left-behind on children's mental health can be attributed to poor parent-child relationships (He et al., 2012; Jia & Tian, 2010; Wang et al., 2015; Zhou & Yu, 2016). Children with a poor relationship with their parents appear to be at higher risk of severe loneliness compared to those with a better relationship (Jia & Tian, 2010). On the other hand, a positive mother-child relationship has been found to be a protective factor against negative emotional outcomes, such as loneliness (Zhao, Liu, & Wang, 2015). Research has also indicated that left-behind children with good relationships with their parents are less likely to experience depression, more likely to be happy and have higher life satisfaction than those with poor relationships (McKinney et al., 2008; Su et al., 2013). In addition, there is evidence that poor parent-child relationships often have long-term effects on their subsequent parent-child relationships. A qualitative study (Zhao et al., 2018) that interviewed 25 children (aged 7-14yrs), 17 parents, and 13 grandparents found that leaving young children (less than 7yrs) for a long time (more than 6 years) negatively impacted the relationship between the child and their parents as they grew older, even if the parents eventually returned to live with the child. However, the study did not examine the point in time when the relationship between the child and their parents became poor, thus leaving open the question of how their relationship evolved during the period of migration. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the timeline and causes of the deterioration in the parent-child relationship during migration.

Additionally, other research has found that the quality and frequency of parent-child communication play a role in determining the parent-child relationship, and this, in turn, affects the mental health of left-behind children. Strong parent-child communication has been linked with a positive relationship between parents and children (Wang et al., 2019). Parent-child communication is often through the form of phone calls and messages when parents are away or face-to-face when they return. A study of 4857 left-behind children and adolescents found that frequent parent-child communication, such as weekly communication, was associated with lower levels of depression in left-behind children (Wang et al., 2015). The content of the communication, such as discussing school life, feelings, and learning experiences, was also found to be important in fostering positive relationships and enhancing the well-being of left-behind children.

In most cases, migration does not seem to be accompanied by effective parent-child communication. The limited holiday time available to migrant parents (usually less than ten days per year) limits opportunities for communication and many young left-behind children under the age of 12yrs are not considered old enough to own their own mobile phones (Lam & Yeoh, 2019; Liu & Leung, 2017). According to a study by Xing et al. (2017), left-behind children who has limited or no opportunities to communicate with their parents are more likely to experience poor interpersonal communication skills and feelings of isolation. Additionally, the return of parents did not necessarily mitigate the negative effects of prolonged absence on the children's well-being (Wang et al., 2019). In some cases, the change in primary caregiver from parents to relatives created new challenges for the children (Pottinger, 2005; Cited in Wang et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2018).

In addition to that, over years of separations and reunions, some children may develop ambivalent attitudes towards their parents, which can further harm the parent-child relationship and the child's well-being (Murphy, 2020). A qualitative study that interviewed 17 migrant parents and their children provides insight into how this occurs. Some children felt that temporary reunions with their parents were able to offset the harm caused by years of separation (Zhao et al., 2018), while others felt even worse after a short reunion, particularly if they asked their parents to stay but their parents still chose to leave. For parents, the inability to address these issues before migration not only harmed their relationships with their children, but also exacerbated the child's psychological distress. This effect is particularly pronounced if the child has been separated from their parents for a long time or if the child was separated from their parents at a young age (Wang et al., 2010). However, some studies have shown that a permanent return home can possibly reduce a child's loneliness, which may be due to the increased opportunities for close communication and interaction with parents (Démurger & Xu, 2011, 2015; Zhao et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the quality of communication and frequency of visits migrant parents play a crucial role in determining the mental well-being of left-behind children, and more research is needed on the life and family relationships of these children prior to parental migration. Grandparents cannot replace the role of parents in the family and being separated from a parent can lead to additional challenges and harm for the child.

3.4.4 Socioeconomic status (SES)

This section aims to explore the relationship between the SES and the well-being of left-behind children in China. It is widely acknowledged that the majority of left-behind children come from

low socioeconomic backgrounds, which often leads to a lack of access to essential resources such as proper nutrition, parental care, and quality education (Ye & Lu, 2011). The SES of the parents of left-behind children is significantly lower compared to that of non-left-behind children (Fan et al., 2010). Research by Yeung et al. (2002) found that children from families with higher income and financial stability tend to perform better on cognitive tests and exhibit fewer behavioural problems. On the other hand, left-behind children who face poor living conditions are more susceptible to anxiety, stress, and fear (Hansen, 2014; Zhao et al., 2014).

Although parents migrate to improve the economic conditions of their family, evidence suggests that low SES can influence left-behind children's psychological well-being. SES often comes with other potential factors that influence left-behind children's psychological development, such as guardian type and relationship with parents. For example, studies have found that left-behind with absent fathers, but with high SES, report low levels of depression; left-behind children who are separated from both parents, but have high SES, report fewer symptoms of depression than those with lower family SES (Cheng & Sun, 2014; He et al., 2012). Moreover, evidence suggests that poor economic status in families encourage parents to leave their children at a very younger age in rural areas, to seek employment in urban areas, and in return potentially influence children's psychological development (Liu et al., 2009). Additionally, poor SES may put a lot of pressure on parents and reduce their parenting quality (Qin & Albin, 2010), in turn increasing left-behind children's vulnerability to poor psychological health (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). However, some studies suggest that having high SES does not guarantee protected mental health for left-behind children; indeed, Zhou and Yu (2016) reported that left-behind children with good economic status experienced more mental health issues than that with poorer economic status. Notably, a study of Zhou et al. (2018) suggested that the negative effect of decreased parental care is stronger than the positive effect of increased income in terms of determining the depressive symptoms status of children in rural China. However, evidence shows that parents' increased income appears to be enough to offset the effect of decreased care, leading to more positive well-being for left-behind children (Ye & Lu, 2011). However, a study reported that although labour migration is a regular occurrence in most households, some left-behind children did not perceive that their household expenditure changed significantly after their parents migrated for work (Ye, 2013).

In sum, migration for increased income is the main reason parents leave children behind. A higher SES can provide children with better support; however, it is unclear whether SES has direct effects and how it affects children's psychological well-being.

3.4.5 Social support

Traditional families in China have mainly been composed of united families and nuclear families. However, the size of families in rural areas has shrunk dramatically as the result of rural–urban migration, especially when both the spouses leave (Ye & Yu, 2011).

As set out by ecological systems theory, social group plays an essential role in shaping children’s personal development and emotions. Social support is a function of social relationships provided by members within a social network, which is generally related to the number of or contact frequency with family members, relatives, friends, and classmates (Murphy, 2020; Xing et al., 2017) studies have reported significant positive correlation between social support and mental health in left-behind children (Xing et al., 2017). Although schools and society pay more attention to them than before, left-behind children still get relatively little concern and limited social support (Xing et al., 2017), especially emotional support, compared to non-left-behind children (Liu, Li, Chen & Qu, 2015; Luo et al., 2009). Due to low social support, left-behind children are more likely to experience low levels of life satisfaction and happiness, poor self-concept and high levels of loneliness (He et al., 2012, Su et al., 2017, Wang et al., 2015).

Good social support appears to play a protective role for left-behind children. For example, Man et al. (2017) reported that social support for left-behind children moderated the relationship between self-esteem and psychological maladjustment. Ai and Hu (2016) indicated that strong social support can play a buffering role against loneliness and depression. Moreover, a six-month longitudinal study showed that social support was positively associated with left-behind children’s life satisfaction and happiness (Su, Li, Lin & Zhu, 2017). Social support appears to provide left-behind children with opportunities to enhance emotional connections with others, and to be especially important for left-behind children at an early age (Zhang et al., 2014, He et al., 2012). Nevertheless, some studies report that left-behind children are exposed to peer rejection, which can contribute to loneliness (Zhao et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2013). Recently, Fan and Lu (2020) conducted research, with 476 left-behind children in grades 4-9 from 6 schools and reported that these children perceived social support to have direct and significant effects on their mental well-being. Resilience could partially mediate the influence of perceived social support on left-behind children’s mental well-being (Fan & Lu, 2020).

For some left-behind children, they depend on school as a source of social support, and school support is strongly associated with their psychological well-being (Chu, Saucier & Hafner, 2010; Hu et al., 2008). Teachers’ support seems positively related to left-behind children’s psychological well-being. For example, a cross-sectional study of 3,759 children (1815 left-behind children) aged from 8 to 17yrs and reported that negative teacher-child relationships significantly

affect left-behind children's depression scores. A positive teacher-child relationship can provide guidance to left-behind children, partially compensating for their migrated parents (Guo et al., 2015). Some studies conclude that strong teacher-left-behind children relationships are positively related to self-esteem and negatively associated with depression (Liu, Li, Chen & Qu, 2015). On the other hand, left-behind children who have poor relationship with teachers or peers are more likely to develop depression symptoms (Guo et al., 2015; Wen & Lin, 2012). Support of school peers and friends appears to help children cope with daily difficulties (Fan et al., 2010; Qin & Albin, 2010; Wang et al., 2015). Close peer relationships in school have significant and positive associations with life satisfaction and school engagement, and daily-based interactions are playing increasingly important roles for improving left-behind children's mental well-being.

3.5 Social stigma and discrimination towards left-behind children

It has been well-documented that left-behind children who temporarily live with their parents called floating children (which was introduced in Chapter 2) in cities and have to return to their rural homes eventually become left-behind children again may face challenges related to identity and belonging. Research has consistently shown that, floating to live with one's migrant parents in a city can be a challenging and emotionally distressing experience for these children, and can lead to changes in their attitudes and behaviours (Fang, Fan, & Liu, 2008; Hu, Hu, & Zhu, 2022). For example, in migration destinations cities, they are viewed as inferior to their counterparts born in cities villages (Liu & Jacob, 2013). Floating children are often called by city locals as an *'xiang ba lao'*, a term associated with stubbornness, a conservative look and simple taste (Moser, 1985;). When floating children return to their hometown, they are viewed as *'cheng li ren'* by villagers - an ironic term that associated with arrogance and insolence, denoting a person who tries to put on airs but still does not change his/her nature (Murphy, 2020). By saying this they imply the returning floating child is a rural person trying to be a city person, yet his/her identity never could be changed no matter how many years they spend living in a city (Hu, Hu, & Zhu, 2022).

This places the floating child in a vulnerable position, feeling marginalised by both rural and urban communities. For example, a study of Yuan et al. (2010) found these floating children considered themselves as an outsider of urban locals but also their sense of identity as "rural people" was also relatively weak. Research has constantly shown that floating children who temporarily live with parents are nonetheless still exposed to a number of harms. Fang, Fan, and Liu (2008) surveyed 1164 floating children, and 75% of them recalled perceived discriminations by teachers, classmates and other locals, such as: the teachers tended to favour urban students by giving them more opportunities in terms of seating arrangements and leadership positions;

for peers, some urban children refused to play or sit with them; other urban parents thought they were more problematic and did not allow their children to get close to them; and many communities did not allow migrant families to use public recreational facilities and cultural resources. Zhang and Zheng (2022) also reported that increased parental care did not seem to give these children more security when being unfairly treated by urban locals. Specifically, Liu, Zhao, and Shen (2013) investigated 1551 migrant children and found that their perceived discrimination had a direct and significant negative effect on their emotional experiences, such as anxiety, loneliness and depression, and these further influenced their behaviours, causing them to be withdrawn, refusing to talk to others, and even being hostile towards others around them and society (Liu, Zhao, & Shen, 2013). This emphasizes the importance of the microsystem surrounding environment for the left-behind children.

Other studies found that being left-behind (non-floating) in the countryside also exposures children to victimization (Wang & Mao, 2018; Zhao & Yu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). Compared to non-left-behind children, left-behind children have a high likelihood of being bullied (Otake, Liu, & Luo, 2019; Tang et al., 2018; Yan, Chen, & Huang, 2019; Yan et al., 2018). In addition, due to the increasing reports on left-behind children's conduct and behavioural problems, left-behind children have been labelled as "problematic children" in schools and face increased discrimination (Wang & Mao, 2018; Xiao, 2014; Zhao & Yu, 2019; Zhang, Ray, Hou, & Liu 2021). A recent study of 742 left-behind children and 1405 peers in grades 6 to 10 from 23 rural schools in 2010 and found that 31.6% of these children reported recurrent bullying victimization such as name-calling and negative comments. Similar results also can be found for school-aged migrants in western settings (Sulkowski, 2014). Additionally, Hu et al. (2018) conducted a survey covering 1881 left-behind children and 2885 of their grandparents (older than 60yrs); 27.5% of the left-behind children experienced bullying, and over 10% of children suffered from poly-victimization (at least two forms of victimization, e.g. being beaten, being forced to do things).

Other researchers have demonstrated that the possibility of being bullied or victimized of left-behind children is related to family structure, social status, and gender. For example, Chen, Liang, and Ostertag (2017) conducted a survey of 800 middle school students in rural China and found that, compared with children living with both parents in rural China, left-behind children by their fathers have an elevated level of victimization. In addition, the chronic absence of fathers leads to a higher level of delinquent and problem behaviour among left-behind children, which in turn leads to further victimization.

There has been a little agreement on which gender is more likely to suffer from discriminations. Yan, Chen, and Huang (2019) reported that left-behind boys (n=117) faced 3% more

discrimination than girls (n=155). Hu (2018) et.al. reported left-behind boys (n=986) were 40.3% higher risks of victimization than girls (OR = 1.403, $P < .01$, n=894). Similar results also be found in other studies (Zhu, Liu, & Liang, 2020). Yet, left-behind girls are more likely to suffer physical harm. For example, In August 2013, a schoolteacher in rural China's Jiangxi province sexually harassed six primary school girls, all of whom were left-behind children (Zhu, Liu, & Liang, 2020). The same year, seven left-behind girls were raped by their teacher; they were 7yrs and 8yrs (Wu, 2013). However, even with such a high level of publicity, little systematic research on victimization in this population has been conducted, especially on less severe types such as physical assault, child maltreatment, bullying, or verbal threat. Thus, the true extent of community harm to left-behind children is unknown.

3.5.1 The associations between discriminations and mental health

The perception of discrimination can have a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of left-behind children in rural China. Research has consistently shown that exposure to discrimination and stigma can lead to negative psychological outcomes, such as increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Fang, Fan, & Liu, 200; Hu, Hu, & Zhu, 2022; Liu, Zhao, Shen, 2013).

Several studies have examined the relationship between discrimination and mental health in left-behind children in rural China. For example, Liu et al. (2013) found that left-behind children who experienced discrimination had higher levels of loneliness compared to those who did not. Additionally, the way in which left-behind children cope with discrimination may be associated with their level of loneliness. Negative coping styles, such as ignoring or self-blaming, may intensify the relationship between discrimination and loneliness. A meta-analysis by Hu et al. (2022) found that perceptions of discrimination among left-behind children were positively related to negative indicators of mental health, such as depression and social anxiety. They also found that gender and age moderated the relationship between discrimination and mental health, and that boys and older left-behind children were more sensitive to perceived discrimination.

Bullying victimization is another factor that may be associated with negative mental health outcomes in left-behind children. Chen et al. (2017) and Zhang et al. (2021) both found that left-behind children who experienced bullying victimization were more likely to report negative outcomes, such as poor peer and family relationships, academic problems, and increased substance use (Chen, Liang, and Ostertag, 2017; Zhang, Zhou, & Cao, 2021). However, such studies are often unclear about the definition of bullying measurement of bullying. Although most studies agreed that left-behind children are more likely to be bullied, the reason for being

bullied is unclear.

The existing literatures that have revealed the poor developmental risks of being a left-behind child. Being a left-behind child tend to experience physical, emotional, psychological, and behavioural problems, and the prevalence of bullying and social discrimination. However, most of existing research on left-behind children have explored the poor developmental challenges they faced during childhood, little exploration has been explored about the experiences of these individuals in their youth or adulthood. There is a significant knowledge gap in understanding if being left-behind has long-term effects on them when they enter adulthood.

3.6 Research on left-behind children's emerging adulthood

While research on left-behind children has emphasised the emotional and behavioural challenges they face during their childhood, much research has overlooked how these early experiences might shape or affect their lives as they grow older. The relationship between left-behind experience and psychological outcomes in adulthood is likely to be very complex, as it is for all people. However, it is possible to identify particular risk and protective factors that seem to be true for some people.

There is little research on the long-term effects of being left-behind and psychological outcomes in emerging adulthood. It is commonly agreed that emerging adults are struggling toward several goals and confronting new challenges such as seeking a job, becoming engaged in romantic relations, and taking increasing responsibility for their own lives (Arnett, 2000), which means they are facing multiple life tasks in a short time. Recently, a few studies of Chinese emerging adults (16yrs or over) have examined connections between their early left-behind experience and later outcomes. For example, Lan and his colleagues found that peer and parental support and individual characteristics (such as grit, resilience) appear to play a protective role in reducing negative psychological (depressive) symptoms for adults with early left-behind experience (Lan, Wang, & Radin, 2019). Peer support and parental support to the young adult are critical protective factors for promoting prosocial behaviour in LB-adults (Lan & Wang, 2019, 2022). Chinese adults with left-behind experience are also more likely to show aggressive behaviour and to have lower self-esteem compared to their peers, which are appeared to relate to the duration and the age of being left-behind (Yu, Li, & Cao, 2020). A study from Zheng et al. (2022) reported that adults with left-behind experience are likely to spend more time with their children compared with their counterparts, being left-behind by both parents had the significant negative effect on their overall health (physical and mental).

3.7 Implications for the present study

The literature reviewed in this chapter has demonstrated that left-behind children are at risk of poor physical, psychological, emotional well-being. However, research to date has focused on children and adolescents and little is known about whether early left-behind experiences influence their overall development in adulthood, i.e. the legacy of being left-behind in childhood is unknown. This is a huge knowledge gap. Therefore, given the vast numbers of people affected, there is a compelling need to explore how young adults make sense of their early experience and the extent to which they feel it has affected their well-being. Outcomes may be able to inform support for left-behind children but during and after a left-behind experience.

Studies in this field have mainly used quantitative research methods to investigate outcomes for left-behind children, while only a few studies have used qualitative methods (the rationale for this is fully explored in Chapter 4). As the phenomenon of left-behind children is influenced by its complicated social, political, and economic context, and every left-behind child grows up in different and complex environment in China, they may have very different experiences and different ways of making sense of their past. It's imperative to emphasize that, to date, to the best of my knowledge, very few have delved into this topic from a first-person, authentic experience perspective. This void in research calls for an exploration of the left-behind children phenomenon through their own eyes, seeking to understand it from their own perspectives. Most research to date has used standardized measures of psychological well-being, which whilst rigorous, also limits the knowledge we are able to generate about how those outcomes may come to be. Given the current limited research knowledge about the long-term effects of being a left-behind child, and the shortage of research which has examined experience and meaning-making in an exploratory, rich way, the present study will conduct in-depth interviews, from first-person account, to explore how Chinese young adults perceive their early left-behind experience and how they make sense of it, to better understand the left-behind children phenomenon.

3.8 Research questions

Through the lens of ecological systems theory, the present study aimed to understand the left-behind experience on Chinese young adults, not just in individual level, but also in broader context in which Chinese young adults growing up.

The aim of the present study was to understand the lived experience of Chinese young adults with early left-behind experience in rural China. Three research questions have been formulated:

1. What are the key experiences recounted by Chinese young people about their left-behind experience as a child, and over time into young adulthood? What meaning is assigned by Chinese young people to these experiences?
2. Do Chinese young people experience any long-term effects on their psychosocial well-being from their early left-behind experiences, and if so, how do they explain this?
3. What implications do first-person accounts of being a left-behind child have for policy and practice in China pertinent to the left-behind population and their surrounding communities?

It is essential to acknowledge that the specific duration that qualifies as "long-term" can vary depending on the context and the nature of the research question, and that in the present study it meant from early childhood up until young adulthood. Long-term effects persist beyond the immediate or short-term timeframe (e.g. just being left-behind), to capture how young Chinese adults to make sense of early left-behind experiences.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter sets out the key methodological approach and methods. This research consisted of a self-pilot, pilot and main study. The self-pilot will be discussed along with reflections on the selections of the methods. Strengths, weakness, and subsequent amendments based on the data collection will also be discussed. The main study involved in-depth, timeline-based interviews with twenty young Chinese adults (aged 18-25yrs) to explore their experiences of living apart from their parents during childhood due to parental migration, and how they feel this affected them up to their current life stage. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the main method of data analysis. This chapter explains the researcher's background, ethics arrangements, methodology and method, data analysis, reflexivity, and personal statements.

4.1 Reflexivity: the researcher

Reflexivity notes are crucial in qualitative research, allowing researchers to reflect on their own experiences, beliefs, and biases, and how these might impact the research process (Darawsheh, 2014). Some academics argue that the status of a researcher as an insider or outsider can be shifted in response to the research situation (Milligan, 2016; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Being an outsider can often mean that the researcher does not have assumptions and may be a more inquisitive interviewer (Milligan, 2016) In comparison, being an insider has been argued to facilitate authentic, nuanced, and responsible research given the researcher's closeness to the phenomenon, allowing them to bring a particular awareness, understanding, and empathy to the interviewee (Milligan, 2016). Additionally, it is possible that being an insider, with in-depth knowledge of the social, political, and historical context, can facilitate richness and contextualisation in data interpretation (Chavez, 2008). For example, sharing similar cultural backgrounds and childhood experiences may make it more likely that participants will feel understood, and for the researcher to understand them. In both positions, researchers are required to be open-minded, authentic, honest, deeply interested in participants, and committed to accurately representing the participants' experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990; Milligan, 2016).

My Left-behind experience: my motivation, and my research position

I am a Chinese woman, aged 23yrs when I started my PhD. I was left-behind in rural Henan province when I was 4yrs, I am thus likely to share similar sociocultural understandings as the target participants and consider myself largely an 'insider' (as opposed to an 'outsider') in relation to the study sample (Greene, 2014).

Growing up as a child in a left-behind situation, I came to recognize the overwhelming prevalence of this circumstance in my rural community. My left-behind childhood was not an isolated incident but rather a common, yet deeply distressing experience shared by many children in my area. It was normal to witness many households where at least one parent had migrated for work, leaving children in the care of relatives or even, in some shocking cases, in the role of the caregiver themselves. One vivid memory that continues to haunt me is the story of a young girl, less than 9yrs, who was left to care for her 3 younger siblings and elderly grandparents after her parents migrated. These children were prematurely thrust into adult responsibilities. Such was the reality for many left-behind children who were, from my perspective, forced to grow up far too quickly.

The experience of being left-behind for me was filled with difficulties and complexities that extended being left-behind per se. It was the process of noticing being different from others by noticing what they had and what I did not have such as my parents never attending my school meetings while my friends' parents did, not feeling I belonged while being cared for by relatives, there being no one to wait for me at the end of the school day. These comparisons deepened the pain of my situation. Being cared for by relatives was a painful and hated experience for me, filled with resentment and bitterness. As a left-behind girl in a family that favoured sons, I often felt unfairly treated and less valued compared to my male cousin. This sense of inequality fed into my feelings of inadequacy and reinforced my perception that I was lesser because I was left-behind and because I was a girl. My awareness of my vulnerable position led to silence and a desperate desire to escape. I moved out my relative's home when I went to university and never wanted to return to.

My personal experiences and the tragedies I witnessed spurred a desire to learn more about left-behind children. I began to closely follow the phenomenon in 2013, alarmed by the news of four left-behind children dying in a bin for warmth, followed by additional reports of tragedy in subsequent years. In 2015, a left-behind boy committed suicide during Chinese Spring festival and left a note saying 'if I die, it would be a relief for my family'. Each story was a painful reminder

of my own past and a testament to the desperation and hopelessness that could drive a child to such extremes. As the years went by, the tragedy continued, but the attention seemed to wane. Left-behind children's deaths became less newsworthy, their struggles less noticeable, and their voices unheard. This growing indifference troubled me deeply, motivating me to explore the reasons behind these tragedies. It is not only through their deaths that we should come to know and understand left-behind children but through a dedicated effort to understand their lives and experiences. Recognizing the urgency of this issue, I felt a strong connection and responsibility to this population.

Another turning point pushed me to embark on this research journey was the realization of a profound personal struggle – the experience of left-behind might have long-term effects on me. I realized not being able to live with my parents meant a great loss for me. As I transitioned into adulthood, I began to notice the extensive impact that being left-behind had on me. This realization was not sudden but occurred gradually, unfolding like a slow, painful revelation. I found myself unable to engage in peaceful, everyday conversations with my parents, something that seemed natural for others but remained an insurmountable challenge for me. I often find myself feeling excluded by my family even when we lived under the same roof. It was not just my relationship with my parents that was affected; my relationships with my siblings also suffered. Being physically separated for long periods meant that we did not share the common experiences that typically unite siblings. I am experiencing that kind of loss and acknowledging that loss, and there is nothing I can do but accept. However, my personal experience served as a catalyst for something greater. Recognizing that millions of young Chinese adults might be struggling with similar issues filled me with a sense of purpose and urgency. I saw an opportunity to not only understand myself better but also to extend my empathy and knowledge to others. The process became more than just a scholarly pursuit; it was a journey of self-discovery and a call to action. It enabled me to transform my personal struggles into a shared narrative that could inspire change and foster a deeper understanding of what it means to be left-behind. In doing so, I hoped to create pathways for healing, connection, and empowerment for young left-behind children who may be walking a similar path.

Given my personal experience, I perceived that my position was 'in between' between outsider and insider of the research. My history gives me a unique insight but also places me in a distinct position in relation to the participants and the research question. My left-behind experience may have allowed me to easily build emotional connection with participants and lessened the

pressure to talk about things might not be positive, perhaps leading to richer and more 'honest' data. Moreover, I broadly share the same cultural knowledge of China as my participants.

My personal experience might also have presented challenges. It might have affected how I interacted with participants and how I interpreted the data. I might have over empathised or over judged extended kin (as caregivers) and migrant parents. Interviewing participants brought vivid memories of my own childhood that might have clouded my judgements. I tried to remain vigilant to recognize and address these influences throughout the research process, although researcher subjectivity and personhood is always brought to bear in IPA.

To mitigate potential biases, I worked closely with my supervisors and peer reviewers to provide external perspectives. Regular discussions and reflections on my positionality helped ensure that I remain conscious of my role and its influence on the research process. Understanding that positionality and bias is not static but fluid, I continually reflected on how my background and perspective were influencing my interactions, interpretations, and decisions throughout the research. The impact of this will be noted later in the thesis.

4.2 The role of memory

This section reflects on the role of memory and methodological considerations related to memory and memory recall within the scope of the study.

The role of memory in social research is a fundamental aspect that allows us to explore the connections between the past, present, and future (Linde, 2015). It emphasizes a focus on individual's subjectivity, and its value lies in understanding the subjective truths embedded within it, rather than in seeking objective and enduring historical truths. Memories are fluid and interpretive, not fixed and absolute (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2005). Studies in many disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, acknowledge that memories may or may not accurately reflect objective reality (Keightley, 2010). In memory research, the emphasis is not on proving the objective accuracy of individual memories (Haug, 1999). Instead, researchers focus on how memories are influenced by individuals' interpretations of past and present events and how they contribute to shaping meaning in their lives (Crawford et al., 1992). This implies that, in the present study, it should be acknowledged that participants' memories might not be accurate representations of their life events. Rather, their memories aim to convey their subjective truths rooted in their past, present, and future.

It is essential to accept that memory is a reconstructive process influenced by various factors, including personal perspectives, emotions, biases, mood and the emotional state of the individual at the time (Cordon et al., 2004; Erskine et al., 1990; Johnson, 2006; Matos & Pinto-

Gouveia, 2010). This means that, memory recall can be selective (Keightley, 2010). This often appears in trauma studies; for example, some traumatic experiences can be omitted from memory or they may remember these experiences to some degree (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010). In the present study, participants' recall of their traumatic left-behind experiences varied. Some participants were able to construct detailed memories of their traumatic experiences, while others struggled to recall specific details. The age at which these experiences occurred (Keightley, 2010), such as being too young to remember, could have influenced memory capacity.

However, it's essential to recognise that memory may not always provide an accurate representation of their life events, and you (researcher) cannot know that what they (participants) recalled was accurate. The selectivity in memory recall is a common occurrence in any memory research, and these aspects must be accepted as such (Keightley, 2010). In the present study, method and methodology have been carefully chosen to maximise participants' memory recall. The timeline interview method served as a valuable tool for eliciting memory narratives, allowing participants to choose and express their left-behind experiences and the meaning that associated with them. The use of IPA as a methodological approach enabled a thorough interpretation of how these experiences had impacted the participants and provided insights into their own sense-making processes. Even if we were all part of the same event (i.e. could verify it factually) the sense we made of it at the time would vary too - so it is not just memory recall, but the way the memory is laid down with personal meaning in the first place. However, it is important to acknowledge that even if we all experienced the same event (i.e. could verify it factually), our individual interpretations and perceptions of that event would differ. This highlights that it's not solely about memory recall but also about how our memories are shaped by our personal meanings and perspectives in the first place.

4.3 Methodology

The left-behind experience being studied is likely to be both deeply personal to individual participants, but also shaped by the cultural, political, and social context surrounding left-behind children in China (Kolar et al., 2015; Roots, 2007). The research adopts a social constructivist approach that proposes the world (i.e. events, people, objects) exists independently of the human mind, but that experience and understanding of these things are constructed by people, often socially, permitting multiple 'truths' to exist. This research is interested in the diversity of experiences that may become evident across participants' accounts, and the extent to which the meaning generated by participants.

The chosen method of analysis – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis – endorses social constructionism. This position asserts that social, cultural, political and historical influences are critical to how we experience and understand ourselves and the events in ours' lives, including the stories we tell about these lives. The present study seeks to understand how young Chinese adults experience and make sense of their early left-behind experience. IPA is a helpful approach to analysis how young Chinese adults illustrate and recognize their early childhood experience and its unfolding effects, if any, on their subsequent lives.

4.3.1 What is IPA?

IPA aims to understand lived experience by integrating ideas from four phenomenological philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Caelli, 2000; Eatough & Smith., 2017; Pringle et al., 2011; Macann, 2005; Tuffour, 2012). The key principles of IPA are phenomenology and hermeneutics. IPA has a long and a short history. IPA was first articulated in the UK in the middle-1990s and initially was used as an approach to the psychology of experience in health and clinical / counselling psychology (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith, 1996). Since then, it has greatly expanded and has become a dominant qualitative research methodology in the UK psychology. IPA's absolute clear commitment to understanding phenomena of interest from a first-person perspective and its belief in the value of subjective knowledge to psychological understanding have attracted many researchers in many fields across the world (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Tuffour,2017). IPA research has been employed in human, social, and health care, education, and sports science studies (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Hefferon & Ollis, 2006; Finlay, 2011; Seamark et al., 2004).

IPA is particularly useful for exploring under researched phenomena or perspectives and is a highly useful methodology in providing a rich and nuance insight into the experiences of research participants (Larkin, Flowers, & Smith, 2021), and typically around experience of some personal significance (e.g. life major events or important relationships) (Smith, 2007). It detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experienced of a small number of participants (Pringle et al., 2011; Smith, 2007; Tuffour, 2012). IPA is part of a family of phenomenological psychology approaches, all of which are distinct from other theoretical emphases and methodical commitments but are in broad agreement about the relevance of an experiential perspective for the discipline, because of its combination of psychological, interpretative, and idiographic components (Gill, 2014).

4.3.1.1 Key principles of IPA

The key principles of IPA are phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach and the way things appear to one's consciousness. Phenomenology was initially articulated by Husserl in the early 19th Century, and later developed by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Caelli, 2000; MaCann, 2005; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Tuffour, 2012). Husserl focused on how things appear subjectively to people to interpret their everyday experience, rather than deal with how things actually are 'objectively' (or 'in reality') (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This aspect of IPA brings attention to the importance of rich description of lived experience. The argument underpinning this is that access to the world is through first-person experience, and therefore key research interests are understanding how people encounter phenomena and trying to understand the essence or structure of the ways things appear to them (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

Subsequent work of Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1956) on phenomenology emphasized the importance of acknowledging the complex environment in which the individual is embedded (Smith et al., 2009). They argued that individuals are influenced by cultural experiences, language, relationships, or assumptions (Smith et al., 2009). For example, Heidegger emphasises that human exist in a world of objects, relationships, and language, and our position in the worlds must be related to or encounter something, and once it is encountered it inevitably goes through the meaning-making process by human (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Different from Husserl, Heidegger's phenomenological approach advocated the study of phenomenology through a hermeneutic lens (Tuffour, 2017). Maurice Merleau-Ponty provided a more comprehensive expansion of the phenomenological approach. He believed that each perception created by an individual uncovers something about that person (Larkin et al., 2016).

Hermeneutics is the second theoretical perspective in IPA, which is the theory of interpretation and meaning (Larkin et al. 2006). This is an inherent base of IPA research, as the key focus is on an individual's interpretation or sense-making. The process of hermeneutics requires the researcher to engage in double-hermeneutic position, which is, the participant is making sense of their experience, and the researcher is trying to interpret what the participants reported, i.e. the researcher is making sense of the participants' sense-making (Smith et al., 2009). This highlights that the researcher's own subjectivity and history inevitably impacts the analysis (Willig, 2013), as well as highlights the importance for IPA research in both the participant's ability to articulate an experience, and the researcher's ability to understand them. As such, Smith et al. (2009) stressed the importance of documenting the researcher's influence on the data. They advocate that the researcher uses reflexivity notes to acknowledge their personal

position throughout to improve the transparency and mitigate the potential effect of the researcher's influence on the data.

The third key concept of IPA is ideography, which in relation to IPA involves commitment to a detailed analysis of each individual case (Moses & Knutsen, 2012). This allows for in-depth analysis with a focus on the 'particular'; for instance, how a particular phenomenon has been understood from the perspective of a particular person, in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). Larkin et al. (2006) advocate intensive and detailed analysis at the individual level initially, and then for this analysis to be completed at a group level. As such, ideography in IPA focuses in detail on understanding one person's experience in context at a time making conclusions about the individual before examining across cases (Smith et al., 2009; Tuffour, 2017). It also takes great care of each case, offering detailed and nuanced analysis, valuing each case in its own merits before moving to the general cross-case analysis for convergence and divergence between cases (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

4.3.1.2 Relevance of IPA to the present study

The present study adopted IPA in the understanding of young people's experience of being left-behind through their early childhood and their accounts of the impact of this on them as young adults. Through the literature review, it has been found that there is a paucity of research on the experience of left-behind, especially the lived experience of those left-behind in China. Little research on left-behind children that have used qualitative research method, and from these studies, there are no qualitative research on these children focusing on their lived experience (Lu, 2011; Ye & Lu, 2011; Zhang et al., 2015; Zhang 2018). These studies are mostly used interviews, children's diaries to analyse data (Zhang et al., 2015; Zhang 2018). These studies analysed data by generating codes and forming categories, then methodically analysing the relationships and differences between these codes, connections between categories and subcategories. However, these studies cannot capture the intricate sense-making process and the nuanced, in-depth accounts of the children's lived experiences.

Furthermore, these studies collected data from multiple people's perspectives, such as caregivers, migrant parents, officials, rather than concentrating solely on the unique perspectives of the left-behind children themselves (Ye & Lu, 2011; Zhang et al., 2018). Their research questions often focused on a specific aspect of left-behind children, such as their agency (Zhang et al., 2015), attachment with their parents (Chen, 2022), their rights (Zhang, 2018). There are no existing studies that have used a nuanced and comprehensive approach to focus on left-behind children's lived experience and explore multidimensional aspects wherever they share.

Through the use of IPA, this study seeks to fill this gap, offering a unique insight into the personal and multifaceted narratives of these individuals, and contributing to a richer understanding of a subject that has been largely overlooked in the existing body of research.

In addition to this, IPA is a particularly useful methodology for examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Left-behind children's phenomenon in China is the product of its social-political-economic products, a large population are at risk of experiencing psychological distress and emotionally problems. It is a sensitive topic where some participants find it challenging to share their personal experiences. What sets IPA distinguish is its participant-oriented approach, allowing individuals to express their left-behind experiences in their terms and ways that make sense to them (Alase, 2017). This method grants participants the space and freedom to reveal their complex feelings and thoughts. However, a key aspect to recognize about IPA is that it is not theory-led; themes are generated from the participants' experiences and descriptions through IPA, but theories are used as tools for reflecting on and interpreting the themes, rather than as a starting point for generating them.

4.4 Identification of a suitable interviewing method

Interview data is well suited for IPA. Several candidate interview methods were reviewed for the present study. The researcher was looking for a method that was particularly able to support participants to reflect on a possibly complex personal history. The question is in which one is flexible enough and participant-oriented to reach 'lived experience' of the research participants in according to principle of IPA. In doing so, life story-based approaches were reviewed, such as life history calendar (LHC), life grid, and timeline interview methods, for the present study.

LHC, life grid, and timeline interview methods are qualitative methods for collecting data based on life stories. They have been used widely to research sensitive topics while offering the potential for a great sense of control and comfort for the participants in the interview process. These approaches appear to empower participants' agency and ownership and support them to share their lifetime experiences (Kolar et al., 2015; Morselli et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2007). Different methods use different formats and stimuli, such as grids, calendars and timelines (Adriansen, 2012; Freedman et al., 1988; Rowland et al., 2019). We considered LHC to be a little rigid and controlled. For example, it puts emphasis on reporting specific events under specific dates/periods (Rowland, 2019; Wilson et al., 2007), which demands a lot of effort from the respondent and dependence on memory (Morselli, 2016). On the other hand, life grid and timeline interview methods appeared more flexible regarding specificity of times. Therefore, the research team decided to road-test these two methods in self-pilots by the researcher.

Life grid is a visual method, where participants are asked to complete a grid in advance of the interview and bring that to the interview to structure the discussion. Participants are given a grid, with rows and columns representing period of times or aspects of interest to the research question, dictated by the researcher. This method has been used in diverse fields, including medical sociology and health research (Berney & Blane, 1997; Blane, 1996), to study smoking behavior among elderly people (Parry, Thompson, & Fowkes, 1999) and to explore the relationship between university ranking and inequality between students (Abbas et al., 2013). Life-grids were a candidate method as they can prompt participant's memory and support them with a structure for noting these. Life grid interviews do not assume to be generating a verifiable record of a person's life. Rather, the method explores the key events that are remembered and how they are reconstructed and given meaning. The grid then becomes a useful tool for the interviewee and interviewer in the interview itself, to follow a chronology of events.

Timeline interviewing is a visual, art-based data collection method that has been mainly used in sensitive studies (Bagnoli, 2009; Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011), e.g. the trajectory of substance abuse and treatment (Bagnoli, 2009), the impact of financial incentives on clinical behaviours (Umoquit et al., 2008), and interviewing suicide attempters (Rowland, 2016). This method has also been used with south Asian immigrants and disadvantaged youth groups, which is similar to the present study (Kolar et al., 2015). Moreover, the timeline method is not complicated to handle for interviewees as they do not need to create it in any specific way (Kolar et al., 2015; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). For the researcher, although it takes times to master, the core components of timeline interviewing is to listen actively and not to take over the interview with too many questions (Adriansen, 2012; Morse & Field, 1995).

4.4.1 Timeline interview method for this study

Evidence shows that asking participants to create their own timelines is very common in interviewing. e.g. Bryant-Jeffries (2001) asked clients with alcohol problems to draw a timeline; Gramling and Carr (2004) invited 28 young women to create personal timelines to reflect their life trajectory; Berends (2011) helped participants complete a timeline. Thus, creating their own timeline may provide an opportunity for participants to represent their own version of reality when reflecting on the significance of individual events, and the relationships between these events under its context.

In addition to the reasons articulated above, there are many other reasons why timeline interview method is likely to be a suitable means of data collection for this study. First, the study aimed to explore particular periods of life when key events happened, i.e., times when the participants lived without their parents. For some participants, these periods may have been recurring, and different living and educational arrangements may have been in place at different times for the participant. Additionally, it may also be the first time that many participants have so clearly reflected on their lives without parents and being able to do so without the researchers' gaze seems appropriate. Thus, giving participants time (one week) in advance of interview to set out the key events from their personal history in a timeline was anticipated to be helpful to participants to feel prepared for the interview, both in terms of structuring their narrative as well as what they may be comfortable discussing (Adriansen, 2012; Kolar et al., 2015). This method appears to help participants to feel engaged and give them a sense of flexibility and ownership and enhance trust in the process (Hargreaves & Patterson, 2012; Kolar et al., 2015).

Second, discussion of the timeline will be planned to be the main stimulus to drive the interview so that it was heavily participant-oriented. This is important in generating data that reflects what matters to the participant, whilst still permitting the interviewer to be curious and to pose questions about the participants' experiences that shed light on the research questions. The timeline serves as a 'collective memory' where the story can be seen both by the interviewer and the interviewee. It is easy for both parties to return to an issue already discussed and this can be linked with other events along the way, as well as to keep focused by viewing this piece of data., the timeline was anticipated to be useful to the researcher post interview, both as a piece of data and of itself.

4.4.2 Self-pilot

I underwent two self-pilots using life-grid method and timeline interview. The aim of the self-pilots was to 1) experience the methods as a participant, 2) to identify if they were usable in relation to the research question, 3) to see the nature of data that they could produce, and 4) to learn interviewing skills from experienced interviewers (the supervisors). Self-pilots are rare in research, yet they were pivotal for my research development. First, as a researcher, I learned many basic interviewing skills, such as appropriate eye contact, listening skills, being open and not judgmental, and gained an overall confidence in interviewing participants. Second, we also selected the most appropriate method from this process.

Here, I briefly report what we have learned from this process and more details on the method chosen for the main study.

- (i) Compared to the timeline approach, the life grid method needed more effort and time to define its components that contributed to the research questions and to make it well-structured. This means that the researcher needs considerable skills to prepare the format of the grid and to manage the interview process. In addition, as an interviewee, I felt that I was led by the grid structure rather than my own stories, which goes against our research aim of exploring the ways of how respondents make sense of their own experiences.
- (ii) Compared to the life grid method, using the timeline interview method was easier for both interviewer and respondent. Instead of defining the participant's life into different components, the timeline is open and aims to serve the main aim of talking about important events during their lifetime. As an interviewee, I had more choice and freedom to talk about events and experiences I felt were important and wanted to share or disclose. We concluded that it was likely to be suitable for this doctoral research.

Self-piloting helped to provide insight into the possible position of the participants and to understand the work and involvement of the researcher from both an outsider's and insider's perspective. Through the self-pilot, I gained new insight into what it is like to be a participant, the different worries or concerns one might have as a participant, and how an interviewer can meet the participant with where they are at. These helped in making useful amendments and improvements to the method in the pilot and main study.

4.5 Pilot study and reflections

To develop interviewing skills and to road-test the timeline interview, two practice interviews were conducted in the UK (not recorded as ethical approval had not yet been awarded). Participants were Chinese friends of the researcher studying at a local university. One was a male aged 22yrs and one was a female aged 25yrs. They both met the main study inclusion criteria except they were currently students. They were both given the study information letter and advised that this was a practice interview and would be asked to feedback on the process afterwards. A week in advance, they were asked to prepare a personal timeline and important,

meaningful or even turning point events based on their subjectively defined life stages (i.e. primary school, first 10 years) and which would help me understand their experiences of being a left-behind child. Interviews were conducted in the University's library self-study room at a mutually agreed time. Both interviews took around two hours which is the average time of using timeline interview method (Kolar et al., 2015).

During these interviews, I applied the learned skills from the self-pilot. In addition, four new issues were identified in the practice interviews which I needed to consider for the main study:

- (i) Sending the timeline task and following up on their preparation with participants is important. Both participants did not prepare their personal timeline in advance, and they spent around fifteen minutes doing so at the beginning of the interview. They explained that they did not do this in advance due to a lack of time, as well as mentioning that I did not urge them to do so. Therefore, we decided to send the timeline earlier and put more emphasis in the emails on the importance of preparing the timeline ahead of the interview, as well as sending following-up reminders before the interview.
- (ii) I spent more than expected introducing the research and answering participants' follow-up questions. The participants were more interested in my personal experience instead of theirs, which is not uncommon (Squire, 2008). For the main study, I recognised the need to relatively quickly focus the interview on the participants' timeline. It was important for me to know how to give short answers when asked personal questions and keep the interview more focused on the participants' experience.
- (iii) Participants appeared to have the impression that the study was interested only in negative events or upsetting/sad experiences. Therefore, for the main study, I planned to emphasise that they can share any events they feel important to them, giving examples of both difficult and uplifting or significant experiences or people in their lives.
- (iv) Being more proactive with interview questions. I noticed that participants lingered

with certain events. Whilst it is important to be participant-led, I noticed I was hesitant about asking questions regarding other events. Upon discussion with my supervisors, I planned to be more proactive and use questions like 'Would you like to share with me about other events?' or 'Can you tell me more events at other stages?' to help the conversation to explore wider aspects.

Overall, this pilot study helped me to recognise important preparations before the interview and to be mindful of key practices during the interview.

4.6 Main study method

This section details the process of how the main study was conducted including recruitment, ethics, the interview and data storage.

4.6.1 Recruitment process and location

Due to the global outbreak of Covid-19 and lock-down in the UK, and the huge uncertainty of travelling to China to interview people face-to-face, it was decided to conduct interviews online (with ethical approval). Recruitment was via two ways, in-country and online. In-country recruitment in China was with the help of my cousin: (a) poster / flyer on school noticeboards in Huaiyang to recruit participants for an online interview via school-going young people or students' siblings; (b) flyers to be handed out in Huaiyang town. For the online recruitment, (c) a recruitment call on WeChat. The poster / flyer and WeChat post invited people who were interested in the study to contact me via WeChat or email for the full study information letter and / or to ask questions.

The goal was to conduct 20 interviews in total. IPA emphasis on an in-depth and detailed exploration of individual experiences, and because of this emphasis, IPA studies typically utilize smaller sample sizes participants compared to other qualitative research methods. Robinson (2014) and Smith et al. (2009) suggested that 3-16 sample size considered typical for IPA studies, and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) indicated that it is less common in psychological studies using a large sample size. The decision to utilize a slightly larger sample size in this particular study was motivated by a couple of specific considerations. Firstly, since I had not previously utilized IPA before this piece of research, I was uncertain whether my participants would be able to provide sufficiently rich data. Including more participants in the study provided me with greater confidence in my interpretations. After collecting substantial data from the initial five participants, all from the same region, it became evident that expanding the participant base would allow for a more diverse and multifaceted understanding of the left-behind experience.

Therefore, I sought to include participants from various locations, culminating in the final sample of 20 interviews. This size enabled me to encapsulate the complexity of the phenomenon while still adhering to the depth-focused philosophy of IPA.

4.6.2 Main study: inclusion and exclusion criteria

Participants were eligible to take part if they were aged 20-25yrs, and if the Chinese local criteria of being a left-behind child applied to them, that is, that they were a Chinese national and had lived without one or both parents for at least six months in childhood (under 18yrs) due to parents' economic migration. We recruited participants who were living in the researcher's hometown of Huaiyang for easier access and convenience. This town was considered by Chinese government to be 'left-behind children and adolescents' town in 2013, accounted for 10% of left-behind children in the Zhoukou Province (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016). The participants needed to have internet access for the online. Exclusion criteria were being a university student we wished access the lesser studied population of non-students. The decision to recruit a non-student population within the age range of 20-25yrs for researching left-behind children was influenced by several factors.

- Representative insights into lower SES backgrounds: Focusing on non-student participants in this age range allowed the research to effectively target individuals from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Left-behind children are often associated with disadvantaged SES, with migration typically undertaken for financial improvement (Zhang, 2018). Non-students in this context are more likely to hail from typical Chinese migration families, and their left-behind experiences are likely to be more representative of the broader population. Thus, non-student participants provided insights that are more aligned with the experiences of left-behind children from poor SES backgrounds.
- Rich and diverse perspectives: Non-student participants might also include individuals who have become migrants themselves (having been left-behind children) or those without occupation. Both of these categories can offer distinct and rich accounts of their left-behind experiences, contributing to the complexity and depth of the research findings.
- Avoiding Pandemic-related challenges: The timing of the research was the beginning of quarantine in China due to Covid-19. University or college settings where students might be quarantined, focusing on non-students helped to circumvent potential difficulties in communication and avoid additional emotional distress when discussing sensitive topics.
- Ethical considerations in a sensitive Context: Given that the research topic is sensitive

and the social context might constrain free expression, engaging non-students as participants might lessen the chance of being influenced.

These considerations collectively shaped the choice of recruiting non-student participants, aiming to create a study that is not only representative but also ethically conscious, robust, and attentive to the unique challenges posed by the subject matter and external conditions.

4.6.3 Ethical consideration and approval

Initial ethical approval for the main study was obtained from the School of Psychology Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds on the 9th of January 2020 (Ethics no. PSC-876). Further approval was attained after the onset of the pandemic to permit online interviews and was approved on the 19th of March 2020 (Ethics no. PSC-876).

Data anonymisation and storage

Interview audio-recordings were kept on a secure University of Leeds shared drive designed for the confidential storage of research data. Any computer on which data was stored for analysis was locked with a username and password. All stored participant data (except original audio-recordings) were anonymised and the different elements (transcripts, and timelines) were linked only through the use of participant identifiers in the form of a pseudonym. Signed informed consent forms from participants were stored in a separate file with a username and password. Care was taken so that individuals were highly unlikely to be identifiable in normal circumstances through this stored data. In particular, transcripts were carefully anonymised with any identifying details removed or changed. Permission was obtained from participants to use quotations from their interviews in the study, on the understanding that their names or other identifying features would not be used. Anonymising was done at the time that transcripts were checked against audio-recordings for accuracy. Peer review has checked and confirmed the quality and confidentiality of the stored material.

4.6.4 Sensitivity

The topic is deeply personal, and it was likely that participants would recall upsetting experiences. A number of steps were taken to mitigate the risk of serious harm. First, the age range was between 20 and 25yrs as people at this age are likely to have more personal capacity to manage a potentially sensitive interview compared to people under 20yrs. Second, participants knew in advance the nature of the interview and could decide if they felt able to take part. Third, the pre-interview preparation (timeline) gave the participant considerable ownership over the interview content, and an opportunity to think in advance about what they

were willing to disclose. A participant-led interview method was chosen to go some way to managing the risk of over-intrusion by the researcher. Fourth, participants could choose to do the interview online (WeChat). All interviewees could pause or end the interview at any time if they become too distressed. If participants reported immediate harm or risk of harm to themselves or others, the researcher protocol was to ask police (the only available support source in rural China) to provide support and guidance. This was clear to participants on the information sheet. Finally, participants were provided with a list of free psychological and emotional supportive resources written in Chinese in case they needed to access help after the interview.

4.7 Procedure

Potential participants were fully informed of the study via a comprehensive information booklet, and they signed consent and audio recorded consent prior to interview start. Participants were asked to generate a unique participant code (the combination of the last four digit of phone number, surname and date of birth) known only to the participant and research team.

4.7.1 Creating a timeline

Participants were asked to prepare for the interview by creating a personal (historical) timeline of key events to bring to the interview, e.g. some important events that stand out when they reflected on their life. The instructions were:

- (i) Draw a line on a large piece paper, i.e., A4 paper sheet to divide the paper into two sections either in a horizontal or vertical way. On this line mark a starting point that makes sense to you, i.e. this will be where you start to share your story of your experiences of living without your parents due to parental migration. This may be well before you were living without a parent, as you may want to describe how things were before. Then add to the timeline in ways that make sense to you.

- (ii) Place a mark where you want to note something important happened. This may have just been important to you. It may be positive or negative or in-between. Try to bring the timeline to end in the present - in other words, your life right now. This timeline will help you to share your experiences when we meet and will help me to follow the things that have happened. We can spend time discussing each point and how things were for you and why it mattered to you.

- (iii) I may ask you other questions about certain time points so that I can understand your experiences. You may remember new events in the interview and that is fine – we can talk about those too. Your timeline can be very detailed if that helps you, or it might just have a few key times if that is all you need to help you. It is totally up to you. I will give you two timeline samples (**Figure 9, 10**), which have been use in an Asian group study (Kolar et al., 2015). After creating your own timeline, you will be asked to bring it to the interview. I will ask your permission to take a copy of this so that it can help me when I come back to listen again to the interview recording.

Basic information about participants and their family were asked at interview start, such as their age, age of being left-behind, how long have been left-behind, who migrated, who they were left-behind with, siblings, current occupation, hometown, parents' annual income, lands, and whether have had debt. The latter is an acceptable question in China to establish a sense of socioeconomic status. A loose set of questions to ask about the timeline were prepared in advance:

1. Let's start by you talking through the rough outline of your timeline. Based on your timeline, which part do you want to describe in more detail first?
 - a. What was important to you or difficult for you about this time? Why is it significant and on the timeline? (probes to get rich description, e.g. can you tell me more, could you give me an example)
 - b. (if not mentioned) Who were key people in your life at this time? Can you tell me about their role / influence for you in relation to this event?
 - c. What did you understand about what was going on (in terms of other people's actions) at this time?
 - d. What were your needs at this time? Your feelings?
 - e. How do you feel about this time in your life now, looking back? Has your perspective changed over time?

(apply to each event noted on the timelines)

Other questions (as examples)

1. Have you talked about living without your parents to many people? How has that been for you?
2. How are things for you now, in your day-to-day life?
3. How are your relationships with family? And friends?
4. How do you feel now about the time you lived without your parents?

5. What is important to you now, looking forwards? What matters to you as you look to the future?

4.7.2 Interview procedure

Following consent, a recorded interview was conducted online based on the participant's preference. The interviews were conducted on WeChat via video call and recorded by a digital recorder. Each interview was uploaded to a secure storage place (one drive) immediately once the interview is done. Interviews began by asking participants demographic information, what they are currently doing, and if they keep in touch with their biological family. The participant then shared their timeline via WeChat or email it to me before the start of the interview. Timeline would show it on the screen that can be seen for both the researcher and participants. The interview question followed the questions above (as examples), or being flexible asking questions based on their stories. Interviews ended with closure conversations about how they felt at the end of the interview, any needs for support and what they would be doing to take care of themselves after the interview. After each interview I made immediate notes about how the interview went and also initial thoughts about what were key parts of the interview. A copy or a photo of the timeline was stored separately to the audio and transcript data. Interviews were conducted in batches of five to allow for interim reflection on the method and quality of data being produced. It also allowed for breaks in interviews as a way to sustain good quality interviewing.

4.8 Data preparation

All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese and anonymized. They were tagged at key points to the timeline. The first five interviews were translated in their entirety into English to allow supervisors to provide input when considering data quality and the early analysis process. We considered whether translating the complete manuscript into English was important for later interviews. It was decided that the most efficient process was to only translate into English any extracts used in the write-up.

4.9 Analysis procedure – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

This section outlines the various stages of analysis, encompassing preliminary coding, and the generation of themes. It also explains how I worked with supervisors to credibility check my interpretations.

Stage 1: Transcription and data preparation

Stage 2: Descriptions and codes

Stage 3: Check codes with supervisors

Stage 4: Tabulation of individual themes (pen portrait, key experience, demographics)

Stage 5: Developing cross-cutting themes

Stage 6: Theme generations

Stage 1: Transcription and data preparation

IPA requires careful transcription in order not to miss expression that could assist analysis. Orthographic transcription is commonly used for IPA studies and delivers a transcript in the form of a playscript (Forrester, 2010). The first interview was transcribed by me (21 pages), and subsequent interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription Software (i.e. DeepL, SYSTRAN). I checked the transcripts against the audio for accuracy, especially when there were dialects in the transcripts where company cannot capture; at this point, some participants' paralinguistic features were also integrated, such as pauses, laughs, crying, sighing, and emphases where they were felt to be significant to understand their accounts.

Stage 2: Descriptions and codes

Transcripts were read and re-read to establish familiarity. Next, brief descriptions were made for segments of text which were reducible to meaning units (i.e. smallest unit of text that can be understood to be representing something discrete from the next segment). As cooperation with the timeline, I also separated the transcripts into several segments, according to the period that they listed on the timeline, such as, middle school, or before 10yrs, as shown in *Table 1*. I structured the transcript into two rows, open coding and each segment name, and one row - coding memo.

Table 1 An example of structured transcript

Perception on parental migration	Opening coding
<p>IN: Why did your family migrate to city? What do you think of it?</p> <p>PP#1: One is because we are poor. We cannot afford family expenditure. No savings, my mother always borrow money when I am sick. Another is because, you know... we lived with my grandparents together, and since my mother went out to city, they mainly took care of us. My dad has an older brother (my uncle) and he also have two boys, we lived near each other. My grandparents very spoiled their family but ignored us. This is the case in the countryside, which is to favor the older children and their children. (when my parents were away from home) I and my younger brother were particularly ignored by grandparents, and I was angry about it. For example, when we asked pockets money from them, they only gave us 5 yuan or 10 yuan, and it was not easy, but when my cousins asked, they would give them 50 yuan or 100 yuan. They would buy toys and clothes for them but not for us. This money should be given to us because my parents earned it. My grandparents did what my uncle's wife told them to do. It seems like that my father is not their child. My parents knew this, they just keep the situation like this but did not say anything. It is a scandal</p>	<p>-perceived a struggling precarious financial situation</p> <p>-he lived with his paternal grandparent for nearly one year, grandparents are the main caregiver, his both parents migrated to city</p> <p>-he was ignored and made to feel less important</p> <p>-unfair treatment</p> <p>-family power struggles and manipulation</p> <p>-feeling sorry and wronged for parents.</p>
<p>Coding memo: Participant's family is deeply influenced by traditional culture. After both parents left, he and his brother were ignored by grandparents, experienced less caring from the family. He felt to be unjust and very wrong as parents were sending money, but grandparents spent little money to the PP#1 and brother. He believes that this is one of the main reasons affecting his family to migrate to the city.</p>	

These descriptions, represented the first level of interpretation of the data. This process involved the articulation of general meaning without specifically attending to the research questions. Once each meaning unit in the transcript had been assigned a description, the next analytic step was to develop opening coding. Open coding represented a level of interpretative activity in that I sought to represent a likely meaning or understanding implied by the text. In some uncertain texts, I re-reviewed the data in the context and marked uncertain open coding, and re-listened the audio tried any ways to develop codes. After this, I summed open coding and to generate the

main concept or summary in the end of each segment, while also highlighted for codes that I was uncertain. In line with usual IPA practice, each transcript was analysed wholly before analysis on a next transcript began.

Stage 3: Check codes with supervisors

This stage was a discussion with supervisors about uncertain codes, as well as to practice and share the way how I generated the initial codes initially. It was a process to learn and train my coding skills. It was also a process to check there any data that I did not code. For example, I found out myself sometimes missing something that might be significant for the participant, as shown in *Figure 1*, where my supervisor helped me to check it through.

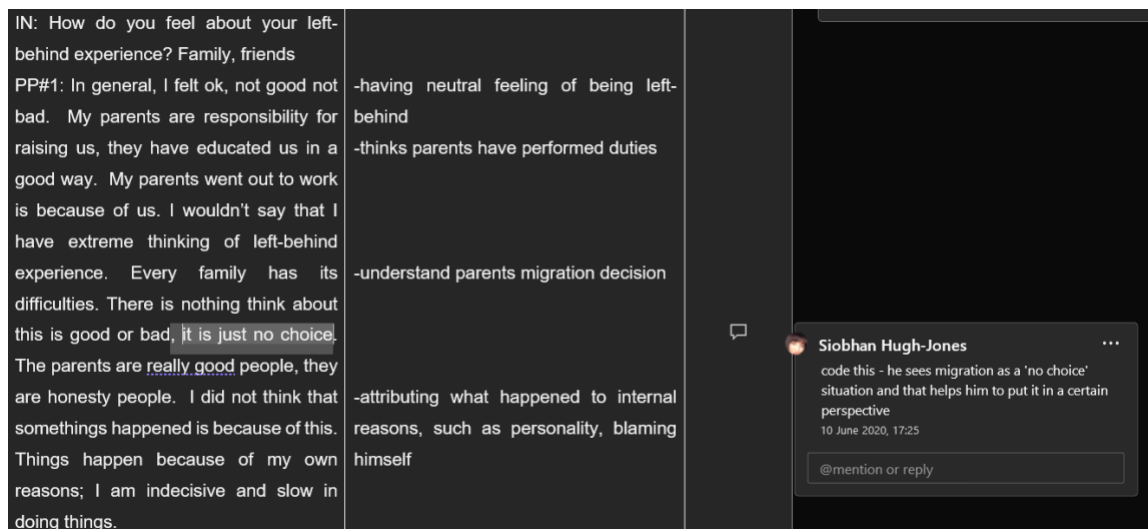


Figure 1 Supervisor's comments on missing codes

Stage 4: Tabulation of individual themes (pen portraits, key experiences, demographics)

At this stage, I went through transcripts and open coding, and prepared one page of a pen portrait of each participant. The aim of pen portrait was to give an overall summary and view about that person's life stories; key experiences, participant's demographics, and the sequence of milestones followed were noted, as shown in *Figure 2*.

She is a female, 24yr, studying in a provincial university and will be graduated in two years. Her parents are still working outside the home in cities.

Before she was 10yr, she lived with her parents and a younger brother in a small village. Her father was responsible for making money and her mother was responsible for taking care of them. There was no peer around her house, so sometimes her mother took her to visit her maternal grandparents and she could play with her cousins there. Her father migrated to cities first. She knew that her mother was migrating to cities in a few months, whereas she didn't know when. Her mother left them without saying goodbye while they were sleeping in the very early morning when she was 10yr and her brother was 6yr. After she woke up, she took her brother to chase the bus looking her mother and they failed, they felt very sad and cried together and then they went to her paternal grandparents' home seeking for help. She chose to live with her maternal grandparents, while her brother lived with her paternal grandparents. Two years later, she moved to her paternal grandparents' home and has been living with them and her brother until now. She made a few friends around her paternal grandparents' house, but she never invited them to come to play at home, because she felt that her grandparents didn't like this.

During the time of parental migration.

Her paternal grandparents took care of them and provided them basic needs (meals, shelters). Her parents sent money to her regularly and asked her to manage the money for her and her brother. She and her young brother normally returned from boarding schools to home on weekends, and she gave him the money of next week once a week on weekends until he completed his middle school. Her parents asked her to watch out her young brother carefully that do not let him do bad things. Her parents back to home once a year separately during Spring Festival and they were separated for years. When she was in 3rd year of high school, her mother mentioned the divorce and then pretended nothing had happened until now.

Now, her grandparents need her to take care of them instead of them to take care of her. She has lost many friends as she grew up, so she felt upset.

Figure 2 An example of participant's pen portrait

Individual's themes were also generated, driven by the preliminary analytic engagement in the form of codes, as shows in *Figure 3*. Individual-level themes aimed to represent key experiences for that participant at a conceptual rather than descriptive level (e.g. being robbed of a childhood). This was done to keeping the person's unique context in perspective and the specific demographics of the participant, for example, age, gender, cultural background and educational qualification that may have been shaping that experience.

2. Traumatic initial separation
 Her mother left her without saying goodbye which meant panic, fear, insecurity, abandonments for her, and doubts about her mother's love.
 She didn't understand why her mother did this. She felt that if her mother had told her she was leaving, she would have understood. She feared that her mother abandoned them, so she took her brother to chase the bus looking for their mother.

a) She failed to find her mother meant that her hope was dashed.
 Her younger brother's words 'my mother abandoned me' evoked her saddest emotions. For her, she felt sorry for her little brother did not have their mother around at such a young age.

b) When her mother left home for the city, she felt insecure and uncertain about her future; she also felt there was no one was available for her.

She was used to having parents around, she therefore sensed that her life might be different after her mother left.

3. An isolated daily life at her paternal grandparents' home
 For her, her paternal grandparents' home was a temporary shelter rather than a permanent place to live in. She perceived that she lived under someone else's roof. Living with her paternal grandparents was not bad, but not as good as living with her biological parents.

a) Living with her paternal grandparents meant years of restraint, insecurity, instability, and less power.
 In her paternal grandparents' house, she could not speak freely and openly; she could not expect to invite her friends coming over.
 For her, she needed to handle family relations (the two generations, siblings) carefully under the invisible family power.

b) Living without her parents for her meant worry and little freedom.
 For her, she was like a mother-substitute sister to her younger brother which adds another responsibility on her shoulders.

4. Powerless and forced to be independent
 'no one that I can rely on' meant that she felt numb and powerless.
 Since she was a kid, she had been used to solving problems on her own without support from anyone. She might have attempted to ask for help many times without success. She therefore had to accept the fact that she had to rely on her own.

Figure 3 An example of generating individual's themes

As with the previous procedure, this process was conducted in co-operation with my supervisors. They conducted credibility checks on my interpretations. This involved presentation of themes with supporting extracts and making a case for their importance, and completeness, for each participant. Via discussion in supervision, we refined these to represent the data to the extent where we felt themes were differentiated from each other and had integrity to the participant's account.

Stage 5: Developing cross-cutting themes

It is at this stage the analysis moved from individual to group. This involved scrutinising the individual-level themes to identify similarities and differences, and where there was the potential to cluster themes under an even more conceptual / abstract group-level theme. After the fifth participant, highlighted similar themes across these five participants in the same colour, then generated cross-cutting, as shown in *Table 2*. This process aimed to summarise how the first group (participant 1 to 5) might be already pointing to some common experiences.

Table 2 Mapping out similar themes from participants 1 to 5

PP#1	PP#2	PP#3	PP#4	PP#5
Injustice, powerlessness, ignored by paternal grandparents	Being cherished by her parents even being left-behind	Money and conflicts with extended kin, unfair treatment	traumatic initial separation	Mother left with no pre-notice -feeling abandoned
'fight for myself' after being taunted by the teacher – being excluded from school, isolation	Compromise, family power, wider family, tradition- Extended power step in and de-valued her existence	'I want to do my best' to support his family- Strength, resolve, and responsibility	A restrained daily life at her paternal grandparents' home	'I don't think my father treat me properly, my mother was not here' Restrained relationship with parents
Carrying the cascading hurts of loss of LBC community (friends)	Happiness after receiving gifts from parents	Polarized attitudes towards parents	isolation, get out of no choice, force to be independent	Living with extended kin - Vulnerable and Alone
Shifting relationships with parents	Discrimination in school while moving to cities parents	Felt sorry for his mother	distancing herself from family of hindsight	Carrying the cascading hurts of loss and pain (siblings)
		Feeling being cherished by peers (also left-behind children)		- being exposed to social stigma and exclusion in community
				Power, control, injustice while being cared by extended kin

From the *Table 2*, a few themes were generated from the same colour, injustice, unfair treatment from extended kin; isolation in community; shifting relationships with parents, cascaded pain from family members, feeling cherished by families, peers. Unhighlighted themes were also noted cautiously, as subsequent participants might have similar experiences and similar sense-making.

After this, I generated cross-cutting themes with general descriptions as seen in *Table 3*.

Table 3 Examples of cross-cutting themes from first five participants

Cross-cutting themes	Description PP#1	PP#2	PP#3	PP#4	PP#5
Injustice, ignored, felt less important after parents left	Ignored by Paternal grandparents(P GP)	Treated differently by PGP			Sons preferences -PGP and father
		'live under someone's roof' or depends on whether they have children.	Being treated badly by neighbours without anything wrong	'live under someone's roof'	
Cascaded pain from family members	One of left-behind friend die				Left-behind brother dropped out of school because of migration if school
Restrained relationship with parents	Find hard to be close with parents	Little communication with parents	Huge Disappointment with his father, yet huge sorry for his mother	Refuse to answer parents' call	Having no connection with father for years

Themes at this stage were not final themes. For example, the theme 'cascaded hurt' was only prevalent for two participants has so it was not taken forward as a cross-cutting theme. This early stage theme check was simply to sensitize myself to some emerging areas of importance, and to make progress with data analysis in batches.

Smith et al. (2009) suggested that there is no right or wrong way of doing IPA and they encourage IPA researchers to be innovative. Hence, to see data clearly and structurally, I experimented by generating mind maps, listing key experiences and key figures around participants to capture themes. As shown in *Figure 4*.

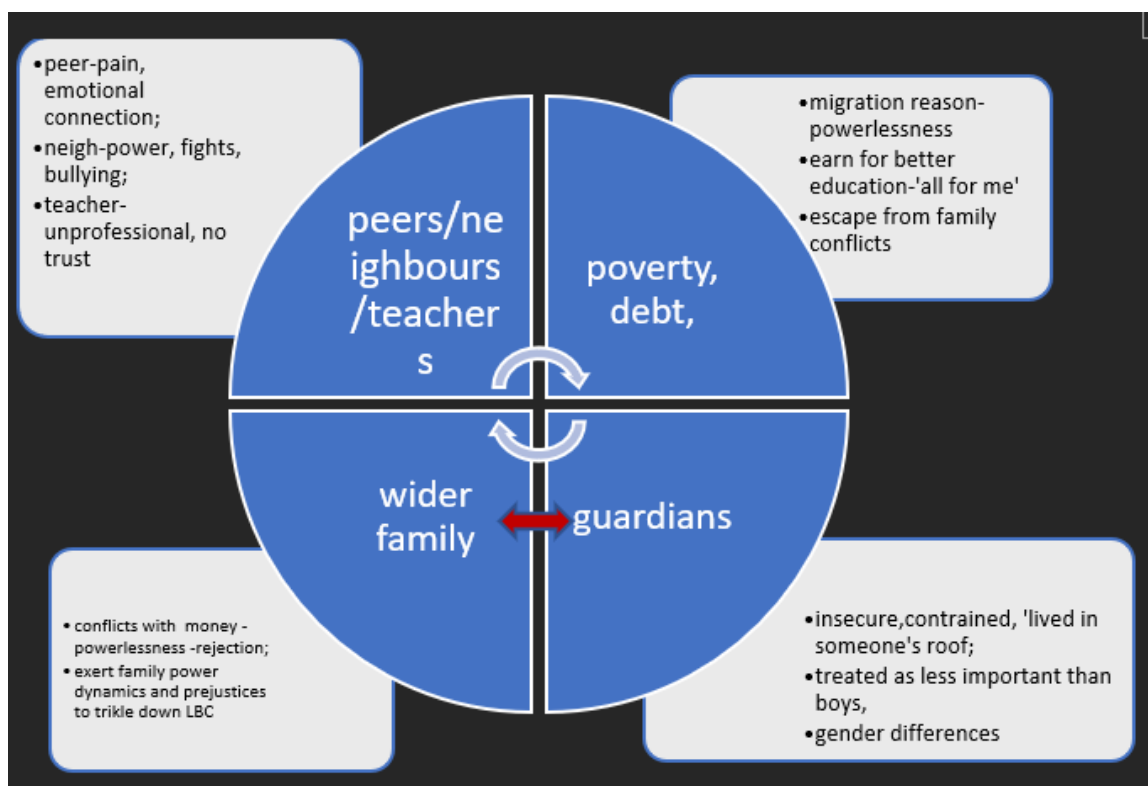


Figure 4 Mind map of participants

Through the first five participants' data, it seemed that peers, poverty, extended kin, and guardians were influential to participants, and powerlessness, isolation, and insecurity were common experiences. However, with analysis of subsequent transcripts, this mind map became too complex and I did not take it forward.

With the ongoing discussion with my supervisors, the process of generating data seemed to be manageable for me. Through supervision, the 20 participants were initially grouped into 10 themes. These themes were applied to the transcripts to discover if they fitted my interpretation of data. The process confirmed that these data were overlapping between themes, and it might not be easy for the reader to follow. Hence, a final set of five themes were generated and being presented in chapters 5.1-5.5.

For example, as shown in *Figure 5* and *6*

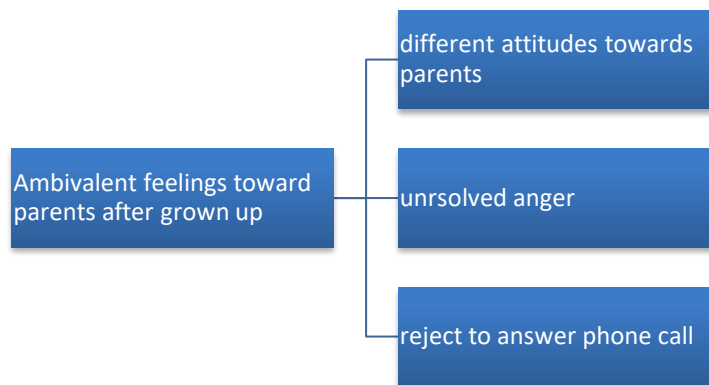


Figure 5 Theme: Ambivalent towards parents

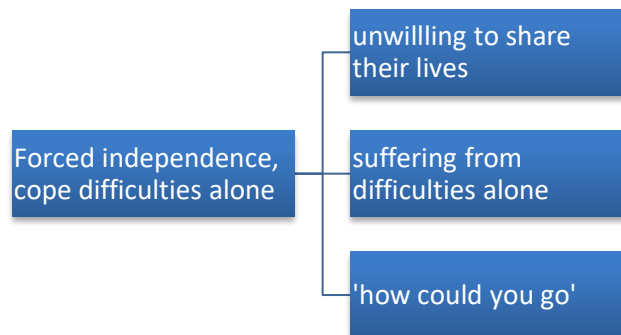


Figure 6 Theme: forced independence, cope difficulties alone

Both of these two early group level themes encapsulated the participants' long-standing perceptions of separation from their parents, revealing the complex ways in which they navigated and coped with this reality. These were merged to represent a love-hate relationship with their parents.

4.9.1 Reflections of the interviews

Power imbalances are commonly perceived and experienced between the researcher and participant (DeJonckheere & Vaughn 2019). The timeline interview method was a way to support participants to tell their stories in their way. At the recruitment stage, I presented myself to the participants as a humble student who needed their help to finish my study abroad. I was clear about my academic and research roles. I put my pictures on the flyers and poster to show my ethnicity, age and gender. However, some of participants saw me as an expert and deferred to me in the interviews. I used my own personal narrative to help participants relate to me by sharing my own (authentic) experiences of being left-behind in rural countryside. I hoped this would help the participants feel that we had things in common and would encourage them to say their story more fully. For some participants, I found it was not difficult to build connections with the participants, it may be because I was introduced by their friends, and, I am of a similar age to them. However, perhaps due to my research status where I studied abroad and the topic was sensitive, some participants were quite concerned that their personal stories might cause political issues or put them in trouble in China. I repeatedly assured them of confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to withdraw their recordings within two weeks of the interview end.

When I conducted and reflected on the early interviews, I felt my questions were sometimes too direct, and I could feel participants felt pressured to answer. For example, after a participant told me that she did not have enough money and went hungry for a whole semester because her father wanted to punish her for not having good grades in the exam. I was angry for her, so I asked, 'do you hate him?' She was silent for a couple of minutes. She finally responded that she used to hate her father but not anymore. She admitted that she was ashamed to confess her hatred of her father to a 'stranger'. This experience helped me to reflect on how to be more cautious in my questions so that my emotional response did lead me to assume theirs would be the same.

After interviews, in the beginning I often found myself exhausted and found it hard to get back to reality. Some participants' stories were really upsetting and sad. Sometimes I dreamed about them, crying and shouting. It was tough for me analysing their data. My supervisor and I both decided to take a short break after each interview to ground myself, such as making video call to friends or doing exercise. I also tried to share my feelings with other peer researchers. This was really helpful, and I started to be more familiar with the process and have more ability to be aware of my emotions and make adaptations. Some participants also told me (at the end of the interview) that it was very difficult for them to deal with their emotions after revealing their lives.

It is same for me when I did the self-pilot; I cried and felt very upset during and after the interview. So, I offered to talk this through with them after the interview without being recorded if they wanted to. Despite the emotional challenge, participants were all very pleased and expressed how grateful they were to be able to be heard. This was extremely rewarding for me. Knowing that I appeared to be helpful during this difficult time makes my project feel very worthwhile. I have been deeply emotionally invested myself in this project and have tried to balance my emotions with the professional requirements of this project. To have been able to interview these young Chinese adults and listen to their left-behind experiences felt like a privilege, and I thank participant for being willing to share their stories.

4.9.2 Reflecting on analysing data

Participants' narratives always need to be revisited and themes generated always need to open to scrutiny and reformulation to make sure they represent participants' meaning as credibly as possible. I encountered problems when doing data analysis. It may be because I was used to quantitative work and a focus on causality. So, when I began IPA, I had a tendency to find relations rather than exploring meaning. To improve this, highlighted key sentences that appeared most meaningful; If I could not grasp the meaning, I discussed this with my supervisors. I also asked one of my researcher colleagues who is an expert using IPA to gain more insightful knowledge. I wrote several drafts on coding after the first batch of five interviews and made amendments until my supervisor and both felt it was good. The second batch of three interviews of my data analysis was conducted more independently.

I found it was difficult to generate themes that were simple and representative of the lives being left-behind for the majority of participants. It may be due to the complexity of the data and uniqueness of each participant's experience. I felt I lost vision of seeing meanings or seeing the difference and similarities among their narratives. To improve this, I revisited each account and to see their narratives through another lens. I listed all of their life events by using mind maps and looked closely at these alongside the interview texts during analysis. In comparison to the initial themes I made, I then generated different themes, and this was even so after third and fourth readings and when checking themes back to the text. With IPA I could see a different process unfold which was somewhat of an epiphany. It was rewarding and reassuring to know that I was not presenting my own perspective as it was clearly more detailed and nuanced after adequate practice and thinking.

The outcomes of IPA are presented in the next 5.1-5.5 chapters. Each chapter represents on overarching theme, with a total of 5 themes.

Chapter 5.1 Turning point – the initial separation (two phases)

Before starting this chapter, themes represented in the subsequent chapters (5.1-5.5) are briefly summarised to get to know the bigger picture.

Chapter 5.1 presents the initial separation of left-behind children, referred to as the theme Turning Point. This theme includes two subthemes: Feeling abandoned, and Adjustment in sadness.

Chapter 5.2 focuses on extended kin with the theme - Pushes and Pulls of Family Layers. This section includes four subthemes examined in two contexts: Being Harmed or Protected by family conflicts; Competing for love; Left-Behind Children as tools of seizing control and power; Being isolated and feeling helplessness.

Chapter 5.3 elucidates - Family Dynamics and the Meaning of Home through five subthemes: Cascaded vulnerability, Newly gained understanding of fathers, Home as a place to be yourself, Home means family, and Home means reunions with parents.

Chapter 5.4 presents – significant individuals during left-behind periods - Heroes and Villains around left-Behind children; and The power of gifts, with four subthemes: Gifts as an experience of love and being cherished, Gifts as a double-edged sword of love and doubt, Gifts repair and rebuild relationships, and Gifts as an indicator of being noticed and saved.

Chapter 5.5 presents - the coping strategies after years of separation and reunions - Love-hate Relationship with Parents. Three subthemes are discussed: Unresolved anger, How could you go, and Withdraw from conversations.

This first theme in chapter 5.1, and its broader context, is described first before the two sub-themes. The theme relates to particular changes and experiences at critical points in the participants' left-behind experiences. A particular striking and emotive aspect of all the participants' narratives was their recollections of the initial separation from their parents, and the significance of the pivotal moments before and after separations. All participants reported that the first separation from their parents was intensely painful, distressing, deeply impactful and had a devastating effect on the children's perception of separation from their parents.

Separation was a significant event that marked a turning point in their lives. All participants experienced initial separation from their mother and / or father at a young age (10yrs or younger) and had to wait nearly a year to see their parents again. Most participants were not informed of their parents' migration plans in advance, and they reported feeling shocked and traumatised after their parents' departure. Many encountered multiple difficulties following the separation and were compelled to make immediate adjustments, along with living in uncertain arrangements and with new, extra responsibilities.

From the participants' perspectives, their parents' migration encompassed two significant moments or periods, and are presented below as two sub-themes. Briefly, the first period occurred when participants were initially informed about the migration, typically a few days prior to the event or upon discovering it themselves during the departure moment itself. Many parents frequently left with no prior notice to the children about their migration plans, leaving the child in a state of utter shock and unpreparedness. The second phase emerged immediately following parental migration, requiring participants to make major adjustments in a short time, while processing the intense sadness and confusion about their parent(s)' departure. These moments were experienced as dramatic and sudden and were the beginnings of enduring effects on the participants.

Their experiences of the initial separation and its aftermath is presented in the following two sub-themes:

- 1) feeling abandoned

In the first phase, they reported feeling abandoned, particularly in the case they discovered being left-behind by themselves. This phase captured their one of peak distress and dramatic moments, yet they were 'forced' to accept the reality (parents' migration).

2) adjustments in sadness

In the second phase, the initial post-migration period was pervaded by sorrow and uncertainty. Participants underwent significant emotional fluctuations, while simultaneously having to make immediate adjustments to adapt to their new circumstances.

5.1.1 Feeling abandoned

The initial separation from parents held considerable significance for participants, as nearly all of them vividly recalled the scene of being separated from their parents. During the first phase, participants reported being uninformed about the migration plan, which left them in the dark until the last minute. This amplified their feeling of abandonment. This phase encapsulated one of their peak distress and dramatic instances when they were 'informed' about the migration. Left-behind participants were often either told for a few days or on the migration day about their parent(s)' departure. Most participants did not know in advance that their life and family structure were about to change dramatically. Even those participants who were told of migration plans a few days before still found the moment of departure highly distressing.

There were two participants, Chao, and Jun, whose parents chose to tell them about the migration a few days before they migrated. This decision was perceived by these participants as a reflection that their parents thought they *were "too young to accept"* the decision or that telling them was *"unnecessary"*. This was the case for Chao, who lived with his parents until he was 8yrs old: his father was a farmer, and his mother took care of the household. He remembered his shock at being told just days before his father's departure. He recalled how, although he knew of the concept of being 'left-behind', he was completely 'in the dark' about his father's migration plan:

...My life was so nice before that my father's migration; my parents were with me. I knew about migration as my friends' parents left them behind and never came back. One day, my father told me he was given a job in Russia and he planned to leave in a few days. I couldn't believe he would 'throw' (he used 'reng' that translated into English is 'throw') us away. But he seemed determined, so I said nothing, but my inside had collapsed. I thought he would stay in Russia and never come back as there were many cases like this in my village. Parents said to their children they had to go earn money for them, but they never came back, the children became orphans, and no-one wanted them. I thought it may happen to me. These parents just threw their children away because they wanted freedom and money. Our family didn't need money, but he thought it was needed. (Chao, 22yrs, Male)

Chao's felt extreme fear, dread, and concern (albeit silenced and never voiced at the time) about his father's imminent departure and the potential for Chao to be completely abandoned. Chao

recalled how sense-making, and fear, of that time was shaped by whether he saw the migration as needed (or an excuse for freedom) as well as at he saw happening to other children in his community, i.e. parents never coming back and no-one wanting an 'orphaned' child. His sense-making was that he was being 'thrown away', as though his father viewed him as disposable. In the days before the departure, Chao decided to stay with his father as much as he could, believing he was preparing to 'lose him':

Before his departure, I just followed him wherever he went, a son wanting some company with his father. My father laughed at me for not being cool, but he has never known what I was facing that time, this was a son who may have lost his father.

But, when I recall back after all of these years, I never believed my father planned to leave me behind when he told me. However, I wasn't very clear knowing what was going on when he told me, I had so many worries. It was unbelievable and so sudden for me. It seemed like he had been making this plan for a long time, yet for me, it was like he just decided at that moment, everything was just so unexpected. I was like WHY? I wish I had known this before he told me that day, he might think I was too young to accept. But maybe I would have felt clearer about the situation and less distressed after.

Two layers of harm were reported by Chao in this instance, one intensifying the other. The first is feeling completely 'left-behind' in the family decisions that hugely affected Chao, and that his parents had either been completely oblivious to the likely impact on him or had decided not to include him in discussions about the need for migration. The second layer of harm was the 'trauma' of the decision which he felt was never going to happen to him in his "nice" childhood. Chao was especially upset about being suddenly told. Being blind about the situation amplified his worries and confusions about his father's migration. This illustrates that openness and involvement in conversation about one's family future held significance for Chao, as it would have helped him feel some reassurance about his father's commitment to him, even if the decision remained unchanged. Chao felt there was no time to prepare for, and understand, his father's departure.

In contrast to Chao's profound fear of abandonment by his father, Jun had less dramatic but more overwhelming sadness when the day of the separation came closer. His father migrated before he was born; he and his two brothers (10yrs, 6yrs) had lived with their mother and paternal grandparents. When Jun was 8yrs, his mother decided to migrate to be with his father to support the family. Jun did not know about this until a few days before his mother's departure, and he recalled his feelings at the time of being told:

...one day, I came home from school, my mother told us that she would leave home for the city in a few days to earn money to help my father. I was like, oh, it was ok, because many of my friends' parents had already left and they seemed ok. But I was wrong, the feelings started to explode

after she told me. It was my first time to face separation from her that I could remember, because I didn't remember my father's. (Jun, 25yrs, Male)

Though Jun was familiar with the experience of 'left-behind' and he had a child's awareness of knowing what migration meant, the pain of facing near separation from his mother for the first time was significant. This was amplified by the household sadness about his mother departing with his father as he headed back to work in the city:

I remember...two days before their departure, I clearly felt that the atmosphere had become a bit sad, and everyone avoided talking about leaving, but we all knew. My parents started packing, also washing our clothes, checking our schoolwork, giving money to my paternal grandparents. They may have thought we were too young to be ready to talk about this. The closer they got to the day of departure, the more anxious I felt, and I was worried for them. However, no one wanted to ask the details, like their date of return, or help them pack. But I didn't want them to feel sad. I looked at them, worried for their health as my father wasn't feeling well, and wondered when they would return, maybe have to wait nearly a year, i.e. next Chinese New Year.

Jun conveyed the heaviness in the family close to the departure, and his own worry for his parents. While the participant's parents had informed him about the migration date, there was a distinct lack of discussion about it. It seemed like the migration for parents was a matter of fact, without real engagement discussion or potential challenges for their children of a such significance change. The departure was shrouded in a loud silence – everyone knowing but no-one asking burning questions about when they would we see each other again. Jun feels he missed out on important information, though he realized his parents may have thought he was too young to be given explanations about the migration. This suggests that, same as Chao, Jun values being included in important decisions and desires more open communication with his parents.

Jun's and Chao's stories revealed that although children were informed beforehand, they still felt they had been kept in dark and had minimal information about the migration plan. Being kept in dark amplified their doubt and worry about their parents' migration decision, and worried silently.

There were two other participants whose fathers had already migrated and whose mothers later left abruptly in the early morning when they were sleeping. Neither of their mothers told them their migration plans; the participants woke up and found themselves "abandoned". The day of being separated for the first time from their parents was an indelible and distressing memory of their childhood. They clearly remembered these moments and still felt it as hard moment as an adult when they recalled it.

This was the case for Limin whose mother left her (when she was 10yrs) and her 6-year-old brother while they were sleeping. Limin had been aware that her mother was not satisfied with the remittance her father sent back from his migration, as they always fought about this. However, she never thought her mother would migrate. She recalled how her mother suddenly disappeared after a fight with her father:

...I woke up in the early morning and found my mother was not home. I was a bit worried then my father told she was gone...gone for making money. I was so...surprised but not very surprised. I thought she might leave and that she wanted to do something to help the family, but I never thought she would leave so sudden and unexpected. Also, I thought as my brother was only 6yrs, he needed her around. I must take the responsibility to take care my brother, and I did, because my father also left a few days later. I thought she must have been thinking of it for a long time, like where, how, and when. That fight just triggered her to leave sooner, but she didn't tell or discuss it with me. I feel sad when I recall this. If she had discussed with me or at least told me, I would have felt less sad, maybe more aware of the situation? Anyway, I supported her decision to leave, whether telling me or not, because I wanted my mother to be happy, earning money is not that important. Just if she had told me, I would totally have understood and supported her. We never talked about this, she didn't want to talk even after separation, so I also didn't want to talk. (Limin, 25yrs, Female)

Limin's discovered her mother's departure by herself in the early morning. She recalled how abrupt and unprepared she was, yet how she, as a child, tried hard to understand her mother's migration. Her story, and indeed those of Jun's and Chaos', shows us that, as a child, what mattered to her was relatively simple, at least at face value: to be heard, included, and seen as a member of the family. She recalled feeling that something was wrong at home, but in the absence of parental communication with her, she felt left to carry her child-level awareness and anxieties herself. The separation placed many serious and mature issues on Limin's mind. Through her story, we can see how migration can lead to individuals taking on additional responsibilities in a caring role, often at the expense of their own well-being. She revealed how she prioritized her family's well-being over her own ("*I wanted my mother to be happy*"), highlighting the significant impact that migration can have on family dynamics and individual well-being.

Another participant, Xiaocao had lived with her mother and her little brother (6yrs) after her father had migrated. When she was 10yrs, her mother once mentioned that she planned to migrate but had not decided when. However, one day, her mother left abruptly in the early morning while her little brother and she were sleeping. She woke up shocked and chased the bus to try to find her mother, yet failed. She portrayed two desperate children, frantically searching for their mother:

I was shocked, and worried, sad, angry maybe? I wanted to know where she had gone, what should I do in this situation. So, I took my brother to the bus station and searched every bus, but we couldn't find her. Then we went to look for her in on-going buses. I saw a woman who looked like my mother, so I took my brother to chase the bus but failed to catch it. My brother and me just stood there, looking around people, and he asked me with tears, 'Has my mother abandoned me?!' At that moment, my heart was broken. He cried hysterically, he was so little and holding my hand. I clutched his hand tightly, feeling my heart was bleeding. Before, I didn't feel very sad until my brother said that and cried - it triggered me. My brother was only 6yrs (The participant breaks down and takes a few minutes break). (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female)

Xiaocao's abrupt separation from her mother left her in a state of shock and feeling disoriented and confused. She described a feeling of loss of control and direction, as if her world had been turned upside down. Searching and chasing buses indicates how frantic and terrified she felt. Her brother's despair broke her heart and amplified her own distress. Xiaocao explained how being prepared for this departure would have helped her and her brother, as they did not even know where they should live:

I felt it would have been better if she had told us before she left and let me know that she would return. Also, I didn't know where to go. Live on our own? Or stay with my paternal grandparents? Was I going to take care of my brother?

Xiaocao talked about the great unknowns she then faced as a ten-year-old, with responsibility for a young child; unknown care arrangements, a 'missing' mother, no knowledge of how long she would be gone; no known plans of return or reunion. What she wanted was relatively simple, to be well-informed and have a clear sense of direction in her life and to know her mother's return date. Distress was piled on distress as she contemplated the severity, insecurity, and vulnerability of their situation, with no immediate resolution. As resonated with Limin, as an older sibling, Xiaocao was placed in a situation with confusion and abruptness, yet felt invisible, whilst also taking on adding responsibilities when migration occurred.

Limin and Xiaocao's stories share a common thread - a strong desire to be heard and validated, particularly during separation times. Similarly, Jun and Chao also experienced feelings of exclusion from important family decisions and expressed a desire for greater transparency. These underscore the importance of family openness with the children.

Differently to Limin and Xiaocao, Xiaorui, recalled how, as a 4-year-old, her memory about the initial separation from her parents was endless crying. She was left-behind with her paternal grandparents when her parents decided to migrate. She recalled how hysterical she was when her mother gave her to her grandmother at the bus station:

I don't remember the details because I was too little. What I remember is a scene – there were lots of people in the coach station, my mother held me, and I was quite in her hug, then she suddenly tried to give me to other people. I cried and grasped her and didn't want to go. She put

me on the ground, asked me to be quiet, called my nickname and told me 'to be good', but I cried even louder and ran to her. She took a step back, I took a step forward, then like this, she was getting farther and farther away from me, until she disappeared. I kept shouting 'no, no, no'. I didn't want her to go. At the time, I didn't know what this meant, I had no idea of migration or departure, I just didn't want my mother to go. I needed her. (Xiaorui, 19yrs, Female)

Xiaorui recalled the emotions, actions, and impulses she had felt as a 4-year-old being separated from her mother. She talks about not understanding intellectually, but feeling profoundly, with raw emotion, that she *"did not want her to go"*. Her recollection of trying to keep her mother in her line of vision is powerful, that as long as she could still see her, it was something. She recalled the strong feeling of 'needing' her mother and that no-one else could satisfy that need.

Limin, Xiaocao, and Xiaorui all shared the experiences of not being informed about their parents' migration until / after their initial separation, resulting in feelings of shock, abandonment, and increased caregiving responsibilities. They perceived their initial separation from their parents as the most distressing experience of the left-behind period. However, when compared to participants who were informed earlier about the migration, it becomes evident that the nature of separation from parents remained consistent regardless of the timing of disclosure. The participants often felt unprepared, disoriented for the separation and the significant changes that migration brought to their lives. Nevertheless, the participants stressed the significance of being well-involved, heard, and receiving clarification about the family situation to better deal with the separation.

Two participants, Yujie, and Lin, reported a different experience when facing the initial separation from their parents. Yujie had a rather blurred memory about the time of her father's first migration, when she was 6yrs and her sister and brother were 7yrs and 5yrs, and their mother was with them. However, Yujie did remember the feeling of the news of her father's migration being sudden:

...one day, I came back from school and wanted my father to supervise my schoolwork. My mother just said my father was gone. I asked where, she said making money for us. It was quite sudden, and I had lots of questions, like we didn't need a lot of money, it was unnecessary, and why he hadn't told me? I was upset for maybe a day or two? I don't remember. Then as long as I finished my schoolwork, I forgot about it. My life was, you know, as usual. Also, I wasn't very close to my father. I relied on my mother more. Maybe I was too busy playing with my friends and siblings, and my older sister could supervise me, so I did not seem need my father that much. (Yujie, 26yrs, Female)

Yujie portrays minimal impact of her father's migration on her at that point in time. Yet Yujie recalled wondering why she had been 'kept in the dark' as well as not understanding the need for money. For her, *"it was unnecessary"*, suggesting the economic rationale for migration made little sense to her as a child. Nonetheless, the presence of a social network and siblings appeared to have played a crucial role in mitigating Yujie's distress, despite this being her first experience of parental separation. It seems that for Yujie, the separation hinged on whether or not she needed her father, and as long as she was being supported, the separation had little effect on her. Yujie's story implied who she was left-behind with matter, her life *"was as usual"* as she justified *"I relied on my mother more"*, and her *"sister could supervise"* her.

Lin, like Yujie, reported a relatively painless experience when he was first separated from his mother when he was 9yrs, despite the fact that it was unexpected and being informed about the migration on the separation day. Lin shared that his family had made considerable efforts to alleviate his concerns.

...One day, my mom surprised me by saying that she was leaving for a while to make some money to buy me new toys in the early morning. At first, I was super excited about the toys, but then it hit me that she was actually leaving me. It was totally unexpected since things seemed good at home. But my mom explained why she had to go and what toys she was going to buy me. My siblings didn't seem too worried about it, which made me feel better. Then she left, and my father cooked us a very delicious lunch, which made even less upset. My siblings also bought me snacks, which made me forget about my mother was actually gone. And sure enough, my mom bought me some cool new toys and visited me a few times during her migration. It wasn't so bad after all, and it even made the next time separation a bit easier to handle. (Lin, 24yrs, Male)

Although Lin's initial separation was subtle, he had felt kept in dark during the separation. His story again highlights the importance of family support and family openness in conversation during separation from parents. As was the case for Yujie, Lin's siblings also appeared to be a source of comfort. The initial separation was well-handled by his family, from Lin's perspective - being well-informed, involved, and well-treated during major life changes. The initial separation was also a turning point for him to know what separation is like, and might be like. He felt his family did setup a good example for him to cope with the initial separation, making future separations *"a bit easier to handle"*. As resonated with Yujie, who Lin was left-behind with matters his level of distress, and the way his mother helped him cope with the pain of separation.

5.1.2 Adjustment in sadness

The separation process experienced by most participants was lengthy and involved not only the moment of separation, but also the aftermath. The days and weeks after the initial separation were described by many participants as being clouded in sadness and feelings of great loss, occurring in a context where they also had to quickly adapt to the new reality. Some participants (Yujie, Chao) were able to find a way to direct their attention to peers, siblings, and study, and they managed their sadness by making a busy life.

Yet some participants experienced an enduring time of distress. Xiaocao, for example, whose mother left in the early hours of the morning, had to beg for a home. She had to experience a second separation from her brother as she was not allowed to stay with her paternal grandparents, but her brother could:

... after settling down my brother in my paternal grandparents' home, I went to another village alone looking for my maternal grandmother. I was extremely upset but had not energy to think. I made my explanation to my maternal grandparents very simple, so that my feelings didn't need to go through it all again and they [feelings] would disappear by time. I wanted to shout and cry, and wanted to, you know, be a naughty child, just be myself, but I couldn't. (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female)

Xiaocao's account shows the assumptions that the older female sibling would 'settle' the younger male sibling in these situations, and that her own needs were a lower priority. Her search 'alone' for her maternal grandmother's house portrays a very vulnerable child, looking for shelter, having been rejected twice in as a day (mother and paternal grandparents). Xiaocao's deep desire that wanted to be a child was because the situation changed and the people, she loved was not present, yet she also had to cope with sorrow as she learnt to...

I had been upset and sad, maybe angry, for nearly a week. The first day after the separation was hard, because I needed time to accept and my environment was changed, then in the next few days, I didn't want to talk or eat. I just lied on the bed and looked at the ceiling, just feeling empty. Also, there were no peers around and I was alone. My grandmother was nice with me, but she was too busy with farm work. Sometimes I asked myself – when will my mother come back? Would she bring gifts for me? What was she doing right now? How's my brother doing? I missed them, but I could not see them. We were very close before the separation, then everything changed. Then it reminded me of that sad scene again, so I deliberately made myself forget about my feelings at the time, so I would not be destroyed. For me, if something similar were to happen again in the future, I would anticipate the worst-case scenario and take steps to avoid getting into a desperate situation again. I learnt to keep all feelings to myself as no one really understands you. I have never told my mother about the whole story, and I also didn't want to.

Through Xiaocao's experience of the initial separation, she learned to suppress her own emotions and feelings. As a result, Xiaocao went through a series of adjustments, from feeling emotionally down to withdrawing her feelings and eventually recognizing that *"no one really understands you"*. Although Xiaocao longed for family companionship, as a child, she was not left with choices and had to be tolerant in silence and adjust in sadness. This was a significant point in the initial separation for her: the once close-knit family was no longer united, and the environment new was unfamiliar. What are unfamiliar could also be stressful for her as she had to navigate the challenges and endure family separation alone. This was also a turning point that shaped Xiaocao's expectations about others as she *"would anticipate the worst-case scenario' to gain safety"*. The dispersion of Xiaocao's family resulted in a marking point that her relationship with her family seemed forever changed as she said *"I didn't want to' talk about it"*, which indicates her strong, unresolved feelings about the situation.

A pair of siblings, Lulu and Qiangqiang who both participated in the interview separately, relayed a very different situation. Their mother is deaf, mute and illiterate. They communicated with their mother only by gestures before the separation. Their mother migrated when Lulu was 6yrs and Qiangqiang was 5yrs, and their father stayed to take care of them. The overriding memory of that early time of separation was how to be assured of their mother's safety, as Lulu expressed:

...after my mother left, I had no time to feel sad (although I did feel sad) because I was more worried about her safety - had she safely arrived? could other people understand her? Was anyone bullying her? I worried a lot. She is disabled so she can't do things people usually do. Also, unless she contacted us first, we didn't know where she was as we both didn't have a phone. She took two days to finally contact us. (Lulu, 24yrs, Female)

Unlike Xiaocao, Lulu did not talk so much about distress about the initial separation itself but about her worry about her mother's circumstances and how they would get news of her safety. Qiangqiang also expressed his worry by keeping an eye on a phone, but when the call came, it brought little comfort given the extreme difficulties in communication:

During those two days, I went to the store (the only phone we had in the village) from time to time and stayed at home just waiting for the call. But when she called us, besides knowing she had safely arrived, I knew nothing. We couldn't see and couldn't talk, and when I asked something, she just taped the phone, let us know she was there. It was not even a talk. It was a really difficult communication, but was there any other way? No. The situation was tough so that you had no time to feel sad or upset, because your feelings were not important, your concern became worry (Along with the sigh). (Qiang qiang, 22yrs, Male)

These siblings explained how, to them, concerns about the safety of their mother trumped any difficult things they were going through: *"your feelings were not important"*. Their situation shows how the experience of being left-behind can be influenced by who is deemed to be most vulnerable, who has what challenges to overcome, and the expectation that everyone plays their part. However, they were the ones who need to be protected most in difficult times. Nonetheless, the siblings already 'understood' their mother's relative vulnerability compared to theirs.

Chao's account of the time after separation relayed other experiences and layers of subsiding longing for his father. Chao explained how his process of trying to cope with the sense of loss was to try to get close to this father by going to places where they used to go:

...after my father left, on the first few days, I just locked myself in the room and didn't want to eat and talk and cried. I worried about him, has he safely arrived or was he ok? But I could not see him, he wasn't there, and that was hard for me. My father and I were very close to each other, I relied on him, so after he left, the first day was very difficult, then in the next few days, I felt I was lost. I went for the place (lake, a path) that my father and I used to go. I was walking around the lake were my father used to go fishing, so I stayed there the whole day as if I was staying with my father, which made me feel better. I could stare at the lake for the whole day. Sometimes I went for a walk with my peers in those places. I told my friend that I missed my father - he said he also missed his father, then we were in silence. But somehow, I felt I was not alone, because we were same. In the meantime, I kept asking my mother when my father would come back. She answered that he would be home soon, then I asked, 'how soon'? My mother felt annoyed to answer me. I knew she also didn't know, but I wanted to ask, maybe if I asked more, my father would know then he would come back soon. Sometimes I heard of migrant people dying out there because they were asked to do some dangerous work. I was so fearful and stressed at that time, but I couldn't say anything as I worried if I spoke it out it might come true (Chao, 22yrs, Male).

The adjustment Chao made was to re-visit the places shared with his father, which reminded him of being with him. Chao portrayed an experience of loss and grief, and of searching for closeness with his absent father. He could *"stare at the lake for the whole day"* as it was a place of comfort. His constant questioning of his mother also told of his unsettledness about the situation, that he wanted to know when it would be over, and that by showing this, his father might return sooner. Chao's worry about his father's safety seemed to intensify after he heard about the deaths of migrant workers. This lifted Chao's emotions up shifted from sadness to fear for his father's safety, yet there was nothing he could do. This is a powerless situation, highlights the powerlessness that as a child undertaken, as well as highlights the ways in which a left-behind in such situations may feel that they need to bear the burden of their emotions alone. However, different from Yujie, his mother's presence did not seem to mitigate his distress, and that to be justified by himself *"My father and I were very close to each other, I relied on him"*. This implies

that prior migration relationship between parents and children might associate with children's distress level after separation.

Jun shared some positive experiences about how his family and friends helped him to cope with the pain after separation. Jun's mother migrated when he was 8yrs and left Jun and his two brothers with their paternal grandparents at home:

I was unhappy about my mother's migration, but I understood she did this for us. She is my mother; no mother wants to leave their children behind. I knew where she went, and when she was coming back, so there was nothing for me to worry about. My mother called us immediately once she arrived at her workplace. I felt relieved that she was safe and good. Also, my paternal grandparents had been taking care of us very well and tried to keep our spirits up. I remember...after my mother left, they brought us to market and bought snacks they normally wouldn't buy. I did feel sad about the separation, so I stayed outside the whole day with my friends, because they kept me happy, and we were all left-behind children, we were the same, so I like to play with them, I found kind of connected? Maybe. When we played together, your sadness disappeared. My brothers were also helpful, actually, we helped each other as we all missed our parents. We just kept each other company; we ate together and slept together, so I rarely felt lonely, only sometimes when I really missed my mother. The time I spent thinking about my mother became less, my distress only lasted a couple of days. (Jun, 25yrs, Male)

Jun's account shows that extreme and prolonged distress is not evitable, and that knowing about his mother's safety and feeling cared for at home, and in community with his brothers and other left-behind friends, helped him to manage. Jun portrayed a sense of being cocooned in safety (which included being kept informed of what was happening) and feeling understood and cared for by his grandparents and brothers, i.e. his vulnerability and need for support was recognized and responded to, and this was helpful to him. Spending time having fun with friends, and have time distracted from distress, was also helpful, especially since his left-behind friends shared an unspoken understanding of their collective situation. Jun's stories, in a comprehensive perspective, depict the functions they serve for Jun and how Jun's peers, siblings, and caregivers collaborate to support him in coping with the absence of his parents, highlighting their respective roles.

Following-up Limin's abrupt separation from her mother, her father also left a few days later. She remembered feeling both distressed and determined to take on the responsibility of caring for her younger brother...

After my parents left, there were only my brother and I in the house. They called us once to ask us to take care of each other. My feelings were mixed: sad, yet somehow strong, as I knew that I was the only 'adult' in the family. I felt a sense of responsibility to take care of my brother, and I could not show any signs of weakness, like crying in front of him. I began to learn how to cook steam buns, soup, and dishes. I tried to use this busyness to fill in my mind to forget what they

have put me through. I held my sadness inside and ignored it, thinking that it was not important. However, one day, I got burned while cooking, and I couldn't suppress my emotions any longer. I cried hysterically, and my brother came out to ask me what was wrong. I pretended that it was because of the burn, but I felt very aggrieved because I had done nothing wrong, and yet I had to bear the consequences of my parents' decision to leave. I understood that we needed money, but couldn't they have waited a few more years until my brother and I were older? (Limin, 25yrs, Female)

Limin expressed mixed emotions as she adjusted to the absence of her parents, highlighting the emotional and practical challenges she faced that left her no choice but to be strong. Limin went through all mental gymnastics, silently, yet the responsibility she had to shoulder forced her, as a child, to mature and to take care of another child. Her eventual emotional collapse highlighted the fact that parental separation and its aftermath was way too much for a child. Limin's story underscores the fact that a child, despite her inherent strength, unsupportive family system, can amplify the harm she had while being left-behind. For Limin, her parents' migration made it seem as if they had disappeared, leaving her to take care of everything on her own.

5.1.3 Discussion

In the interviews with young Chinese adults who experienced being left-behind, participants were free to express the range of ways it impacted them. The initial separation experience appeared to be a highly significant event in most of their lives, often causing (from their perspective) a profound and enduring impact on their well-being and family relationships.

Although the impact of parental migration on left-behind children in China has been well-documented, no study to date has captured young adults' reflections on the experience, as a left-behind child, of the initial separation from their parents. Participants, in the present study, provided detailed accounts of their initial separation from their parents, including vivid recollections of the scene, their emotional states, and their coping adaptations both at the time and in the aftermath. Initial separation from parents for them was a lengthy and intricate period which highlighted the significance on the early day/weeks following separation and its profound impacts on participants.

The participants' memory of the time points or period of initial separations was strong, painful, and constant. Most participants recalled the moment when they realized, they had not been part of the communication about the decision to migrate. Being kept in the dark left participants feeling invisible and unheard, and that they had been given limited information about the migration, despite feeling it would have been better for them. Their emotional response was particularly intense when they were first informed about the migration, and the high emotional

intensity persisted for several days after their parents' departure. Immediately post-separation, participants conveyed how they felt left to manage their extreme emotions, from sadness to fear, and to figure out what adjustments to make to face the reality of their new circumstances.

The initial separation and its aftermath were mostly influenced by factors such as who they were left-behind with in the family, or their social networks. Some participants (Jun, Lin) perceived that their lives did not seem to change that much regarding on their lifestyles and care arrangements as people who they were left-behind with were helpful and supportive, although they did feel upset separating from their parent(s) for the first time. Others (Xiaocao, Limin) experienced a complete change in their care arrangements and lifestyles, particularly when both parents migrated. They perceived that, with no parental presence, they were placed to not only process their distressing emotions alone but also deal with new care arrangements and environments, and sometimes along with new care responsibilities. For example, three participants (Xiaocao, Limin, Jun) had to look after younger siblings even though they themselves needed care. The aftermath of separation also appeared to be influenced by their social networks. Participants in the study adapted with their experiences of being left-behind through play and connecting with other left-behind children, which provided comfort and a sense of belonging. Overall, the initial separation from their parents was a significant and emotional event for most participants.

5.1.3.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Major points of two theories

In interpreting these findings about the impact of separation from parents, two frameworks from psychology appear useful - first, those relating to adverse childhood experiences and second, attachment theory. They form the theoretical lens for the discussions of all of the themes and that the next section justifies that choice.

These two bodies of work emphasize the significance of understanding early life experiences through the lens of attachment needs, and how adverse experiences in childhood can influence a person's life trajectory. Both bodies of work draw attention to, and try to explain, the long-term effects of early, difficult childhood experiences on an individual's development (Cooke., 2019; Grady, Levenson, & Bolder, 2017). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to a range of traumatic or stressful experiences during childhood and adolescence (0-17yrs) that can have a lasting impact on the physical, psychological, and social development of an individual's health and well-being (Boullier & Blair, 2018; Felitti et al., 1998). Examples of ACEs include emotional abuse, neglect, household dysfunction such as parental separation or divorce, and exposure to

environmental toxins or violence (Bethell et al., 2016). ACEs are a prevalent global phenomenon, including in China (Boullier & Blair, 2018; Li et al., 2015). Research in Western countries has found that nearly one in six individuals report exposure to four or more types of ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences Report, 2022). Reported levels of ACE exposure in China vary across studies, ranging from 31% to 93.5% (Chen et al., 2022; Li et al., 2015; Wei & Yu, 2013). ACEs often impact individuals in various ways, such as increasing the risk of mental health and emotional problems. They have been linked to chronic physical health problems and mental illness, and substance use problems in adolescence and adulthood (Bethell et al., 2016). The more ACEs an individual is exposed to experiences, the greater the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes (Witt et al., 2019). However, ACEs are not deterministic (Bellis et al., 2022). It is possible that supportive family members, childcare support, or community members may mitigate the effects of ACEs (Cooke et al., 2019).

Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding the way in which early experiences with caregivers are fundamental in shaping the way in which individuals form and maintain relationships throughout their lives (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013; Bretherton, 1985). The theory emphasizes the significance of the relationship between children and their primary caregivers, usually mothers (Bowlby, 1982, 1997). It proposes that it is natural for children to seek connection and proximity to their caregivers for survival, creating a close attachment. Through their early experiences with their primary caregivers, the theory proposes that children learn and internalize the attachment system (i.e. whether the attachment figure is a reliable and effective source of support and emotion regulation) and use these primary relationships as a model for how to engage with, and have expectations of, future relationships beyond their family (Bowlby, 1982). This inner model of relationships is called the internal working models (IWMs) and is the cornerstone of attachment theory (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). The IMW is argued to provide a template for future attachments and plays a role in later development, as proposed in the continuity hypothesis of attachment (Ainsworth, 2013). It claims that a person begins forming IWMs from infancy and these continue to develop across the life span. They are likely to become more flexible, and sophisticated as children develop more abstract cognitive abilities and experience different relationships (Juang et al., 2018). Each interaction and significant event contribute to the formation of new cognitive and emotional representations, which are then integrated into the existing framework of the internal working model (Bowlby, 1982). Over time, this ongoing process of assimilating and incorporating experiences leads to the development of a complex internal working model that influences how the individual perceives and engages in future relationships and experiences. The more complex their internal working patterns are, the better their chances of surviving adversity (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002; Pietromonaco & Barrett,

2000). This is because a complex internal working model provides individuals with a greater range of coping strategies and a more nuanced understanding of social relationships, which can help them to navigate challenging situations more effectively. The better the internal working model can simulate reality, the better the individual's capacity to plan and respond (Juang et al., 2018).

Attachment research has identified that each child-parent dyad develops a particular type or style of attachment, reflecting their relationship history around the management of distress. The types are broadly secure or insecure. The formation of a secure attachment between a child and their primary caregiver is beneficial to a child's development (Ainsworth, 2013). When a child experiences a secure attachment with their caregivers, they have a 'secure base' to turn to for emotion regulation when distressed or fearful. This builds a sense of trust, healthy dependence and a sense of security between the primary caregiver and the child. The child then feels safe and supported, which allows them to feel / explore their environment. This healthy experience in their primary relationship (i.e. a secure attachment) is associated with later healthy relationships with others (Bretherton, 1992). In contrast, insecure attachment can develop when the caregiver is inconsistently available or unresponsive to the child's emotional needs, leading to feelings of abandonment, mistrust, confusion and often fear in the child (Ainsworth, 2006). Compared to secure attachments, insecure attachments are associated with much poorer outcomes for children across psychological, social, educational and economic domains (Ainsworth, 2006; Bowlby, 1982, 1997).

Although attachment (in) security is biased towards stability, it can change. For example, if a parent begins to change how they respond to the child's need for emotion regulation, the child can learn, over time, to use that 'secure base' differently than they did before. Finally, the usual negative outcomes associated with insecure attachment with one primary caregiver can be offset by a secure attachment with other key caregivers (Howes et al., 1988; Quiroga et al., 2017; Venta & Cuervo, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). This means that children and young people can develop secure attachment relationships, even those with a history of insecure relationships.

Attachment theory can be understood to sit within the broader ACEs framework (Grady et al., 2017). The ACEs framework provides a foundational understanding of how early adverse experiences impact children's development, while attachment theory underscores the critical role of secure attachment bonds between a child and their caregiver, emphasizing what is critical for healthy social and emotional development of the child (Donadio, et al., 2022; Grady et al., 2017; Thomson & Jaque, 2017). This theory provides one possible mechanism for explaining why ACEs may be associated with poor outcomes, i.e. that disrupted attachment following ACEs

explain one impact pathway (Cicchetti & Doyle, 2016; Cooke et al., 2019). Moreover, a secure attachment serves as a critical buffer for children experiencing ACEs, working to shield them from the long-term impacts of distress and trauma (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). Children with an insecure attachment, lacking a secure base to manage their distress, are likely to experience worse outcomes compared to those with a secure attachment (Grady et al., 2017).

Literature related to theories within the migration context in global and China

Within migrant families, children are observed to have a higher likelihood of encountering ACEs and developing insecure attachments (Choi et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2012; Hoang et al., 2015; Venta & Cuervo, 2022). A growing recognition has emerged regarding the potential associations (though causality remains unestablished) between ACEs and attachment security during early childhood within the context of migration (Donadio et al., 2022; Paras et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2008). In western countries, extensive research has established that attachment security can serve as a protective factor against the adverse effects of ACEs, such as parental absence due to migration, on children's well-being (Venta & Cuervo, 2022). However, parent-child separations resulting from migration have been found to potentially disrupt attachment relationships, exerting a negative and significant impact on children's overall well-being (Donadio et al., 2022; Smith, Lalonde, & Johnson, 2004). Reunifications, though attempted, have shown limited effectiveness in restoring the ruptured parent-child bond (Smith, Lalonde, & Johnson, 2004; Venta & Cuervo, 2022). Quantitative studies have further indicated that young adults who have experienced family separation in childhood are more likely to have reduced attachment security (Santa-Maria & Cornille, 2007; Venta et al., 2021). Qualitative studies utilizing interview-based methodologies from the perspective of children have reported deleterious effects of parental migration, particularly maternal migration, on children's attachment security (De Haene et al., 2013; Venat et al., 2020). For example, these children were less likely to seek out their mothers instead, to seek out their caregivers (grandmothers) (Venat et al., 2020). In similar ways, a study found that a child who experienced migration-related separation from mothers were 4.7 times as likely to report poor relationship quality with their mothers (Conway et al., 2020).

Conversely, although migration experiences are commonly experienced as stressful and challenging, children in migrant families who have (or have had) a solid history of supportive attachment figures or a solid supportive network in their current environment may experience reduced stressors and challenges (Idemudia & Boehnke, 2020; Juang, et al., 2018; Sroufe, 2005). This highlights the continued support and availability of attachment figures when navigating new relationships and environments during migration is likely to be very important (Juang et al., 2018). Nevertheless, other studies suggest that if the heightened pressure associated with

migration damages the quality of parental caregiving or undermines parental support in navigating new relationships and environments during migration, even children or adolescents with secure attachment relationships may encounter challenges in adjusting during migration (Benner & Kim, 2010; Juang et al., 2018). For example, parents facing significant life stress, such as economic hardships, tend to be more absent, distracted, or depressed, thereby compromising the quality of their caregiving and leading to more negative interactions with their children (Benner & Kim, 2010; Lester et al., 2019). This, in turn, has the potential to undermine the adjustments and psychosocial development of children (Benner & Kim, 2010). Furthermore, if secure children or adolescents perceive that their parents are no longer emotionally available, their internal working models (IWMs) are updated to reflect the new negative relationship experiences, whereby parents are no longer perceived as a secure source of support. Consequently, these children must develop self-regulation abilities to manage their emotions independently (Ayoub et al., 2003; Bretherton, 1985; Sable, 1997; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Juang et al., 2018).

In the context of Chinese migration, being a left-behind child in rural China, can be considered an ACE and to constitute a major risk to attachments with primary caregivers. Also being left-behind could be an ACE, regardless of what comes after. Loss / bereavement is also an ACE. Left-behind children often undergo early parental separation and are frequently placed under the care of various caregivers, leading to uncertainty and instability in their lives (Biao, 2007; Ye & Murry, 2010). As a result, their life becomes uncertain and unstable, leading to a greater likelihood of exposure to multiple ACEs such as neglect and abuse (Ye & Lu, 2011; Zhao et al., 2018). Additionally, many left-behind children have limited access to educational and healthcare resources, and often live in poverty and poor living conditions, which are forms of ACEs (Chang et al., 2017). These ACEs often lead to further health and mental burdens later in life (Li, Zhao, & Wang, 2021). Traumatic and enduring separation from their parents since early childhood puts left-behind children them at a heightened risk of experiencing unstable care arrangements and disrupted attachments and unstable care arrangements (Zhao et al., 2018). Additionally, parental migration frequently leads to separation or divorce (Ma et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2018), which is a further ACE. These cumulative exposure to multiple adversities poses significant challenges for left-behind children in establishing and maintaining secure attachments with their caregivers (Dai et al., 2017; Zhao et al., 2018).

Research findings consistently demonstrate a strong association between migration-related adversities and insecure attachment among left-behind children in China, highlighting a higher likelihood of experiencing such attachment difficulties compared to their non-left-behind counterparts (Shuang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2021). Specifically, studies on

left-behind children reveal that emotional investment of migrated parents and supportive caregivers play key factors that determine the quality of child-caregiver attachment. For example, a qualitative study from left-behind children's perspective reported that migrated parents had limited time for communication or engagement with their children, which limit children's ability to maintain close relationships with parents, consequently, an increased likelihood of developing negative emotions that disrupt attachments with their parents (Zhao et al., 2018). Also, another study revealed that, additional responsibilities for childcare, household maintenance, and agricultural production place considerable strain on remaining parents in the context of Chinese migration, who also experience emotional burdens due to separation from their loved ones, typically spouses or children (Lu, 2012). These difficulties contribute to heightened stress levels among caregivers, further exacerbating deficits in emotional support (Lu, 2012). In addition to this, the vulnerability of caregivers, often grandparents, hinders their ability to provide high-quality emotional support, which leads to more negative experiences and feelings to left-behind children. Also, the caregiver whose mentally poor (depressed) are unable to provide emotional stability can subsequently disrupt children's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour (Lu et al., 2019; Liu & Wang, 2015; Zhao et al., 2018). However, these studies have not explored the mechanisms by which children's abilities are disrupted.

Studies have further revealed that parent migration can be overwhelming by the loss of their attachment figures and develop strong feelings of abandonment, even when their alternative caregivers are devoted to their development (Lu et al., 2019, Wang & Mesman, 2015). Additionally, life adversities such as parental divorce, the death of one or both parents, extreme poverty, experienced while being left-behind, have been associated with inadequate parental support and care, thereby increasing the likelihood of developing insecure attachments (Lu et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2018). While studies have provided valuable insights into the importance of emotional investment from parents and supportive caregivers in maintaining secure parent-child attachment among left-behind children, none of these studies have explored the quality of attachment prior to migration, leaving uncertainty regarding whether insecure attachment existed prior to migration or was a consequence of the migration process. Nonetheless, all studies indicate the significance of parental separation as a major disruption to the presence of consistent attachment figures, emphasizing the heightened need for additional care and support from migrated parents and caregivers in such circumstances (Shuang et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2018).

5.1.3.2 Project data, ACEs framework and attachment theory

Although the present study did not evaluate participants' attachment security through psychological assessments, the described nature and emotional qualities of their relationships with parents provide some tentative indicators of attachment which are helpful to learn from.

The present study revealed that separation from parents could have a traumatising effect on the left-behind participants. Participants reported extreme distress before separation and after, like chasing bus looking for parents, refusing to talk about this with parents, or even refuse to recall this memory back. This will be explained by two small sections, one is the nature of separation for left-behind participants, the other associated factors amplified their feelings of abandonment facing initial separations (left-behind family members, peers, age of separation).

The nature of separation

Firstly, most left-behind participants reported separation distress, anxiety, and sadness during the separation from their primary caregivers. However, only two participants reported relatively subtle distress before and after separation when their main caregivers, who were their mothers, remained at home. The attachment theory provides a framework to account for the distress experienced by left-behind participants when they were separated from their main caregiver, namely the sudden removal of this secure base (Ainsworth, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In addition, the study revealed that some participants displayed extreme emotional distress when they had positive relationships ("*life was nice*") with their parent(s) before migration. Prior to migration, the participants were accustomed to parental presence and relied deeply on their parents for comfort when encountering difficult circumstances, yet there was no-one there to help with distress.

Secondly, separation from a primary caregiver at a young age (no more than 10yrs) could be an ACE and some participants did express how traumatized they were after parental migration. Through the understanding of ACEs, when a person is exposed to an extremely stressful event, there is an increase of intense feelings of vulnerability and fear. This fear may be related to something similar to what one has encountered will happen to oneself or to one's loved ones (Boullier & Blair, 2018; Dyregrov & Mitchell 1992). For example, Chao feared becoming an orphan following his father's migration, while Xiaocao expected the worst-case scenario in any similar events to avoid being in a desperate situation again. These traumatic events often leave children feeling that the world is scary and unpredictable and that you have to look after yourself, with limited control over the situation (Dyregrov, & Mitchell 1992; Lester et al., 2019). Like the participants in the study, they repeatedly expressed their sense of helplessness and acceptance of what had already happened, acknowledging their limited ability to alter the situation.

Moreover, the ACEs literature suggests that following a traumatic event, individuals engage in a complex psychological process aimed at making sense of what happened. Due to the traumatic event being so far outside the normal range of experiences, the mind may employ a range of cognitive strategies to process and 'master' the event (Perry, 2003; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). This process may involve the individual engaging in cognitive activities such as thinking, problem-solving, and reflection to come to terms with what occurred. The ultimate goal is to achieve a sense of coherence and understanding, to help the individual make sense of the event and integrate it into their sense of self and world (Dyregrov & Mitchell 1992; Perry, 2003). Such a process can help individuals to adapt and cope with the traumatic experience.

This process interpreted the way in which participants made sense and processed during and adapted after initial separation. In the beginning, when they just knew about parents' migration, some participants (Xiaocao, Chao), tried to make sense why needed for migration, then they came to doubt that the motivation of their parents' migration was to be free from them, as they perceived that their families were finically ok. Also, other left-behind children's stories where their migrated parents never came back amplified their vulnerability and fear (Chao, Jun). After separation, participants adopted different strategies to process and adapt to the aftermath of the separation, such as withdrawing feelings, staying busy, or talking with peers to 'master' the situation. Consistent with the present study, previous studies have also highlighted the various strategies used by left-behind children to cope with the loneliness and sense of loss they experience when their parents migrate (Fu & Zhu, 2020, Ye & Lu, 2011), such as making complaint, This process illustrates how participants engaged in various mental activities to cope with the traumatic event of initial separation and how they adapted to their new circumstances. However, the present study did not aim to prove how strong and resilience they were, instead, it sought to present the ways in which they coped and adapted under limited choices. By understanding their coping strategies, the study provides insights into the emotional and psychological challenges faced by children after the initial separation.

Other associated factors related to initial separation

This section discusses the other factors related to initial separation that put participants in more vulnerable and traumatized situations. Firstly, unknown or having little knowledge about parents' migration had made the initial separation become more traumatic for participants. Most participants lacked a sense of uncertainty about when their parents will back, what kind of job they do, and unknow care arrangements. This means that they were completely being kept in the dark during migration, and in the lens of ACEs, leaving the children with uncertainty, facing

something out of their capacity, and the distress of it is extremely frightening (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). This has become the most painful part at the time of separation for participants. Many perceived that knowing the migration plan beforehand would have lessened the pain of the sudden separation and allowed them to discuss and resolve their confusion. They expressed a strong desire of wanting to be heard, involved, and listened to in the family decision.

However, left-behind children are often not involved in the migration decision (Démurger, & Xu, 2015; Ye & Lu, 2011; Zhao et al., 2018). A qualitative study with in-depth interviews of left-behind participants alone explained the reason of it from left-behind children's perspective, one is because they were too young to express themselves, the other is because they knew parents would not change their plan even if they know how to express their views (Zhao et al., 2018). Moreover, studies also found that it is also common for parents not to say when they will be back home after migration (Démurger & Xu, 2015), which is similar to that of the participants in the present study.

Some participants were lucky enough to be told about migration a few days earlier, the effect of separation did not seem to diminish. This might relate to the way in which migrated parents prepared and discussed the migration plan with their children. For example, participant Lin was told migration surprisingly in the early morning and left on that day, he did not suffer. Lin's mother paid efforts to help him prepare for migration, such as giving reason why migration needed, where to go, and promise when come back, and she also offered a loving gift while she come home. This might draw a way in which parents can help the left-behind children deal with the separations. It highlights that – the important of helping parents to help children prepare for migration, to develop a communication and 'love' plan, and to have a safety and care plan in place so children know who will keep them safe in their parents' absence, as well as suggest that parents thinking of migrating should be strongly advised against just leaving.

Secondly, the study's findings indicate that the emotional well-being of left-behind children was influenced by the individuals with whom they were left-behind. The presence of supportive left-behind family members, such as siblings or a remaining parent, as well as peers, were found to be significant factors related to their level of well-being, with both positive and negative effects reported. For example, in terms of parents, Yujie felt her father's migration was ok for her when her mother remained at home. However, Chao's mother and Lulu's and Qiangqiang's father who remained at home did not seem to mitigate the effect of their father's or mother's migration. This finding is partially consistent with previous research, which has reported similar levels of loneliness and depression among Chinese left-behind children who grow up with an absent mother or father (Wang et al., 2015; Zhou & Yu, 2016). However, other studies have shown that

children with an absent mother through migration tend to have poorer psychological and emotional well-being, as the mother is often the primary caregiver (Liu et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2009). This difference in findings may be due to the fact that this chapter sought to explore the effects of the initial separation of children from their parents, rather than exploring the long-term effects of father/mother-migration on participants. It is common for children to experience distress when separating from their parents, for example, Chao and Xiaocao both expressed significant emotional distress when their father and mother, respectively, migrated. However, it is important to acknowledge that in many cases, the migration of mothers often results in the child being left-behind by both parents, as the father migrates earlier. It may be inappropriate to solely attribute the impact of maternal migration on the child to the mother, as the joint impact of both parents may be at play. Nonetheless, children with two parents migrating experienced more psychological and emotional problems (Sun et al., 2017; Zhao, 2018).

Siblings, in the present study, also seemed to have mixed effect on left-behind participants' well-being. For example, Jun's and Yujie's siblings provided support by keeping each other company, playing together, and helping with homework. While Limin and Xiaocao reported that siblings added extra burdens and distress at the time of separation when they needed care the most, but felt they had to be mature and suppress their emotions to look after their younger siblings. These findings are in line with previous studies (Huang & Zou, 2023; Jia & Tian, 2010; Yu & Lu, 2011; Zhao et al., 2014) that suggest that siblings have mixed effects on left-behind children's emotional well-being. On the one hand, they provide emotional support by keeping them company and academic help for supervising their homework (Jia & Tian, 2010; Yu & Lu, 2011). On the other hand, siblings also add more responsibility for caring roles, as well as increase competition for resources such as love and educational opportunities, and sometimes even at the expense of their education and future (Chang et al., 2011; Huang & Zou, 2023; Zhao et al., 2014). These studies propose that it is possible that children receive less love, attention, material, and psychological support from their caregivers if they have many siblings. However, while previous studies have examined the influence of various factors on left-behind children's well-being, including the role of siblings, few studies have specifically focused on the impact of siblings during the period of being left-behind. Moreover, these studies tried to explore the long-term impact of siblings on left-behind children's well-being, whereas no study has provided insight into the stress and burden siblings may add during the time of separation.

Consistent with previous research, peers were found to play a crucial role in reducing loneliness and meeting the emotional needs of left-behind children in the absence of parents (Li, Zhang, & Li, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhao, Liu, & Wang, 2015). Previous studies explain that peers and

friends are important social networks to compensate for left-behind children's emotional needs in the absence of parents, though they can never replace the parents (Chen & Sun, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). However, the present study also highlighted the importance of peers in providing a sense of belonging and connection for left-behind participants. Participants found that being around peers who were also left-behind children helped them feel connected and less lonely, as they were experiencing a similar situation. For example, Chao found comfort in talking to his left-behind friend who also missed his father, and Jun felt a sense of connection while playing with his left-behind peers. This finding provides valuable insights into the potential for emotional support among left-behind children in the future studies.

The study findings also indicated that the age at which left-behind children experience initial separation was not strongly associated with the impact of separation on their emotional well-being. This contrasts with previous studies that found younger children (less than 7yrs) who experienced separation from parents had more negative emotional symptoms (Fan et al., 2010; Qin & Albin, 2010; Zhao et al., 2016). However, the exact age at which children experience the poorest psychological outcomes remains unclear. Both younger (4yrs) and older (10yrs) left-behind participants in the present study experienced comparable emotional distress during initial separation, suggesting that age may not be the only factor at play. Attachment theory suggests that younger children may be more attached to their parents due to their greater dependence on them for survival, protection, and emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1997). Also, when individuals have developed a secure attachment with primary caregivers, they are more likely to be more positive and enable them seek support from others to deal with difficulties, as they start developing their internal working model as early as age 3 and imitate what they have learned from their main caregiver. However, the present study's findings only partially support this notion since both younger and older left-behind children experienced similar emotional distress during separation. This is might because many participants experienced huge distress during separation, possibly due to facing multiple adversities that were beyond their capacity to deal with or having or having had an insecure attachment with their parents before migration.

Overall, the present study findings suggest that left-behind participants' well-being were determined who they were left-behind with; left-behind family members and peers played significant roles in providing emotional support and a sense of belonging for participants, particularly in situations where both parents migrated or during the time of separation. The age at which participants experienced initial separation did not appear to have a significant impact on their emotional outcomes. However, it is unclear that whether these factors are solely associated influencing their well-being, or in combination, explain why initial separation have such a significant effect on participants.

This chapter presents the emotional and psychological experiences of left-behind children following the initial separation from one or both parents. The present study suggests that being separated from parents for the first time was a major and meaningful event in their left-behind life and provides insight into how these children may perceive separations in the future. The study highlights the importance of helping parents prepare their children for migration and developing a communication plan to reduce children's distress facing separation. The present study also emphasizes the need for parents to have a safety and care plan in place, ensuring that children know who will take care of them in their parents' absence. The results show that being kept in the dark about migration is extremely frightening for children, and parents considering migration should be advised against leaving without proper planning and communication.

Chapter 5.2 Pushes and Pulls of Family Layers

Chapter 5.2 begins with descriptive context around left-behind children and their extended families and explains two family contexts that appeared, in the data, to be associated with particular experiences and are presented as themes. The first context is where extended family had full caring responsibilities for the left-behind child (Context A) and the second is where extended family had no or only partial caring responsibilities for the left-behind child (Context B). Before the themes are presented for each of these contexts, the next section provides a brief description of cultural norms and expectations of extended families in the care of children in China to contextualize the interview data.

5.2.1 Cultural norms: the Chinese family

Certain traditions in rural China define the family structure and family caring roles family (Cohen, 1992). These have been derived from the historical convention of Confucian filial piety that set the core pillars of many cultural and moral ideals in China (Bedford & Yeh, 2019; Gu, 2022; Jankowiak & Moore, 2016; Ye & Pan, 2011). In a large Chinese family, parents, grandparents, and some core relatives usually share the same household or live close by, and they are expected to help each other in domestic life. Asking extended kin to look after your child from a few days to a few months is very common in Chinese culture, and in return parents offer help to them when needed (Biao, 2007; Démurger & Xu, 2015; Pan & Yue, 2017).

In traditional Chinese culture, there are certain cultural norms for the traditional Chinese family. First, there is a strong emphasis on respect for the elderly and filial piety (the virtue of respect for one's parents and ancestors). Children are expected to show respect and obedience to their elders, and parents have a responsibility to care for and protect their children (Ye & Murry, 2012). In practice, giving the cultural values of respect for elders and the belief that adult children have a responsibility to care for their parents (Tang, 1995). This means that aging parents may have limited power or autonomy in decision-making within the family, especially when they financially rely on their adult children. There is also a cultural preference for males in many parts of China, and the first-born son is often seen as the most important member of the family (Cohen, 1992). This may be due to the belief that the son will carry on the family name and is expected to take care of his parents in their old age (Li & Lavelly, 2003). As a result, first-born sons and their families may be given more privileges and responsibilities within the family (Cohen, 1992; Li, 2020). These norms are likely to remain similar in left-behind children's households and shape the trajectory of their left-behind experience (Hu, 2019; Wang, 2014).

Under the norms of filial piety, grandparents, parents, and children usually live together; the father should work to earn money, while the mother should manage the money and fulfil the needs of family and home, including housework and childcare, as women are considered much better at managing recourses (Albertson & Norrie, 2019; Ho, 1987). In some cases, mothers do additional work to earn money. This heavy burden on mothers means that grandparents often step in and take a main role alongside mothers in raising their grandchildren (Chen et al., 2011; Chen & Liu, 2012). During the prime farming seasons, grandparents are expected to be the main caregivers for children in rural families (Biao, 2007; Chen et al., 2011). Therefore, grandparents often play a major role in raising grandchildren whether they are left-behind children or not, and their roles depend on how busy and burdened the parents are (He & Ye, 2014; Li et al., 2003, 2004; Short & Sun, 2003).

Overall, cultural norms are strong influences on Chinese families, and the roles people play in them. Extended family taking on full or partial care for left-behind children is normal in China and is practical. Often, it is more unusual that left-behind children are taken care of by the maternal grandmother.

5.2.2 Context A and its themes

The section describes key aspects of Context A before reporting themes associated with it. In context A, both parents migrated, and paternal or maternal grandparents, uncles or aunts looked after the interview participant as a left-behind child.

Although Chinese culture has well-defined roles for extended family, most participants reported very poor care by their extended family, and many reported significant and destructive impacts on them and their family relationships because of this, for the following reasons. First, most participants reported a form of tension or conflict between their parents and their extended family which originated prior to their migration and continued after. Often, these extended family relations deteriorated significantly during the left-behind period and resulted in their complete breakdown. These tensions and difficulties with kin also negatively impacted the left-behind children's nuclear family by, for example, causing parental separation or weakening the relationship between these children and their parents.

Second, some participants reported that, during their parents' migration period, their well-being was largely determined by the number of children or left-behind children in their relatives' families. Relatives often had to look after more than one left-behind child along with, sometimes,

their own children, and their love and attention were not given equally to each child. Participants commonly reported feeling unfairly treated, and the time of living with extended family was described as an experience of being isolated and ignored. Third, a few participants described that some extended family members, especially paternal or maternal grandparents, seized control of them as a left-behind child while their parents were away, or they tried to get them to cut ties with their parents - sometimes even after their parents returned home. For many participants, such difficulty, conflict and neglect from extended family was the main distress and struggle in their left-behind experience.

Three themes were generated for Context A to capture the ways in which extended family impacted participants' experience: 1) Being harmed or protected by family conflict; 2) Competing for love; and 3) Left-behind children as tools of seizing control and power.

5.2.2.1 Being harmed or protected by family conflicts

Two participants reported a fundamental tension around their mother and the extended family. Bing's father migrated and he and his mother and brother lived with their paternal grandparents. Bing was aware of financial pressure and that his mother would follow his father and migrate. However, Bing felt that one other factor speeded up his mother's departure – that his grandparents favoured their first-born son and his family, meaning Bing's father and Bing himself, were rejected. Money, resources and care became the grandparents' way to powerfully enact their favouritism for the first-born son and his family:

They liked my uncle's family more than us and gave the money that my parents earned to my uncle, because my uncle is their first-born son and has priority, and so does their family. It seems like my father is not their child, so we are not their grandchildren. My parents had a few fights due to this before migration. My father wanted to remain silent, but my mother thought it was unfair for us. My mother quarrelled with my grandmother once while my father was away because if my father were there, he would not allow my mother to have a fight with his mother. (Bing, 25yrs, Male)

Bing's extract illustrates many cultural norms and expectations for families in China, e.g. son-preference, first-born privilege, and how these influenced his left-behind experience. He relayed how he was treated as "not as a grandchild" and how this favouritism caused conflict between his own parents. Bing recalled seeing his mother fight for his right to be better treated, despite the expectation that she would not challenge the family matriarch. However, his mother's challenge to the grandmother had little effect:

...nothing had changed. It was a family scandal. Anyway, after that she [mother] left for the city and stayed with my father, and left us with my grandparents, just left (a long sigh). She did not say why but I knew why she left.

For Bing, the conflict triggered his mother to leave, meaning he was left-behind by both parents. Bing repeats the phrase she "left", and accompanied by a long sigh, which was emotionally read (by the interviewer) to reflect sadness, resignation and feeling unimportant: "she just left" as if it was easy for her to make the choice. The true reason was never voiced, but Bing 'knew' it was about the way his grandparents were treating them. The grandparents' misuse of money and inequitable allocation of resources and care was another way in which the family fractions cascaded to affect Bing directly:

Even now, I still remember that after my mother left, my paternal grandparents refused to give pocket money to us, but they did give to my uncle's children, by using my parents' money. When my mother was there, they sometimes gave us some, but not anymore. Also, my grandparents did what they were told by my uncle's wife. Whenever my grandparents went to town, they brought new clothes for my cousins, but never for us. Also, no one could supervise our homework, so we just didn't do it.

Bing noticed the signalling of his grandparents' manipulative actions that, because of the existing family fractions, he was less important in every way compared to his cousins, and that amplified his experience of unfairness. For Bing, being left-behind not only meant 'losing' his parents but also losing access to love, material resources and practical support for school from this assigned carer – all as a result of family power struggles and favouritism for the first-born. This period of time for Bing was short but impactful, and he explained that:

"After half a year, my mother took us to the city and started our floating life, and we never went back if it was not necessary".

Throughout his account, Bing portrayed the sadness, powerlessness, rejection and injustice at being the victim of adult favouritism and conflict, and to have borne the brunt of this during his left-behind experience. Bing's account shows that the left-behind experience is not influenced only by being separated from parents but by the complex, fractured and conflictual relationships they grow up in alongside being a left-behind child.

Xiaorui also explained how previous conflicts between her mother and grandmother had led to her mother travelling back and forth to ensure her well-being as she feared the family conflict would be taken out on Xiaorui. As with Bing, the migrated father had made no contribution to resolve the conflict, as far as she knew:

... My mother and my paternal grandmother had a quarrel about money issues before they migrated. My father cursed my mother and asked her to stop being mean to his family. She left me with my paternal grandmother and asked my maternal grandmother to visit me sometimes, to see whether I was well or not. Also because once when they were on the video call, my mother

saw I was eating mud and that was all over my face and clothes, my paternal grandmother just sat there. My mother said "you were like a homeless person". I was too young to understand and did not remember the details, but I remember her eyes became red. (XiaoRui, 19yrs, Female)

The previous conflict Xiaorui remembered directly affected her well-being when her parents were away. As Xiaorui looks back on this time, she remembers it as complicated and that she did not like her grandmother, although relations with her are "fine" now. Yet, her mother decided to return:

...In the end, she was worried too much about me, so she returned home when I was 7yrs old. You don't know how happy I was that day; I hugged her and didn't want to let her go.

Xiaorui conveys her joy when her mother returned. Relief and security emanate from her description and not wanting to "let her (mother) go" evokes a powerful re-connecting of child and mother.

Bing's and Xiaorui's stories show that often parents have limited choice in who can look after the children, and they are often caught between needing to work and needing to protect their children from family conflict and power struggles. The two mothers in these extracts found a way to be with their child (floating or returning). For the participants, they portray a sense of being a helpless child and harmed in these battles. The insights show how being a left-behind child in rural China is shaped by the broader family context, and the specific individuals with whom the child is left. These family contexts matter for the well-being of the left-behind child. Xiaorui's and Bing's accounts tell us it is that environments can render the left-behind child vulnerable.

However, more positive experiences with grandparents were reported. For example, Jun described how her paternal grandparents cherished him more after his mother left, despite their previous conflicts with his mother. Jun's story of family conflicts was presented as "common" in left-behind families as there was often no-one to mediate between wives and other family members:

...Once my maternal grandfather and my mother got into an argument over some verbal dispute and then had a fight. It was so common in the countryside when the men were away from the house, because there was no one who played the role of a mediator in my family to manage conflicts as the father migrated.

Before this fight, they were always nice to each other. But that time, they did not talk for a couple days. I was a bit confused and thought they would be like, become good after they talked. I was aware of my mother's migration plan but did not know when. However, after this fight, my mother migrated to my father's city. He asked my mother to stay to calm down the situation. Also, because of increasing needs for money, they stayed in the city until now. Our life was the same after my mother migrated; my grandparents treated us as usual. I even thought they cherished us more, they cooked us what we liked to eat, never mentioned their arguments, and

just asked us to study well to repay my mother. I figured this was because of us, they protected us from the adults' war, they did their best for us. (Jun, 25yrs, Male)

He witnessed how other extended kin played a part in his life as a left-behind child conveying how lucky he felt to have this family, even though his parents had left. Seeing the efforts that the whole family made even after conflicts, and the daily evidence (e.g. cooked food they liked, cared for more, being treated even nicer by his grandparents) showed him the strong and caring family system around him. He felt his grandparents rose above the conflict "*because of us*" and did "*their best for us*". It inspired him to show more understanding of his family:

... It may be because they felt sorry for us for not having parents around at a such young age, or for the conflict they had. They kept their fights just between them, never tried to annoy us, or treat us badly. Because I saw some other elderly people did so to other children like us. That is very sad. Everything was going well, and they seemed to forget that conflict. Recalling back, I think they did things wisely, they are sensible and cooperative people, so even though there were no parents around, my left-behind life was not affected by their previous conflict.

Hence, for Jun, his extended family were a protective force who acted with wisdom and sensibility to ensure that he was not a casualty of adult conflict. He saw and felt, even as a child, this protection which contributed to Jun feeling his childhood life even with parents around was not affected by these historical conflicts.

From Bing's, Xiaorui's, and Jun's stories of living with extended family during parental migration, it shows that, who you are left-behind with, and the relationship between your parents and them, matter, and that even relatively small arguments between adults could evolve into cascading impacts on the left-behind children. Moreover, the experiences of left-behind children can vary depending on the state of the family system before or during the period of separation. Having a strong and caring family system before migration had positive effects on some participants when they were left-behind. Also, the carers' willingness to protect the child rather than harm the child was crucial for some participants, as indicated by Jun's and Xiaorui's stories. It also shows that if parents effectively manage family conflicts before and during migration, this may diminish the impact on the left-behind child. When the family system was well managed before or during left-behind period, some left-behind children did have a positive experience of family and felt what 'family' means or the cohesion of the family; others could not wait to separate more from their family. It once again shows that the extended family experience really adds to the legacy of the left-behind experience, and that the Chinese norms for family norms are not actually upheld in some migration families.

5.2.2.2 Competing for love

The second theme from participants' experiences of Context A relates to living with their relatives' children and / or with other left-behind children in that family. How they had been treated by their relatives led some participants to see competition, rejection, power struggles, and injustice in what they thought was a united family that stayed and supported each other in difficult times. It further contributed to participants redefining the meaning of extended family, and emphasised the difficulties experienced by left-behind children in the extended family setting. Participants often perceived themselves as "invisible" or "unimportant" through the experiences of living with their relatives and other left-behind children, and influenced subsequent negative self-perceptions. Being unfairly treated and invalidated by carers raised self-doubts like "am I not a good child?" or "was it because I didn't behave well?".

This experience was particularly poignant for two participants who, through their left-behind experiences, held resentment towards their relatives. Huixin expressed how unfair treatment had taken place during her time with her extended family, and how much that had upset her:

...After floating with my parents for two years, I was sent home to live with my uncle's family and paternal grandparents. They were very nice with me in the beginning until they had their own child. Everyone seemed to like this boy more than me. I felt it was maybe because I am a girl, but maybe because I did not behave well? I could feel a little difference before and after. So, I never liked my cousin, even now, because I felt because of him, all my 'privileges' gone. They still offered me food and a place to live, but they did not talk to me as they used to do. My uncle's wife asked me to stay away from their kid, but I did not do anything. I thought that I was invisible and unimportant; sometimes I felt like 'was my fault?'. (Huixin, 22yrs, Female)

Huixin perceived as a child that the family around her had changed in their orientation to her and that love had been reallocated to the new arrival. She may have been a casualty of the priority of boys in Chinese families, as "Everyone seemed to like this boy more than me". Huixin tried to make sense of this change by questioning whether she had been behaving badly as she did feel a sense of tension and losing her "privileges". She felt "unimportant" and "invisible". Huixin's feelings were more upset when her uncle blatantly asked more from her parents for their own benefit:

Also, they asked for extra money from my parents and said it was all for me, and my parents agreed. I knew this because I heard their discussion about money. However, this money was not spent on me; instead, it was spent on their son. Their son was taken the money that I should have. My grandmother had known about it, but she did not say anything, yet she was supposed to do something, maybe because my uncle's family was in charge of the family though my uncle migrated later. But we are all their grandchildren, love should be equal. Isn't it? I tried hard to want more attention and more attention, but it never worked because...I did not understand at the time because I was too little, but now, I think I know the reason. My parents were afraid that

if they refused their request, they would not have taken care of me well. I understand their compromise and know it was not my fault. Now, I do not talk with my uncle and my cousin often because he does not deserve that. My parents took me to their city after half a year.

The key point of Huixin's narrative was how, as a child, she knew there was something wrong and unfair in her circumstance, but she could not figure it out. Looking back as an adult gave Huixin a new understanding – that migrant parents can feel just as helpless as the left-behind child, and that the extended family can easily turn the situation to their advantage. Huixin portrayed her upset about her grandmother not reaching out as *"she was supposed to do something"* as *"love should be equal"*. Huixin *"tried hard to want more attention and more attention"*, describing the competition between her and her cousin, and how other children and extended kinships shaped the impact on left-behind children. Huixin's account suggests that power struggles in the family can affect the left-behind child and can be passed onto the younger generation.

Huixin's story also revealed the tradition in practice that, with age, elderly parents become dependent on their adult children and their family for financial and emotional support, especially if they live with them. This can result in a loss of power and control within the family dynamics for the elderly yet simultaneously the gaining of more power and independence in family decisions. So, in Huixin's case, her grandmother was not able to challenge the uncle as her *"uncle's family was in charge of the family"*. For Huixin, the feelings of being invisible, unwanted, and powerless in that situation were the consequences of being 'left again' by her parents when they allowed her to be 'left-behind' even with those relatives. When these participants (Huixin, Bing, Xiaorui) reflect with an adult's knowledge, they can make sense that their parents faced with few options, and economic survival comes before meeting the child's needs.

Likewise, Lu he realized, boys as privileged, and reported how she was aware of the differential treatment between her and her brother. She detected unjust treatment as a child, but had no resources to address this:

...my aunt was nice to me, but compared to my brother, she liked him more because I am a girl. She has no son, so she treated my brother as her son. She brought new clothes for him but asked me to wear the old clothes and told me they were new, she thought I didn't know, but I knew.

I didn't say anything to my parents, because...I think I did but they didn't say anything, just asked me to be good child, I thought maybe I was not good enough. I remained silent; it was easier. Also, I didn't like my brother (laugh), that's funny, maybe because of him, I compared and saw that I wasn't treated well. I wanted the same kind of favour that my brother had, but I am a girl and maybe I was not good enough? I know now it is not because I was not good enough, it is because of them. (Lu, 26yrs, Female)

Lu's left-behind life with her aunt taught her the value of a girl in Chinese culture. Lu recalls telling her parents but *'they didn't say anything, they just asked me to "be good child"*. Lu's first attempt at help-seeking was met with appeals to *"be good"*, suggesting 'laying low' was a survival strategy, but it made her question *"maybe I was not good enough"*. She *"remained silent, it was easier"*, resonating with other participants' (Huixin, Xiaorui, and Bing) experiences of perceiving and silently tolerating injustices as a left-behind child, whilst wondering if it was their own 'badness' which was making adults treat them this way. Similar to Huxin, Lu did not like her brother, *"because of him"*, she knows she *"wasn't treated well"*. She *"compared and saw that..."*, all injustices were because she is *"a girl"* and maybe *"was not good enough"*. Like other participants (Huixin, Xiaorui, Bing), Lu reflected on this as a young adult (*"I know it is not because I was not good enough, it is because of them"*), suggesting her newly acquired adult perspective made sense of this as injustice and competition and that she was an innocent in the situation, yet one who was without power to redress it:

I was sent to stay at my paternal grandparents' house while my aunt claimed to be too busy, but my brother got to stay with her. My grandparents had to take care of me and three of my male left-behind cousins, but they prefer the boys. Every time, they asked me to bring all the plates to the kitchen after meals, but my cousins did not have to do anything, and they were like a king, watching TV, dropping their bowls in front of me, asking me to do all of things, I was like a waitress. My cousins were well aware of their special treatments, getting all the love and care from our grandparents without lifting a finger, they can do all the naughty stuff without being punished, like sometimes stealing my pencil, tripping me up on purpose. I wanted to have those privileges, so I thought if I did more chores, maybe my grandparents liked me more. Also, I tried study hard to get higher scores than my cousin to simple to show I was better and wished they loved me more. But it didn't work, it never worked.

As for Huixin, Lu's experience while living with her grandparents showed that how other left-behind children live in the same household raised rivalry in competing love and care from caregivers for a left-behind child, and how that shaped his/her left-behind experiences. Through Lu's narratives, it is interesting to know that Lu's left-behind cousins knew their privileges and used that privilege to deliver more harm to Lu, which points again to the disempowerment of the left-behind child themselves. Lu's attempts (e.g. doing more chores, getting higher grades), were her way, as a left-behind child in an isolating environment, to hold on to hope that she was unconditionally loved and cared for. However, Lu realized *"it never worked"* as she took the courage to ask her grandparents why...

I asked my grandparents, like, "Why is it always me?" And they snapped back, saying, "Why are you so lazy? Don't you wanna help? Do I have to take care of all of you?!" It left me so confused. I kept asking myself, but I gave up because there was no answer. I was so disappointed and lonely, as I thought they were different from my aunt, they also like me as the way they liked my cousins,

maybe they were too afraid of my uncle (her cousins' father), or they were too tired to care for four children at the same time. But maybe they just don't like me.

Then, after a year and a half, my parents whisked me off to their city, and I've hardly gone back there since. Now, I know it was not my fault and that I was not lazy, they just thought it made it easier for them to control me.

Lu's experience was one of feeling powerless in her maltreatment, and the attempt to speak up led to the apportioning of blame to her ("*why are you so lazy*"). She tried so hard to make justifications for her grandparents' maltreatment yet the consequences of her being never cherished made her realize maybe "*they just don't like me*". Her wish '*they*' (Lu's grandparents) *also like me as the way they liked my cousins'* shows how desperate she was of wanting to be loved and cherished. Lu's story shows that the left-behind life was not easy and was influenced by multiple factors, including who you were left-behind with, gender, whether there were other left-behind children living in the same household. In addition, it shows that children with non-biological carers are at risk of being less cared for than biological children in the same household. Furthermore, when injustice happens among carers, it is hard for the parents to intervene. Lu acknowledges this with an adult perspective and so she "*hardly went back there since*".

5.2.2.3 Left-behind children as tools of seizing control and power

The third theme emerging around participants' experience of Context A was associated with living with their extended kin (paternal grandparents), and how participants perceived that they wanted to gain control and power by cutting off their parent-child relationships. Some participants often felt placed in a 'complicated' situation and being imprisoned in family feuds, and they felt aggrieved and marginalised in the broader family context.

Zhihong's story provided a perspective that is essential to understand the situation of left-behind children living in large families and their conflicts. Zhihong described how the historical conflicts between previous generations were passed down to the subsequent ones, and how that affected him as a left-behind child.

I was sent by my parents from the floating city to my hometown and lived with my uncle sometimes and my paternal grandparents. During the time of living with my paternal grandparents, I could feel they did not like my mother, and that kind of resentfulness was projected onto me. I didn't know why they didn't like my mother or me, until... (Zhihong, 23yrs, Male)

Zhihong described how, as a child, he had a visceral sense ("could feel") of the attitudes his grandparents held towards his mother, and how he became a casualty of that. There is a sense of a silent reality for Zhihong that became clearer through a subsequent story he relayed:

It was a winter when I was about to go to boarding primary school, and the school asked each family to prepare warm mattress for us to go through the cold winter. So I told this to my grandparents. One day, I saw, they brought a new fluffy blanket back, and I thought that must be for me! I was so happy, because it looked so warm, and must be very comfortable to sleep with. But, it wasn't for me - it was for another grandchild that they had to take care of. Mine was an old sheet layers combination that they sewed together. It was not enough for me to live through the winter. I was so upset and confused, so I called my mother and asked her why. She explained that it was due to historical conflicts with them but did not tell me in detail. She did not like them either but had no one else to ask to take care of me. She just asked me to ignore it, and told me, whenever I felt bad, I could call her. She also asked my uncle to get me a similar blanket. She seemed to have a fight with my grandparents after that.

The incident of the blanket is one of meeting basic care needs for warmth, yet it is one where Zhihong is the casualty family fractures. Zhihong knew as a child that he had been given inadequate warmth in the sewn together sheets and was confused by the inequality in his grandparents' provision. The story shows the silent hoping for equal love and attention between left-behind children living in the same household. It is a positive in Zhihong's account that he could ask for explanations from his mother. Yet her account consolidated Zhihong's position with his grandparents as unacceptable, but without solution ("she asked me to ignore it"). Given the family's subsequent fall-out after the blanket incident, Zhihong was placed in a no-win situation, as he explained:

...And whenever I called my mother, my grandparents would come close to me and try to listen. And whenever I finished, they would ask me 'what have you told your mother?'. I replied, 'nothing'. Then she would say 'your parents are too busy to listen to your story; you would do better not to tell them everything'. I felt it was a threat, like I had to listen to her. It seemed like she spoke it in a nice way, but I could feel it. So whenever I called my mother, I would find a place to hide to not let them hear what we talked about. After this first event with the blanket happened, I never told my mother about my grandparents, because I didn't want them to fight, or my mother to cry. So when something similar happened, I would try to swallow it. Because I had to balance these two relations.

The core experience of living with his grandparents as a left-behind child was the cutting-off and control of his child-mother relationship. "I could feel it" creates a picture of a certain ethos and mood in the house that he was aware of but which he could not fully explain. Feeling responsible to navigate complex adult feuds was the main struggle in his left-behind experience.

Another participant, Yunwen, similar to Zhihong, expressed how parent-guardian relationship influenced her well-being while being left-behind. Yunwen explained how Yunwen was completely cut-off from her relationship with her mother by her grandparents and father, leading to her misunderstanding her mother for years as a left-behind child. Yunwen explained the impact on her:

...as far as I could remember things, my mother was a bad mother. She refused to take care of me, left me with my paternal grandmother and my aunt, and she disappeared. She was being unreasonable, and divorced my father, never showing her responsibility as a mother should have. She liked to quarrel with my grandmother and make her angry, not giving me any financial support. None of my father's relatives liked her, and neither did I. I used to curse her just because I didn't want to see her. My grandmother took all the control over my life as my guardian, like a true mother. She didn't like my mother to come close to me. So, I had never been close with her, as there was nothing good of her. (Yunwen, 22yrs, Female)

Yunwen's account portrays how negatively she felt about her mother when she was a left-behind child. She lists her mother's perceived failings, when judged against what mothers ought to be like, and she describes her mother as difficult and unreasonable. In this context, Yunwen grandmother had taken up a maternal role, which she describes as taking "all the control". Yunwen account has elements of resentment as her life as a left-behind child was heavily shaped by her strong, negative view of her mother who "refused to take care of me". However, things changed...

... Everything changed when I went to middle boarding school, because I was far away for my grandparents and my mother had an opportunity to come to visit me. One day, she came to me, miserably, with her pale and sad face; I could see her life was not going well. I felt sorry for her, and this kind of empathy pushed me to want to know more about her. She told me - how she found my father's affair, the efforts she made to save their marriage, and how my father and my grandparents made my mother give up my custody. Also, my father had financial stability. So, in the end, the court gave custody of me to my father.

Despite the pre-existing breakdown in the relationship between Yunwen and her mother, she speaks up for her mother in a way that grasps a sense of injustice, and understanding:

...After hearing of these, I was totally shocked, I couldn't believe the truth was this. I felt I was controlled by my father and grandparents, because everything I 'knew' was because they had told me. They stole my mother from my childhood. They judged my mother first and then asked me to think like them. I was never the first person to know what was going on. What my mother said is real. But it is hard to say, I kept my mother's truth secret within me, because I didn't want to hurt my grandparents' feelings, or turn against them, or even ask why, as they have always cared for me. But it is sad, this sadness is too much for me - like something you believed for such

a long time, suddenly collapsed. And that made me miss the best opportunity to be with my mother, or stand by her, she has been alone to fight all of this.

Yunwen described a range of emotions on hearing this story - shock, feeling robbed, conflicted, sadness and regret. As a middle boarding school pupil, Yunwen would have been between 12 to 15yrs. She conveyed how her belief about her mother until then "*suddenly collapsed*", bringing with it heartbreak over missed opportunities for a mother-child relationship till then. Yunwen accounts resonate with Bing, Zhihong, Jun about the significant impacts that guardian-parents' relationships can have on their left-behind experience. It is a positive in Yunwen's account that she could manage family conflicts into silence and peace. Yet for Yunwen, not being able to be a child having bundling affection with her mother was her life burden, which brought harm and trauma into her left-behind experience.

Most sadly, for Yunwen, was being caught in the middle of adult feuds at the expense of the ruined relationship with her mother, and that loss experienced as a profound and 'ambiguous' loss - the loss was she never could go back with as a child to be "with my mother", or stand by her, or even "rebuild a relationship with her". All of this had s long-term negative effects for her, as she explained:

...The saddest thing was when I wanted to rebuild my relationship with my mother, it was too late for both of us. She knew nothing about my life, and I did not know about hers. So we were like two magnets with opposite magnetism. We were willing to restart, but it would never get close. I could no longer be her daughter, and she has no chance of being my mother again. That is too traumatic (sobbing).

Acknowledging her loss, and powerlessness about the mother-child relationship caused double harm for Yunwen; and acknowledging that she had to carry on that broken relationship and in secret for the rest of her life was another long-term significant harm for her. Yunwen's story shows the layers of hurt and trauma that can be added to the left-behind experience. The feeling of being responsible for family struggles and having to choose the proper decision in the already emotionally difficult situation were the results of the complexities of fragmented, complicated family relationships and broken parents' marriage, when they allowed extended family to seize control over their children.

Zhihong's and Yunwen's accounts illustrate the different ways in which extended kin exerted power on left-behind children. The complexities of fractured families involved left-behind children into a 'shut down' situation ("*kept secret within me*" or "*try to swallow it*"). Care was experienced as inadequate and unequal compared to other left-behind children living in the

same household. Pre-existing conflicts in the family prior to migration caused hurt and trauma, adding to the difficulty of the left-behind experience. In turn, for Zhihong and Yunwen, their understandings of their extended family members underwent a change in perception, from natural child-kinship relationship to a sense of rejection and/or betrayal as a result of being caught up in the complexities of the fractured family. Some participants' accounts showed that the child often got caught up in family feuds while they were just reaching puberty and the child had to figure out everything on their own while being left-behind (i.e., balancing adults' relations, keeping themselves silent).

5.2.3 Aspects of Context B and its Themes

This section describes key aspects of Context B before reporting themes associated with it. In this context, one of the left-behind children's parents had migrated and one remained as a main caregiver. Paternal/maternal grandparents, uncles or aunts had no or partial caring responsibilities when parents migrated. Participants described several aspects of this family context, which are important to understand prior to outlining the themes.

Chinese culture has defined roles of extended kin; asking them to look after the left-behind children for brief periods of time is perceived as normal in China (Biao, 2007). Elders, especially in-laws, are supposed to be respected, and sons should protect their mothers and siblings over their wives and children (Ye & Pan, 2011). This was especially true as extended kin got involved in the financial problems of the nuclear families where the father had migrated and the mother stayed behind to care for the child.

Two participants reported this situation where their fathers had migrated, and mothers were with participants. They expressed feelings unimportant and insecure when their families involved them in money conflicts with extended kin, and both reported significant impacts on the finance and family relationships. They perceived that severe financial difficulty in the left-behind period (e.g. having no proper meal over festivals or little money to pay for education) was caused by extended family. Often, this difficulty had collateral damage by, for example, causing both parents to migrate, and/or weakening the relationship between the left-behind children and their parents. Additionally, these tensions and conflicts with kin were significantly amplified during the left-behind period and led to a complete disintegration in their relationships. Only two participants' family members (Yujie's younger brother under this theme, Jun's stories in Chapter 5.1) reported a positive experience with relatives while being left-behind. Most participants reported feeling bullied, isolated and unfairly treated in a family that were

supposed to support each other. Therefore, a theme was generated to capture this – being isolated and feeling helplessness.

5.2.3.1 Being isolated and feeling helplessness

Limin's father had migrated before she was born, and she lived with her mother and maternal grandparents. She reflected on how her aunts and uncles were continuously 'borrowing' money from her parents for their own benefit and how that disintegrated her family and led her mother to migrate and refuse to come home for more than three years.

... My parents used to have a very good relationship, until they started quarrelling because my father's siblings refused to pay off my father's paternal grandparents' debt. And that should be distributed to his four siblings – they are richer than us, yet they asked my father to pay it off, as the most favorite son in the family, my father didn't say no, but left us in hunger. (Limin, 25yrs, Female)

For Limin, her extended family were considered troublemakers, causing her parents to live on the financial edge for many years and leaving her in worried her parents might split up. Sadly, Limin felt her mother was bullied by their relatives:

My parents quarrelled a lot, which made me feel like they might divorce (they did in the end). I felt so stressed as I wanted them to be as good as before. When my father migrated, he would come and shout at my mother and ask where the money is. My uncles and aunts are cold-blooded and have no conscience. Although my mother fought back and rejected them, they still got what they wanted as my father thought we were family. At night, I always heard my mother's long sigh Life was a mess; my father was not with us and his siblings bullied us. I felt so isolated, so did my mother, she must have felt so helpless at that time. So, in the end, my mother could not tolerate it anymore and she left for migration, to subsidize the family, and to escape from my uncles and aunts. My parents took 5 years to pay off the debt and our life was terribly poor.

For Limin, extended relatives caused the destruction of her family, and her complete abandonment and strong cultural norms drove her father's sense of financial duty to pay the debt. Limin reported the need for help from relatives yet did not receive any. She portrayed how disappointed she felt in them. She described her relatives as "coldblooded" and having "no conscience", presenting the feelings of injustice and anger in that situation. Limin's account suggests children's well-being was of low priority behind family obligations and duties, and that she, as a left-behind child, was at the lowest rank order, as extended kin was described as "part of family". As Limin looked back as an adult, that sense of anger and disappointment caused by relatives encouraged to understand her mother more:

...I have been feeling sorry for my mother; she must be very disappointed with relatives and my father. She has tried what she can to protect us. Until now, except my father, no one is willing to talk with them.

Limin justifies the situation with an adult perspective that her mother has "tried her best" and "no one is willing to talk to" her relatives, representing her continuing indignation towards her extended kin. Limin's story shows that nuclear family and extended family are interconnected, and if one was affected by family conflicts, the nuclear family would also be affected. Limin as a left-behind child with no power and had no parents to protect her, and money issues with extended family participants were seen as the major problems for increasing the vulnerability of her left-behind life.

Likewise, Delin's father migrated to support his family and left Delin at 9yrs, and Delin's siblings and his mother behind. Life was peaceful and nice. However, Delin reports terrible life changes after his kin blatantly asked for money for personal needs:

...My father migrated to subsidise my family before any problems happened. But in that period of time, our finances was not bad. My mother and siblings were at home. I had friends to play with. My parents were nice to each other, and I was happy, like nothing troubled me. Until my father's siblings started to ask for money because they failed in business and owned a huge amount of money. My father didn't say no. Because he thought, as a family, we have to share all the good and bad. So in the end, the money he earned was given mostly to them, he only left us a little, which was not enough. (Delin, 25yrs, Male)

Delin explained the extent of the impact:

Over festivals, we even could not have a proper meal, and my mother was ill, we needed money to buy medicine and our education, there are three children in our family. When my aunts and uncles did not get what they wanted, they made a fuss, crying and shouting. My father was not home, only my mother and me dealt with it. Also, my mother's illness was getting worse, and I had to look after her, none of them helped us. When my father took three years to pay off their debt and returned home, they did not even bother to say 'thank you'. I thought my father was a coward as he was the one who brought up all of troubles and he had made my mother and us suffer. It did not matter to me, but it mattered to my mother. I had a few fights with my father because of this. My parents often quarrelled.

Delin illustrates a range of money-related issues generated by his extended kin and how that affected his left-behind and family life, i.e., having no proper meal over festivals, not enough money to pay education and medicine. As for Limin, Delin felt his extended family caused the disintegration and weakened family relationship and father-child affection, and more

importantly, diminished the quality of his left-behind life. He portrays a sense of injustice, helplessness, and isolation, resonating with Limin's, Yunwen's, Zhihong's and Bing's experiences about the significant impact that the grudges between core family and extended family could have on left-behind experience. It also shows that Chinese culture endorses extended kin to bluntly ask for money and the left-behind family faces dilemmas about saying "no", despite meaning increased poverty for their own immediate family.

Interestingly, both Limin's and Delin's stories expressed more about the impudence of extended family than their fathers' perceived mismanagement of finance. Their story shows that, in Chinese culture, often parents do not perceive much choice when it comes to dealing with issues related to the interests of extended kin, and that they are often caught in a moral dilemma between fulfilling the obligations and duties of their birth family and their own family. Both their mothers had tried to protect their children (migration or fighting) yet this came with consequences (parental separation, poor father-child relationship). Their stories show that, financial strain is often present in left-behind family and that children in these situations suffered not only directly from being left-behind but also from not being prioritized by their migrant parents.

Different from others, Yujie reported that her younger brother received good treatment when her parents migrated. Yujie's parents moved to a city for business and she lived in a boarding secondary school in the same city while her younger brother had to continue his education for six months in his hometown. Her bother expressed how well he was being cared for by relatives.

...my brother said to me, he was so happy that we were not at home, because he was cared very well by my relatives. He lived at home alone, but he didn't have to do anything. Everything was taken care of by my relative. For example, my aunt sometimes came to visit him, or asked him to come to her place (because we were living not far). They my uncles' family took care of him every well. He was very happy despite being left-behind. I was also every happy for him, because it seemed like he was cared for very well by my relatives, even only for half of a year. My parents are therefore grateful to my uncle's family. (Yujie's brother, 24yrs, Male)

Offering dedicated food and helping do chores were all simple gestures that implied his brother was being cherished and felt important. It also indicates that being cared for by relatives is not always experienced as unfair or inadequate. Supportive and caring relatives could have a significant positive effect on left-behind children.

In summary, Limin's and Delin's experiences revealed how cultural norms and money could lead to extended family exploiting them. Their mothers were powerless within the family disputes despite being physically present. Two participants' chronic feeling of isolation and powerlessness

stemmed from not being prioritized by their own parents. In contrast, Yujie's brother's story shed light on the potential positive outcomes that extended family could bring.

5.2.4 Discussion

This chapter explores the way in which extended kins were felt by participants to shape their experiences of being a left-behind child. Finance, cohabitation with other left-behind children within the same household, and family conflicts that occurred prior to migration often frustrated situations for participants and their migrant parents. The nuclear and extended families were perceived by some participants as highly interconnected and that they were affected by familial perturbations. Participants' stories highlighted the experience of living with grandparents which included themes of isolation, manipulation and injustice, and sometimes the development of negative self-perceptions as being bad or worthless. Some stories revealed the positive experience of living with caring extended kin, suggesting who the child is left-behind with, matters. The discussion will focus on: the positive and negative effects in the care of extended kin; the role of remittances in childrearing amidst family conflict, powerless navigating in family feuds; understanding the origins of power controls; exploring the competition among left-behind children within the same family.

5.2.4.1 Positive and negative effects in the care of extended kin

The main findings of the present study in relation to experiences of care with kin are consistent with previous studies. As in the present study, the majority of caregivers for left-behind children reported in other studies are typically elderly grandparents and that both of the parents migrated (Chang et al., 2019; Ye & Pan, 2011). Other studies show that when both parents migrate and grandparents act as caregivers for left-behind children, grandparents are highly involved in the lives of their grandchildren and play an important role in the children's development and daily lives (Li et al., 2021; Song et al., 2018; Xing et al., 2017). Studies have consistently reported that grandparents have mixed effects on left-behind children but that most experiences for these children are negative (Biao, 2007; Tao, 2016; Xing et al., 2017).

Several studies have reported positive acts from extended kin towards left-behind children, including meeting their basic survival needs by providing meals and shelter (Chen et al., 2017; Guan & Deng, 2019; Wen & Jia, 2012; Zhao et al., 2018). Additionally, research has indicated that grandparents can have a positive but not significant impact on the educational and psychological development of left-behind children (Lu, 2012; Song et al., 2018). For example, positive grandparent-child relationships (in the context of migration) have been associated with increased life satisfaction, improved school engagement, and enhanced self-esteem for children

(Lu, 2012; Song et al., 2018). Grandparents have also been recognized as potential sources of emotional support, acting as a buffer against depression and other adversities faced by left-behind children (Li et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2016). However, while evidence suggests that left-behind children do benefit from the care provided by grandparents, it is important to note that grandparents do not fully substitute the roles played by parents because they cannot form distinctive parent-child attachment (Sun et al., 2015; Ye, 2011). There is a broad agreement in many studies that left-behind children are still subject to higher risks of negative outcomes when they are cared for by grandparents (Lu, 2012; Ye, 2011).

The positive effects of grandparent care highlighted in previous studies align with two participants' accounts in the present study. Nevertheless, previous studies often mixed the positive caregiving from grandparents with other factors such as the child's age at being left-behind and the family's economic status, making it challenging to comprehend the specific ways in which grandparents offer positive caregiving. In contrast, the present study delved into the positive caregiving experiences from extended kin in greater detail. Although only two participants reported such experiences (Jun's, Yujie's brother's stories), they provided an in-depth account of how extended kin offered care while both parents were away, such as cooking the children's favourite food and protecting children during family conflicts as revealed in the theme of *'Feeling harmed or protected in family conflicts.'* The findings show that neglect, although widespread, is not the default for some left-behind children; there are positive experience while in the care of extended kin.

On the other hand, it has been well-documented that grandparental care can have negative impacts on left-behind children. This is consistent with present study's findings. Some studies have reported that grandparents often struggle to provide adequate healthcare and meet the various needs of left-behind children, including supervision and nurturing communication. For example, Robinson et al. (2008) found that grandparents frequently overlooked the importance of a healthy diet and a safe nurturing environment, leading to issues such as low weight and growth retardation in left-behind children. Tao (2016) discovered that grandparents might encourage poor eating habits in left-behind children by compensating for the absence of their parents, such as offering them only their favourite, high-calorie foods. Ye and Pan (2011) highlighted that grandparents' limited cooking skills and dietary habits, such as vegetarianism or skipping breakfast, resulted in irregular mealtimes and nutritional deficiencies for left-behind children, particularly during busy harvest seasons. Chang et al. (2019) revealed that grandparents were often incapable of supervising the child's homework or engaging in effective communication, due to their lower educational background and dialect-based communication yet left-behind children only learn Mandarin in the school, which limited interaction and

increased isolation for the children. The study also reported that grandparents limited physical energy often resulted in reduced engagement and a preference for leaving the children to play alone or watch television (Chang et al., 2019).

Overall, these studies suggest that being cared for by grandparents is mostly negative, and it was associated with reduced physical care, and poorer school performance among left-behind children. This negative caregiving appeared in a way that is related to grandparents' ability, these limited competences challenged them to provide optimal care and support for left-behind children, hence might increase these children's vulnerability while being left-behind. However, a significant difference lies in the fact that none of the participants, in the present study, perceived negative caregiving was linked to the competence of their grandparents. Instead, they perceived it from a familial aspect, such as being due to family tension and power struggles, which were felt to explain why they were treated poorly while being left-behind. This finding shed light on additional potential factors that prompt poor caregiving from extended kin.

In psychological and emotional aspects, research has indicated that left-behind children, when cared for by grandparents, are often more susceptible to experiencing negative emotional outcomes (Tang et al., 2018). Several studies suggested that such children were more likely to encounter feelings of loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem (Jia & Tian, 2010; Sun et al., 2015; Tang et al., 2018). Other studies also highlighted a higher risk of neglect or abuse when children were looked after by grandparents than when they were looked after by their parents (Chang et al., 2017; Cheng & Sun, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). However, these studies have generally approached the issue by considering the effects of both parental migration as equivalent or similar to the effects of being cared for by grandparents, given most of left-behind children are cared by grandparents. These studies tended to simply attribute the poor outcomes of being cared for by grandparents to being left-behind by both parents; they have not reported practically how being cared by grandparents is linked to their poor outcomes, i.e. reporting specific ways through which grandparental care influences left-behind children. For example, Cheng and Sun (2014) examined the correlation between anxiety and depression in left-behind children. They found that the anxiety and depression experienced by children without both parents present were associated with the absence of adequate care from grandparents. However, the researchers did not provide any information regarding the specific caregiving circumstances by grandparents.

Furthermore, the caregiving provided by grandparents is often intertwined with other family demographics, such as poor economic status, strained parent-child relationships, or prolonged separation from parents. This means that other factors may be at play when assessing the impact

of grandparental care on left-behind children. The present study was able to elucidate how extended kin shaped the lives of left-behind children. Similar to healthcare and educational aspects, family conflicts and power control were felt to be intertwined with negative caregiving from extended family members. This is explored further in subsequent sections of this chapter in 5.2.4.3 Powerless navigating in family feuds and 5.2.4.4 Understanding the origins of power controls.

5.2.4.2 The role of remittances in childrearing amidst family conflicts

The present study revealed that left-behind children often experienced family conflicts, tensions or adult feuds between migrant parents and extended kin. Many participants talked more about family conflict and how it influenced their left-behind lives than they talked about being apart from parents, indicating it was a very significant part of their left-behind lives. Moreover, as perceived by participants, these conflicts often arise in situations involving remittances and child-rearing. Consistent with the present study's findings, previous studies also reported the prevalence of left-behind children experience of family conflicts, tension, or feuds between migrant parents and grandparents (Wen & Lin, 2011; Ye, 2011; Ye & Pan, 2011), and its association with remittances and childrearing issues (Chen et al., 2017; Ye, 2011).

With regards to remittances, previous studies have explained why insufficient remittance from the migrant parent to the family members caring for the left-behind child can generate family conflicts in Chinese families. For example, a study from the point of view of grandparents, reported that grandparents who are full-time caregivers in rural China may require fair compensation from migrant parents, given the financial, physical, and psychological cost incurred in looking after children (Cong & Silverstein, 2008, 2012). Grandparents are expected to assist their adult children in providing care in Chinese culture, however they are not necessarily expected to take on a custodial role as a full-time caregiver (Cong & Silverstein, 2008, 2012; Liu, 2014). Financial compensation reflects 'time-for-money' reciprocity, whereby grandparents' time investment has changed into cash flow as a compensation for services. Insufficient remittances from migrant parents can break the expected reciprocity in the exchange, leading to relationship strains and conflict between migrant parents, grandparents and left-behind children (Cong & Silverstein, 2012). Some studies reported that grandparents sometimes do not receive adequate financial compensation from their migrant children and have to work on their own land to make a living to meet basic needs. This may leave them having increased pressure and little financial support in childrearing, negatively influencing their relationship with migrant

parents (Zhang, 2011, as cited by Chen et al., 2017; Ye, 2011). Altogether, these studies highlight the pivotal role of remittances in family relationships playing around left-behind children.

Consistent from previous studies, remittance was also felt to be related to family conflicts in the present study. The present study, however, is unsure whether insufficient remittances is related to family conflicts as none of participants perceived that migrant parent lacked remittances to the grandparents. In contrast, from participants' stories, their grandparents often demanded more money than necessary from the migrant parents and spent it on other family members, rather than on the participants themselves as seen in the theme '*Feeling harmed or protected by family conflicts*'.

In addition to recognizing the role of insufficient remittances as a potential reason for family conflicts, the present study identified novel patterns in the association between remittances and family conflicts, observed across different caregiving Contexts (A, B). In Context A, where grandparents assumed the primary responsibility for managing remittances, the mismanagement of remittances stemmed from their favoritism towards other family members' material needs. Consequently, some participants expressed feelings of being unwanted and unimportant. On the other hand, in Context B, left-behind children witnessed the reckless borrowing of remittances, particularly when they resided with their mothers and nearby uncles and aunts. The continuous borrowing of money by these relatives left the children with scarce resources to sustain themselves during their period of separation, resulting in a theme of '*Being isolated and feeling helplessness*'. These findings shed light on the various detrimental ways in which extended kin exploited the income of migrant families and impacted the lives of left-behind children.

These underscore the influential position that extended kin occupy within these family dynamics, while simultaneously underscoring the vulnerability of left-behind children in such circumstances. These insights challenge the prevailing notion that remittances solely serve the best interests of the child, as desired by migrant parents seeking improved lives for their children. Instead, the reality emerges that extended kin play pivotal roles in remittance-related matters, often leaving left-behind children in a state of powerlessness and caught amidst complex family dynamics.

In addition to the complexities surrounding remittances, childrearing practices have emerged as a contributing factor to family conflicts, as evidenced in both previous and present studies. Previous studies reported that conflicts often occurred on childrearing issues between migrant parents and grandparents (Chen et al., 2017; Wen & Lin, 2011; Ye, 2011), particularly between migrant mothers and their mothers-in-law (grandparents) (Yue et al., 2018). They reported that

the disagreements between mothers and their in-laws on childrearing is a persistent stressor within rural Chinese households. The prevalence of mother-in-law dominance in Chinese Confucian society can shed light on the reasons behind these dynamics. In this cultural context, mothers are expected to adhere to the instructions of their in-laws, which often results in them feeling constrained in their role as primary caregivers for the left-behind children (Yue et al., 2018; Liu, 2017). This would be amplified in rural migration families, when left-behind mothers often needed to co-habitat with their in-laws to take care of the left-behind children (Cong & Silverstein, 2008; Yue et al., 2018).

Other studies reported the detail of how tension can happen in left-behind children's families. Chen et al (2017) reported that migrant parents often have conflicting parenting styles on their children's rearing when they return; they either ignore children's wrongdoings and meet their undue material needs to compensate, or they have high expectations on children's educational performance and put a lot of pressure on caretakers. For example, migrant parents give more than necessary pocket money to the child, causing caretakers to find it difficult to supervise children (Chen et al., 2017; Ye & Pan, 2011), or migrant mother blame grandmother when their children get low grades in tests (Ye, 2011). Both of these further complicate effective supervision and controls for at-home guardians (Chen et al., 2017; Ye, 2011). As a result, grandparents and migrant parents all find it difficult to navigate the situation to meet everyone's needs, and the whole family struggles to have a friendly family environment (Chen et al., 2017; Wen & Lin, 2011). However, studies suggested that family conflict over childrearing practices may counterbalance any beneficial effects of remittances support (Cong & Silverstein, 2008; Liu, 2014).

The prevalent tension between mothers and their in-laws experienced by many participants, was captured in the themes of *'Feeling harmed or protected by family conflicts'* and *'Left-behind children as tools of seizing control and power'*, *'Being isolated and feeling helplessness'*. While previous research did not report how these familial tensions shaped the lives of left-behind children, this study sheds light on how such conflicts can manifest in childrearing practices, especially when left-behind children reside solely with extended kin. This offers a fresh viewpoint, suggesting that the guardian-parent relationship could crucially influence the quality of caregiving for left-behind children.

However, the theme of *'Feeling harmed or protected by family conflicts'* also captured that the conflict between Jun's grandfather and his mother did not result in Jun receiving less care and love; instead, Jun perceived increased affection from his grandfather. This suggests that while the guardian-parent relationship is crucial, it can be judiciously managed by caregivers, highlighting that adult conflicts do not detrimentally impact left-behind children. This offers a

fresh viewpoint: extended kin, being close at hand caregivers in comparison to distant migrants, have the advantage of proximity and availability in shaping the experiences of left-behind children. This is in line with recent study (Song et al., 2018) that found caregivers who were close at hand could effectively monitor children's behaviour, exert immediate control, and provide support, thereby influencing children's psychological and behavioural outcomes. Conversely, migrant parents attempt to monitor from afar proved less effective.

Additionally, pre-migration conflicts or tension between guardians and migrant parents were perceived to shift to and impact the participants. The findings underscore the importance of identifying guardians who will safeguard the child while also highlighting the advantage of the nearby extended kin in shaping children's left-behind experiences. Future studies need to generate more knowledge on how to help parents manage these relationships pre, during and post migration. In sum, the findings from this and previous studies critically underline the significant roles played by migrant mothers and their left-behind in-laws. Further exploration is needed to fully understand the dynamics of the relationships between guardians and extended kin and their subsequent impact on left-behind children.

5.2.4.3 Powerless navigating in family feuds

The present study revealed insights into how the majority of left-behind children navigated unfair treatment and family feuds. As reflected by all themes, these children often adopted an attitude of silence and learned helplessness, regardless of whether they were fully or partially cared for by extended kin. This indicates a trend towards adopting negative attitudes towards seeking help among the left-behind children in this study. This aligns with previous studies which reported that left-behind children were reluctant to share their troubles with guardians (Liu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019) and indicated that such children tended to adopt maladaptive strategies to handle emotional distress and physical harm, such as avoidance or suppression (Cui et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021; Yong et al., 2023). Certain studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between such strategies and anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Liao et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2021; Yong et al., 2023), and a negative correlation with self-esteem and subjective social support (Cui et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2014).

For example, Cui et al. (2021) and Liao et al. (2014) reported that left-behind children with negative attitudes towards seeking help may consequently face heightened feelings of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal tendencies, trapped in a vicious cycle of anxiety and loneliness. Moreover, according to Cui et al. (2021), perceived support had a direct and significant effect on help-seeking behaviours, and self-esteem played a significant mediating role

between perceived support and help-seeking. This implies that left-behind children lacking perceived support may be reluctant to seek help, or were likely to have negative self-worth, and those with low self-esteem may be less likely to do so, despite being supported. Furthermore, Cui et al. (2021) and Sun et al. (2021) suggested that left-behind children's willingness and ability to seek help are influenced by their evaluation of their environment, and this was related to social stigma and embarrassment, such as being labelled as unable to solve problems, or feeling reluctant to ask for help. Sun et al. (2021) discovered that some left-behind children were hesitant to seek help if they perceived their environment or people as unfriendly, as they would worry that the other person might feel negative toward them. Altogether, these studies suggest that how left-behind children navigate help-seeking is primarily related to their own willingness; social support and self-esteem also serve as influential factors in their help-seeking.

Perceived support, and negative self-perceptions, may explain partially why many participants remained silent when facing mistreatment. However, the present study offers a new insight into that silence, namely that a perception that no one is willing to help. The themes '*Left-behind children as tools of seizing control and power*' and '*Competing for love*', as evident in Zhihong's and Lu's stories, capture how they proactively sought assistance from their migrant parents when faced with mistreatment by extended kin. However, they found themselves caught in the crossfire of adult disputes, being 'pushed and pulled' around, leading to further suffering, showing how vulnerable their environment can really be.

5.2.4.4 Understanding the origins of power controls

The present study also revealed that power control was also perceived to be related to influence left-behind children's lives. Power control was introduced in Context A under the theme '*Left-behind children as tools of seizing control and power*' reflected by Yunwen's stories. It captured that grandparents appeared to gain more power by keeping their grandchildren as close as they could. The study reflected new ways through which extended kin can impact the lives of left-behind children. Despite this, to our knowledge, no existing research on left-behind children in rural China has reported such findings. However, these dynamics of power control can be explained by previous literature. The reason why elders kept their grandchildren close to them is potentially related to reciprocity. In rural China, it has been observed that grandparents get greater benefits from caring for left-behind children compared to the benefits received by the children themselves (Cong & Silverstein, 2008, 2012, Xu & Chi, 2011). In a financial aspect, evidence shows that economic development in China has altered the meaning of specific traditions, such as filial piety, from an unconditional duty to support one's elderly parents to a

form of support that is to some degree conditional on parents' earlier support to children (Cong & Silverstein, 2008). For example, by caring for their grandchildren left-behind in rural villages, grandparents enhance their adult children's economic capacity to reciprocate in the form of remittances (Sun et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2021). These remittances from migrant parents not only cover childrearing expenses but also cover their personal expenses such as medicine, health care, to compensate grandparents' efforts as substitute parent while parents migrated (Cong & Silverstein, 2008, Ye, 2011). This form of reciprocity called 'time-for-money' exchange that has also been observed in other Asian migration families (Cong & Silverstein, 2008, 2012; Frankenberg et al., 2002), which the present study has already discussed remittances in Chapter 5.2.4.2 The Role of Remittances in childrearing amidst family conflicts.

Having left-behind grandchildren around can meet the elderly's emotional needs, especially when grandchildren are boys. When both parents migrate, elders and children both experience prolonged family separation, and only can re-united temporarily at Chinese New Year (Ye, 2011). Evidence shows that grandparents often experience loneliness and are in need of family emotional support (Cong & Silverstein, 2012). Grandchildren left-behind are the natural kin that can provide affection, being left-behind in the countryside stimulate the affection between them (Xu & Chi, 2011). Lou et al. (2013) indicated that left-behind grandchildren were a potential source of emotional support for grandparents. Xu and Chi (2011) reported emotional support from left-behind grandchildren was significantly related to the elderly's life satisfaction, yet the elderly providing emotional support to left-behind grandchildren were not significantly associated with the children's life satisfaction. This means that receiving support from grandchildren had more significant impact on grandparents' life satisfactory than providing support to their grandchildren. Yi et al. (2008) reported that although left-behind grandchild care can be physically and mentally demanding for older adults, it can enhance the self-worth, pride, psychological well-being, and quality of life of elderly (Song, 2009; as cited in Lou et al., 2013). Further, support provided by grandchildren to grandparents was observed to mitigate the labor burdens of older grandparents, hence ease their pressure (Ye, 2011; Ye & Pan, 2011). Altogether, these studies suggest that left-behind grandchildren are an important comfort and emotional resource for the elderly.

The present study highlights that when left-behind children are under the care of their grandparents, they not only experience financial advantages but also benefit emotionally, as seen in Yunwen's narratives. The continual benefits obtained by grandparents when caring for these children may explain why Yunwen's grandparents sought to keep her close. However, this

aspect was not a prominent feature in the data. Additionally, the absence of perspectives from grandparents makes it challenging to explain potential reasons for negative caregiving from grandparents. Future studies should explore this topic from various perspectives, in a holistic way, to contextualize extended kin's caregiving in a broader cultural and economic dimension.

5.2.4.5 Comprehending the discoveries in the context of ecological systems theory

That left-behind children's lives were shaped by who they were left-behind with can be understood through ecological systems theory. Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, the theory is a comprehensive framework that proposes that human development is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between individuals and their multiple systems (family, community, school) (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). It posits that individual well-being is not solely a property of the child but a product of interacting and influential systems (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; Ryan, 2001). One critical aspect of the ecological systems theory is the recognition of the familial layer, also known as the microsystem, as a primary context for development (Paat, 2013). The familial layer encompasses the immediate relational environment in which individuals live and directly interact, primarily consisting of the family unit and the relationships within it (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Family systems are considered significant and influential because they provide the foundation for a range of experiences, interactions, and relationships that influence the cognitive, emotional, and social development of individuals (Hong et al., 2011). Migration of parents has resulted in extended kinships assuming significant responsibility for shaping the experiences of these children, especially for those whose both parents migrated, as shown in Context A in the theme of *'Feeling harmed or protected by family conflicts'*. More importantly, in the understanding of ecological systems theory, the interactions between participants and extended kin, the interactions between participants and their migrated parents, the interactions between migrated parents extended kinship, before or during migrations, were all significant parts of participants' recounted experience. Also, the theme *'Feeling harmed or protected by family conflicts'* captured how participants did not see their guardian as the sole factor affecting their experiences, rather, they saw the whole family system that surrounded them, how strong that system was and the cohesion between parents and extended kins assigned by parents to take care of the child, like Jun's family. Their stories highlighted the critical responsibility of parents to identify a supportive caregiver within the constraints of limited options when making the decision to migrate. This task becomes vital as it directly impacts the development of a supportive and nurturing family environment for their children.

Previous studies on left-behind children adopted ecological systems theory to emphasise the importance of interactions with individual's surrounding environments in shaping well-being. However, these studies have primarily focused on the interactions with family (only parents), community (peers), schools (Chai et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2018), to understand how that affected the individual's psychological and emotional development. For example, Li et al. (2018) adopted the ecological framework to understand how family, school, peers and community exert multi-dimension effects on the resilience of left-behind children, and highlights that the interactions between community family and school in managing these children's resilience. Chai et al. (2019) adopted an ecological lens to examine multiple processes of individual functioning and multiple contexts (school, family) to better understand the risk or protective factors for loneliness among left-behind children in China, and highlighted the connections between school and family in shaping left-behind children's emotions. Shao et al. (2018) adopted the ecological systems theory to understand how parent-child cohesion in the context of Chinese migration, alongside children's intrapersonal characteristics, can shape their developmental trajectories, which highlights the pivotal role of migrant parents and their interactions with children. However, none of these studies have tried to understand the role of extended kinships within ecological systems theory. Future studies should explore the interactions between left-behind children and their extended kin, or the interactions between migrated parents and extended kinships, to explore these interactions in shaping these children's left-behind experiences.

Ecological systems theory also emphasises understanding how human experience is influenced by culture (Algood et al., 2013; Hill, 2021). The theory posits that cultural beliefs and social norms, as part of a macrosystem, have the potential to shape family and individuals. In the context of Chinese culture, there's a high emphasis on the importance of family. This culture traditionally assigns caregiving roles to women, such as mothers and grandmothers, whilst men are seen as privileged. This is due to the belief that sons are the bearers of the family name and lineage (Cohen, 1998). Thus, elderly Chinese individuals commonly view their sons as the ideal providers of support in old age (Chen, 2001), particularly the first-born son and his family.

Traditionally, Chinese culture sees the husband as the primary breadwinner and holder of decision-making power within the family, especially when significant decisions for all family members are concerned (Miyazaki et al., 2020). It is typically expected that the daughter-in-law will provide the most hands-on support to their parent-in-laws (Cohen, 1998, Cong & Silverstein, 2008). Even though ageing parents may have restricted power or independence when it comes to decision-making within the family—especially if they are financially dependent on their adult children—Chinese culture mandates respect for elders, particularly from the daughter-in-law. If

conflicts arise between the daughter-in-law and the elders, Chinese culture anticipates the son will play a mediating role to soothe tensions, or offer unconditional support to the elderly (Xiao, 2016). Similarly, if discord occurs between a wife and her husband's siblings, the son is expected to work towards resolving these issues and restoring harmony (Xiao, 2016). The elderly often play an important role in raising grandchildren whether they are left-behind children or not, and their roles depend on how busy and burdened the parents are (He & Ye, 2014; Li, Feldman, & Jin, 2003, 2004; Short & Sun, 2003).

In the understanding of ecological systems theory, the maltreatment experienced by left-behind children can be explained to cultural values such as son-preference and the privileged status of the first-born son. These cultural traditions are commonly observed in non-migrant families. However, these cultural traditions add risk left-behind families due to lack protection of parents. The present study, the data revealed much more about the culture impacts of the care and how it lingered tension between mother and the elderly before migration, as well as how it remained and amplified in left-behind children's caregiving. The data highlighted the restrictive nature of cultural norms, which hindered migrant mothers from effectively addressing issues with their mothers-in-law. Consequently, the prevalence of son-preference and first-born privileges was magnified within migrant families, resulting in adverse consequences for left-behind children who lacked physical and psychological support from their parents. This is evident in the themes of *'Competing for love'* and *'Feeling harmed or protected by family conflicts'*, where both Lu's parents and Xiaocao's parents struggled to challenge their mothers-in-law's behavior. These findings provide a new insight into the multifaceted harm inflicted by cultural factors on migrant families. They underscore the critical and negative risks that culture imposes on left-behind children. Future research should further explore the intricate layers of harm that cultural dynamics contribute to in migrant families, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by left-behind children and their families.

5.2.4.6 Exploring the competition among Left-behind children within the same family

The present study revealed that participants often faced competition with other left-behind children sharing the same household, even with their own left-behind siblings while being cared for by extended kin. Previous studies on left-behind children have been mostly focused on the effects between migrated parents / guardians and children; not many studies have examined the effects between left-behind children who live in the same household. Based on these studies, in line with the study findings, few studies have demonstrated the negative effect between left-behind siblings, and it appears to be related to gender and the number of siblings, financial situation. For example, evidence shows that more siblings mean more competition due to limited

resource (Hu, 2012; Lee, 2011); left-behind girls faced more competition compared to their left-behind brothers in terms of education resources due to son preference in China (Lu, 2011; Lee, 2011). Moreover, Hu (2012) demonstrated that more siblings, particularly for less well-off family and left-behind girls, significantly reduced school attendance. Yang (2022) and Wang et al. (2019) reported that children who had more siblings left-behind tended to be more vulnerable (like more emotional and conduct issues), due to limited resource, yet with tough competition. Yang and Bansak (2020) observed that children with more siblings left-behind were less likely to take the bus for commuting to school, which in turn adversely affected their academic performance. This is largely due to financial constraints and the lack of time to ferry children to schools located at greater distances (Yang & Bansak, 2020).

However, these studies did not report how left-behind children's experience was influenced by other left-behind who lived in same household, such as how the limited resources increased competition between left-behind children and how this competition influenced children's left-behind lives. Theme 'Competing for love' revealed that the competition between left-behind children living in same household was fuelled by the poor adult extended kins' management and power struggles of the extended kin. Many participants perceived themselves to be vulnerable due to unequal access while being cared for by extended kin, despite fighting for attention and care. This offers a new perspective that how unequal access to care can render a child vulnerable, highlights that some left-behind children experience their lives as one to fighting for survival resources.

In contrast, other studies reported positive effects between left-behind children who lived in the same household, and that these were mostly related to education. For example, some studies found that having an older sibling might result in better school performance as the older child can supervise the younger ones' schoolwork while guardians could not (Biavasch et al., 2015; Lu, 2011; Wang, 2014). A recent study demonstrated that there are positive and mutual effects between older ($M=12.08$) and younger left-behind siblings (from 3 to 9yrs) (Bansak et al., 2022); older siblings have a significant impact on increasing younger siblings' test scores, a younger sister in school provides a strong and positive impact on the elder sibling's school performance. Other studies have indicated that older left-behind siblings offer companion and take care of younger ones while parents were away, which highlights the positive effects between left-behind siblings (Biavasch et al., 2015; Mu, 2018; Ye & Lu, 2011). In the present study, participants also did talk about their siblings supervising their homework and offering company while their guardians could not (Chapter 5.1 the significant turning point of initial separation, in Jun's and Yujie's stories), which highlights the positive influence between left-behind children. However,

both of their care renders were supportive, and one remained with their mother. Both of these participants never talked about competition while sharing limited money or food.

This can be explained through an attachment theory lens. Children may compete for resources, and in the context of attachment theory, one of these critical resources is the caregiver's attention and affection (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Both Jun and Yuejie perceived they had a good relationship with their caregivers; hence they might be less likely to engage in a competition mode. Children who feel secure in their attachment with their caregiver are less likely to engage in competitive behaviours because they trust that their needs will be met (La Valley & Guerrero, 2012; Teti & Ablard, 1989). In contrast, children who have insecure attachment may engage in competition to win the caregiver's attention and affirm their relationship (LaFreniere & Sroufe, 1985; O'Connor et al., 2019). Theme '*Competing for love*', participants eager to get attention as they felt threatened by not having it, might be because the attachment between them and caregiver (extended kin) was weak, hence they were less certain of their mothers' emotional availability for them. This highlights the putative role of caregivers in shaping potential competition between children.

Overall, both previous and the present studies highlight the mixed impact on left-behind children or siblings cohabiting in the same household. This dynamic underscores how the shared experiences and challenges of left-behind children within the same dwelling shaped their legacy. However, it's critical to note that the present study has also captured the potential vulnerability that can arise from unequal access to child caregiving. This aspect highlights the critical importance of caregivers and underscores the inequality in children's access to such care, influencing their development. This also highlights the vulnerability of left-behind children under such inequality.

This chapter, drawing from the collected data, constructs a narrative encompassing the various sources of vulnerability encountered by left-behind children. Under the care of extended kin, these children grappled with feelings of isolation, helplessness, and instances of both harm and protection. Often, they were caught in the crossfire of adults' feuds and power struggles, and at times, treated as tools. Cultural and remittances aspects too, had their distinct roles in shaping the lives of these left-behind children. Sharing the same household with other left-behind children, they witnessed unequal access in caregiving, enduring competition, and in some instances, found themselves battling for resources. This emphasises the crucial role of extended kin in providing care, and of migrant parents in identifying guardians. The importance of remittances and family conflicts in shaping family dynamics around left-behind children is also underscored.

Chapter 5.3 Family Dynamics Under Migration & The Meaning of Home

This theme in this chapter delves into the dynamics of migration patterns, offering context and relevance to the preceding chapters (Chapter 5.1 Initial Separations and their Turning Points, Chapter 5.5 The Ambivalent Parent-child relationships). It elucidates how the patterns of parental migration shape the roles and functions of parents and, in turn, how this impacts the well-being of participants and their conceptualisation of family. The objective of this chapter is to facilitate a nuanced understanding of left-behind children's experiences at a familial level.

5.3.1 Cascaded vulnerability

This section details the mother's functions and roles changes after father's migration, and how it connected with participants' lives and influenced participants' well-being. Three participants reported that how their father's migration added more responsibilities on their mothers, and how that distressed them.

This is the story of Yujie. Despite her father's migration, she believed her life remained unaffected. Nevertheless, she expressed a sense of remorse towards her father while growing closer to her mother during this time:

...My father's migration left me with few memories because my life seemed unchanged. However, my mother's responsibilities multiplied as she had to care for three children, manage the household, and handle the farm work alone since my father's departure. I vividly remember the scorching summer days when she had to go out alone to harvest the wheat. This was a task that used to be accomplished together by both my parents. I felt sorry for her, so I told myself to study hard and repay her. So, I always was the first student in the class and to study, even sometimes I didn't want to. (Yujie, 25yrs, Female)

Yujie reflects on her left-behind experience of their father's migration and its impact on her and her mother. Her mother remained significant to her although her father's absence was not. Yujie's story reveals the burden and redistribution of roles and responsibilities on her mother and the way in which Yujie's sense of duty, to do well in school, emerged strongly in reaction to the burden on her mother. Her account shows how the changes brought to families via one parent's migration can trigger significant shifts in the left-behind child's sense of themselves in their family and what they believe is expected of them in return, as well as the sense of care and love between family members left-behind.

Another participant, Kun, also experienced father-only migration, and reported different cascading effects on him and his mother:

I never paid much attention to my father's absence because my mother provided me with everything I needed. However, things changed when rumours began circulating in our village about my mother. People started gossiping, saying they had seen a middle-aged man leaving our house early in the morning and they knew my father had migrated. The rumours spread like wildfire, and it deeply affected me. I tried to explain the truth, but no one believed me. It was a distressing experience, and I started to feel upset about my father's absence as no man in the family means 'weak', so anyone can gossip you and can destroy you. Also, I hoped myself to grow up fast as a mature man to protect my mom. Maybe because of this, I wasn't very close with my father as my mother went through a lot together. (Kun, 24yrs, Male)

As for Yujie, Kun's father's migration made no difference to him as their "mother provided me with everything I needed", and he talks about the closeness that grew between them after his father left. Here, the mother is perceived to have been able to fully satisfy Kun's parental needs and so he reports so effect of being separated from this father per se. Distress did emerge, though as his father's migration created a perception that the left-behind child and mother unit were "weak", that affected the way people viewed and harmed their family. Kun's account also reveals the restricted dimensions of women's roles and highlights the significance of father's physical presence in Chinese families. Kun's growing estrangement with his father was because he missed him, but the difficulties that arose during his father's absence contributed to a sense of disconnection and distance between him and his father. We see also how the experience of being a left-behind child can shape identities; Kun hoped to become a strong and mature man to protect his mother.

Other 'cascading' effects of parental migration were recounted by Lin. He witnessed his mother shouldering additional responsibilities in handling family conflicts that were once managed by his father. Lin expressed his deep anxiety whenever his father's siblings were around, recalling the impact it had on him:

...Whenever my aunt and uncle created a mess in my house, it made me anxious and concerned for my mom, which is why I never developed a liking for them. My mom was an incredible and affectionate woman who showered me with love and support. Whenever they visited, I could sense my mother's worry, but since they were my father's siblings, she couldn't turn them away. Apart from my father, no one had the power to refuse them, so things became increasingly difficult after he migrated. I felt sorry to my mother and wanted to do something to help her, like washing dishes or watering plants. I couldn't comprehend why my father left unresolved conflicts for my mother; he could have dealt with them after his return. (Lin, 25yrs, Male)

Lin reflects the emotional impact and the changes within the family since his father's migration. Similar to Kun, Lin's story highlights the culturally expected roles and conduct of fathers in families: for Kun it meant power, for Yujie it meant guilt and for Lin it meant responsibility. As

with Kun, it was as if the absence of Lin's father generated a perceived sense of vulnerability that his relatives could abuse. Lin's story shows how family conflicts, left unprotected by the presence of a father, brought distress and difficulty to those left-behind. Stepping up to help their mother, as with other participants, was a common experience given the emotional and physical about left with mothers. Over time, Lin's feelings towards his father became critical, not for leaving him but for leaving his mother vulnerable.

5.3.2 Newly gained understanding of fathers

This sub-theme tries to capture the meaning of family as perceived by left-behind children. The sub-theme is particularly tentative and at times obscure; however, it points to how participants perceived that their family dynamics changed over the left-behind period, and their evolving view of what family means and the roles of parents.

Three participants had different feelings towards parental migration (i.e. father left first, then mother followed). Xiaocao was one such example; she was left-behind by her father and then her mother when she was 5yrs and 10yrs respectively. She expressed how heartbroken she was when her mother left compared to not feeling anything when her father left:

I forgot about my father's leaving. During the five years he wasn't at home, my mother took care of us. I didn't miss my father much because my mother gave me everything I needed. He would come back home once a year, but it didn't change much in my life. Even after he migrated, my life was usually happy because my mother provided me with love, care, and companionship. But when my mother left, I felt incredibly sad and upset. It felt like my world had been ruined by the migration. I felt abandoned, stressed, uncared for, unimportant. I lost everything, and it felt like my world collapsed. (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female)

Xiaocao's very different feelings towards her mother's vs. father's migration. Her account suggests her emotional need in relation to her father was less because, she explained, her mother "provided me with everything" that she needed. In this way, Xiaocao's mother fulfilled what she needed from parents. Her mother meant a whole family to her. Thus, when her mother migrated, her world "collapsed". These accounts show the differential impact of one vs. two parents' migration and how a close mother-child relationship is highly protective for the child.

Bing's narrative describes how his father's migration alienated them from each other, although his life remained good as long as his mother remained.

I can't remember when my father left. He was distant and not very involved in my life even before he migrated. He wasn't like other fathers who played with their children or like the ideal fathers on TV. When he came back, we didn't talk much. I nodded to show I knew he was there, but he didn't talk to me much either. However, when my mother left, I was upset and lost my appetite for a few days. I didn't want to talk or play. My mother was important to me, and I felt I was important to her too. (Bing, 25yrs, Male).

Bing's story shows that experience of loss is not a given outcome of being a left-behind child – it depends on the nature of the relationship, and how valued and loved they felt by that parent prior to migration. So, for Bing at least, it was the absence of feeling fatherly love that hurt, rather than the absence of his father per se. We see again the impact, in comparison, of a mother's leaving.

Jun, however, reported a different experience from those described above. He desired closeness with his father when he returned from a period of migration, resembling the closeness he saw between other children and their fathers. However, he never felt loved by his father, as his father's behaviour on his visits confirmed to Jun that his father seemed not to care about him:

...I wasn't very close to my father; he also gave me the feeling that he didn't like me. Although his migration did not change any of my life, I wished I had that kind of closeness with him, like other normal (non-migration) families. However, he spent this time with his friends rather than us every time he returned, drinking and playing, rather than spending time with us. Sometimes when he got drunk, we had to clean up after he threw up. I was annoyed by this behaviour, but he earned money for us, it seemed like he deserved to do what he wanted, even though he is my father. There was something not right. (Jun, 25yrs, Male).

The account shows the confusion and disappointment felt by Jun's - an expectation that his father would want to make up for lost time and be with his child. It shows that 'the return' is not always positive and may even exacerbate emotional distance as the left-behind child yet again does not get the longed-for sense of being cared for. Differently to from Xiaocao and Bing, Jun expressed his desire to be loved by both his parents.

Interestingly, Xiaocao, Bing, and Jun, developed different feelings towards their father following their mothers' migration, showing the changes over time. They reported a sense of eventual, creeping closeness with their fathers when they returned with their mothers. Xiaocao' surprisingly (to her) developed a new dimension of feeling about her father:

... I felt I had become homeless, like there was no home for me after my both parents migrated. However, I grew a sense of closeness to my father when they returned home together. Before I thought it was because I had passed on my joy at my mother's return to my father, but it wasn't. Because when my father returned home on his own, although my father didn't talk to me so much, when he was there, I felt safe. I also could feel my father and me were closer and was more like other father-daughter relationships. Father and mother need to be at home, that's what family means. We still don't talk a lot, but I know, and I am sure he loves me, before I wasn't sure. (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female).

Xiaocao relayed how her feelings changed towards her father over time, which suggest two things. First, that being left-behind by both parents amplified the effect of their father's migration. Her mother's migration helped her to realize the meaning of her father. Xiaocao's parents represented the whole and intact family system, and when both left, the idea she held of the meaning of family did not exist. Second, for Xiaocao, family equals physical presence, togetherness, physical care and security, acts of love (which is very hard to do remotely), and from the late discoveries, she found that extended family could not replace nuclear family. Thus, of course, relationships between children and parents change over time, but the data shows that they do not always and inevitably deteriorate for the left-behind child as they grow.

Bing later also expressed his feelings when both his parents left and how he grew closer to his father, but he also observed something that he did not notice before:

...both my parents left me at home for one year, and over that year, I missed my mother, but I also missed my father somehow. Then my mother took me and my brother to settle in the city – we're still living there now. I still remember the scene when I first saw my father when I arrived, his right hand was lifting some stuff, and his left hand was holding some food for me to eat. He seemed very happy for me to join them, he just kept asking me to eat more and kept saying 'you are skinny'. I felt the warmth flowing into my heart, I was moved. He saw me and noticed me; I didn't expect that. He changed, maybe he was the same, and it was because I had changed. The longing for family reunions and loneliness of being at home alone made me look through every detail and I realised that that my parents loved me and cared for me. Also, I looked at him, becoming older yet still trying to earn money for us. I started to care about him and love him perhaps. (Bing, 25yrs, Male)

Bing's account shows that relationships and feelings about being a left-behind child, and being a family, can change dramatically. Here, both child and father changed in their views, what they noticed, whether they felt noticed, and how they expressed that. It is an account of restoration, or even, more accurately, of evolution of relationships through the left-behind child's perspective. It suggests that the absence and loneliness did something to all family members,

and this changed them for the better, at least in terms of being able to reach each other emotionally. It shows that closeness can develop between left-behind children and their fathers because of mother's migration, and how it zeroes in on what family means.

As with Bing, over time, Jun showed more softness and understanding to his father when he noticed something different in his father after both parents migrated:

... Things changed after my mother migrated. My mother asked him to supervise our homework before he went to his friends, he didn't refuse. When he did stay and spend time with us, I found that he was not a strict person; he just didn't know how to communicate with children. In addition, every time he tried to be close with me, I would run away. I think at that time we both didn't know how to communicate with each other. Then he migrated, and we ended up having less time to spend together, but there was nothing wrong between us. When I slowly understood this, the time we spent together became more precious and meaningful, though sometimes he still wanted to meet his friends.

The story once again shows changes in father-child relationship over time as the left-behind child becomes more able, developmentally, to understand more of adult behaviour and adults' worlds. They show new perspectives on their own contribution to the poor relationship ("I would run away") and how, rather inexplicably, their time together was eventually experienced as it was before for both father and child. Bing's story also shows that the outcome of the poor relationship with his father was not just an outcome of being left-behind, instead, it was how his family relationship worked.

5.3.3 Discussion

This theme aimed to capture how participants perceived their parent-child relationships, and whether these were or were not affected by their migration per se. Three key points are offered. First, the vulnerability of left-behind children can be transmitted from their mothers due to the migration of their fathers as shown in the theme '*Cascaded vulnerabilities*'. Participants' stories told that father's migration can increase house chores, farm work and responsibilities in mother's childrearing and these further distressed their left-behind lives. This was largely due to the socially expected roles of men and fathers in families.

Second, participants gained a new understanding of their fathers since both parents migrated as shown in sub-theme '*Newly gained understating of fathers*'. When one parent migrated, typically the father, the remaining parent, mother, satisfied (for some participants) the feeling of having both parents in their lives. However, when both parents migrated together, the absence of either one became equally significant in their eyes.

Third, the study findings indicate that the absence of fathers sometimes can be tolerated by some left-behind children as long as the remaining mother makes them feel supported, loved, and cared for. The availability of the remaining mother when needed becomes particularly crucial for the emotional well-being of the children. Fourth, the relationship prior to migration was influential, as it matters how children view and experience their left-behind lives.

5.3.3.1 Findings in relation to theory and literature

The sub-themes '*Cascaded vulnerabilities*' and '*Newly gained understanding of fathers*', can be understood through family systems theory. That theory defines the family unit as a complex social system in which members interact to influence each other's behaviour (Bowen, 1974). It poses that any alteration in one family member is liable to have a profound impact on the entire system, potentially triggering changes in other members as well (Bowen, 1966; Watson & Zibadi, 2018).

Only a small number of studies have utilized family system theory to explain family dynamics in influencing the experience of left-behind children. For example, Wang et al. (2019) utilised the theory at a broad level to indicate that parental migration within the family has a mixed effect on children's adjustment, which is weighed against an increase in family income and a decrease in parental care. They indicated that income through remittances may contribute to improved nutrition and general health for children, but parental absence may decrease care, stimulation, and communication, leading to the emergence of psychological and behavioral problems (Liu et al., 2009; Wang & Mesman, 2015; Wen & Lin, 2012). Liu et al. (2020) indicated that family system is torn by parental migration, and the parent-child relationship then becomes a special kind of relationship across its distance and space, which may affect their psychological resilience. They found that father's absence had no negative effect on left-behind children's psychological resilience when the father retained a close relationship with their child during migration. The study indicated that father-child relations during the migration period were more influential than migrated mother-child relations in adjusting psychological well-being. However, the study did not report causal pathways and whether the role of fathers shifted before and after migration.

In the present study, fathers became more important through the newly shared experience of reunions and seemed to coincide with developmental changes in the child's ability to perspective-take. This newly gained affection for their fathers often occurred when the mother has also migrate (*'Newly gained understanding of fathers'*). Other studies emphasized the transformative impact of migration on the stability of the family system, indicated that migration disrupts the usual patterns of interaction between parents and children as well as family

cohesion and relationships (Guo et al., 2012; Jia & Tian, 2010; Liu, & Zhang, 2013; Wang & Mesman, 2015; Zhao et al., 2018). However, no studies on left-behind children have reported the potential role shifting of fathers before and after a mother's migration.

That a father's migration shifts the family dynamic, through differing ways, has been reported elsewhere. For example, Ye (2011) suggested that father's migration led to many remaining mothers worrying about their own safety, and this feeling of insecurity may be transmitted from mothers to children, increasing their already high vulnerability of exposure to victimization. This is what Kun experienced. Wen and Lin (2012) found that father-only migration did not seem to influence children's educational performance and life satisfaction, if the remaining mother was a dedicated caregiver. This is different from what the present study data suggests. In Yujie's stories, she felt compelled to study diligently after seeing what her father's migration did to her mother and showed the change of Yujie's attitude towards education. Another study, Wang et al. (2022) reported that father-only migration could influence left-behind children's school adjustment. It frequently appeared in a way that mother's disapproval and denigration to absent father's parenting may inhibit left-behind children's school adjustment; on the contrary, when mothers approve and support the parenting behaviour of absent fathers, it may facilitate the children's school adjustment. This study tried to imply that left-behind children's education performance was related to the mother's attitudes towards the absent father; while the present study data suggests that it was the participant's self-reflection.

In addition, the findings of the present study indicate that the configuration of the family system significantly impacted the well-being of participants, particularly in cases where the mother migrated. For example, Xiaocao and Bing reported no awareness of their father's migration yet reported feeling overwhelmed when their mother migrated. This observation aligns with previous research, which has consistently shown that the migration of mothers has adverse effects on the educational, emotional, and psychological well-being of their left-behind children than the migration of fathers (Liu et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2013; Lu, 2012; Ye et al., 2013, Zhao et al., 2014). This finding is not surprising, as they confirm the traditional role of mothers as primary caregivers in China, whose absence is often felt more acutely and sensitively by children than the absence of fathers. Also, according to attachment theory, in cases of the mother migrating, the child loses its primary attachment figure, especially given the relatively infrequent and brief visits that generally occur after parents have migrated (Ye & Pan, 2011). However, in many cases, the mother's migration means children are left-behind by both parents, given the common pattern that the father migrates first and followed by mother's migration. It is therefore difficult to clearly distinguish long-term effects of one parent migration vs. two parent migration on the left-behind child.

Furthermore, the stories provided by the participants unveiled a relatively unexplored pattern whereby the presence of the mother means the presence of both parents. However, in instances where both parents migrated, the absence of either one became equally important for some individuals. Take, for instance, the case of Bing, who forged a close bond with his father as his mother migrated alongside him, or Jun, who developed a heightened connection with his father due to being left-behind by both parents. Attachment theory and family system theory provide valuable insight into this phenomenon. It is plausible that the mother, serving as the primary attachment figure, offers a greater level of care and support to her children, which becomes even more pronounced in the absence of the father. According to Attachment theory, a main caregiver, usually mother, as a secure base, help a child to explore or regulate their emotions, and children need more care and support from their main caregivers under conditions of fear, separation and threat (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). This reason is why these participants perceived little memory of father's absence, possibly because their fathers were not considered as a safe base by participants to regulate their emotion, and as long as their mother is there, they will be safe. This was exemplified by three participants (Yujie, Xiaocao, Jun). Concurrently, the father's migration expanded the mother's role in caring for the children, leading to an increased reliance on the mothers (as exemplified by Yujie's situation). The absence of the father further curtailed his ability to fulfil his parental duties.

Asis (2006) observed a somewhat similar, albeit slightly different, phenomenon among left-behind children regarding their perceptions of migrating parents. As in the present study, left-behind children indicated the dual role mothers often played during the father's migration, explaining how they felt safe when their mothers remained. Nevertheless, the children expressed a preference for having both parents present and showed readiness to communicate with their fathers when both parents are around. Both this study and the present study suggest left-behind children have a strong desire for a close relationship with their fathers, emphasizing the importance of paternal involvement in the upbringing of left-behind children. This finding contests the majority of existing research which tends to diminish the role of fathers in child-rearing practices, primarily due to the fact that fathers are typically the first to migrate (Tong et al., 2015; Wen & Lin, 2012). The present study makes a novel contribution by revealing that the newfound emphasis on the father's role is related to the mother's presence and is particularly evident when both parents migrate.

In the understanding of family system theory, the roles and functions of all family members are interdependent, and family members influence one another both directly and indirectly (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2006). This means that father's absence can prompt the close relationship between children and their mothers, and children become more dependent on their mothers. This has also been found in previous studies on left-behind children, which they have indicated that father's migration was associated with increased closeness and dependency with their mothers (Liu et al., 2020; Wen & Lin, 2012), and children reported similar effect when separated from mother or from both parents (Liu et al., 2009). They explained that mother who stayed behind is positively associated with family social capital where she is linked with children's physical and psychological status (Wen & Lin, 2012). The equated importance ascribed to both parents may stem from the deprivation of parental care. Participants experienced the shift of what family is and the role of their fathers, as Jun said, "*my father is becoming more important to me*". The burgeoning closeness they developed with their fathers signifies a profound comprehension and heightened awareness of the notion of family among these individuals.

However, these studies have mostly focused on dynamics between parents and children (relationships, cohesions), little evidence has captured the changes in parental functioning during migration and how these changes further affect the well-being of children left-behind. This could be attributed to the fact that the majority of studies conducted on left-behind children have predominantly employed standardized measurement approaches to investigate the consequences. There has been relatively limited utilization of in-depth interview methods to gather more nuanced and open-ended data. Furthermore, the unique characteristics of the family itself, such as family socio-economic status and migrated distance, have often been overlooked when examining the impact of parental migration. These may all determine parents' functions and roles in fulfilling parental duties under migrations. Thus, it is crucial to recognize the intricate interplay between family members and the consequences of changes in roles and functions for the well-being of individuals within the family unit.

5.3.4 The meaning of home

A feature of all participants' narratives was the concept of home. Homes were more than a physical place or house to live in. The term represented the family unit. Most participants reported that, during the time of being a left-behind child, they were sent to live with different extended family members at different times. Many of them could only spend a few days with their parents over Chinese Spring Festival every year. Guardians' homes were experienced as places where they "*lived under someone else's roof*" (Xiaocao, Limin) and were described as restrained places where "*you couldn't be yourself*" (Xiaocao). Most participants, through some vivid and memorable events that occurred while they lived in others' homes, expressed their ideology and longing for a 'real home', which was described as wherever where their parents were.

Three sub-themes were generated to capture the unique meaning of home for participants: (i) home as a place to be and become yourself; (ii) home means family; and (iii) home means reunion. However, their perceptions also suggested that home contains variegated and overlapping aspects that are intimately related, yet at the same distinct. Often, participants sometimes have more than one perception of home, and here, only the one that occurs more often is shown.

5.3.4.1 Home as a place to be and become yourself

For most participants, living in relatives' homes, while parents were away, was generally an unpleasant and stressful experience where they did not feel free to be themselves. They longed for a place where they could be a child and have the same treatment as they would have if they lived with their parents. Here, Xiaocao explains how she endured living in her paternal grandparents' home since she was 13yrs, while her parents were away, and how that has affected her adulthood life:

My family, none of us have lived together for more than one month, either we were home, my parents were away, or they came back to home while we were in school, we only could stay together over Chinese Spring festival, it is only 10 days that we can move to our own home. This is not easy for me. During my growing up, I often feel like, I cannot be myself, and I live under someone else's roof. I knew, this is not my real home, and they cannot treat me as my parents did. (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female)

Xiaocao began to describe her background in a sentimental way, not living with her family since the start of the left-behind period, which prompted her to extend more conceptual meanings to 'home', expressing how much she longed live with her parents. Home in Xiaocao's account was an expression of her identity to "*be herself*" and a place of feeling free, yet living with her grandparents felt like "*living under someone else's roof*". She explained why:

I have to behave good, not to make mistakes. I have to be aware of their emotions and learn how to please them. They are so many invisible rules inside the house, although they have never said it. For example, I have never invited my friends to this home, because I have known they hate noise. I have to put TV voice lower when watching it, I need to eat as much as I can even when I am full, because I knew they don't like wasting food. I was alone, forced to be alone, especially during holidays. I was just staring at the ceiling the whole day and hoped to go back to school as soon as possible, like I was stuck in that situation, and I am still. Do you know a frog immersed in water that is slowly brought to the boil, I feel I am that frog.

Unspoken rules, (e.g. the TV volume, eating all of a meal), and looking at the ceiling to pass the time, portrayed a level of oppression and having no options. Xiaocao used the striking metaphor of feeling like a frog being immersed in boiling water, conveying how trapped, powerless, and harmed she felt living with her grandparents. A home, for Xiaocao, was part of her personal sphere, where she can "invite friends come over", "speak freely and openly" as she perceived. These oppressive living arrangements appeared to compound her sense of 'difference', and that "my parents put me in that situation".

When I was seeing other children could play together in their homes, or sometimes, with their parents, I felt I was totally different from them, they had fun with their parents. My parents put me in that situation, and my grandparents' place is not allowed me to speak freely and openly, I am always stressed about surroundings.

One of the consequences of being left-behind, for Xiaocao, was a growing sense of blame towards her parents for not providing a home for her and allowing her to have an oppressive childhood under someone else's roof. The ideology of home she portrayed incorporated the presence of parents and a place of freedom and acceptance of who you are. The actual living arrangements appeared to have long-lasting impacts on her:

And, I feel it has a great influence on me, I don't know how to make friends, even any kinds of human interactions, when they asked me 'can I come to your home and we play together?', I always said 'no' as I can't, so they left. I have lost many friends because of this. Then it has further developed that I don't how to communicate with people, even with my parents. Sometimes I thought, if I would be able to be myself, then I might not have lost myself, and lost so many friends, and I hate I am being like this, and I am not. My parents thought it was good for me to live with them until now, but actually they know nothing. Besides, even if they knew, they could not do anything about it, so I would rather not bother them.

The strong statement of "I don't know how to make friends, even any kinds of interactions", indicates the long-term impacts of a silenced and oppressive living environment where she could not learn how to be at ease with people. It perhaps also implies aspects of what a 'good' home

offers, i.e. a place to be socialised. For Xiaocao, the situation of 'losing a home' left her family in a no-win situation; her parents had no idea of what she had lost, and she had no sense of belonging at the place she was supposed to be "cared" for. Also, living with others reshaped her framework of understanding the meaning of home and shadowed her understanding of life later as she realized "I might not have lost myself". She chose to keep everything to herself, conveying a sense of resignation, highlights the significance of 'home'.

5.3.4.2 Home means family

After years living apart with his father and brother, Jiulin, defined his home as "*where the family is, where is the home*". Jiulin's mother died when he was an infant; he was raised by his grandmother, who passed away when he was 10yrs, and his family then dispersed after his father migrated. Jiulin expressed how he longed for family and home, which is conveyed as being synonymous:

My brother and I had to go boarding school from primary, middle school to high school for about 7 years, because my father was too busy to take care of us and my mother and grandmother died. For people like us, boarding school is a good choice, they offer you food, education, and you have peers to play with. But you know...the most difficult thing for us was we had no place to go or to sleep during short breaks or festivals, because nobody was waiting for me to come to home. It was supposed to be a happy holiday, but it always was a tough experience for me. Seeing other people's parents happily coming to school to pick up their children, and then sending their children back to school with large bags of snacks and new stuff. I felt I was the saddest one in the world. It reminded me of my loss of my family, and my home. (Jiulin, 25yrs, Male)

The meaning of home, for Jiulin, was care. Having "*no place to go*" during school breaks was a stark demonstration to him of the void of family in his life. The death of his mother and grandmother was the turning point for him, noticing his loss of a home where he used to have: "*nobody was waiting for me to come to home*". "*For people like us*" was his self-reflection of how he saw himself in a way as a left-behind child who should have felt boarding school was a nice choice. Seeing others' family and their care was painful and shows "*what you could have had*". His earliest and only house where it was home, was so significant to Jiulin that it was seen as a living thing, called 'her':

That shabby, dirty, unsuitable for human habitation, but it's my dearest home. When I had no place to go, I always came to visit my home. Sometimes I came to visit at night, when I was looking at it, I mean 'her', I felt I was watching my childhood, other houses looked so bright and warm, only mine was in dark. It was like no one knew me even if I died, then I cried, I cried a lot (sobbing). I was thinking it would be better if my family still lived there, even though we were poor. It reminds me of the happy time my family used to live together, it reminds of my mom even though

I never met her, but I think she must love me very much; and my grandmother as well, she raised me up, I can always be a naughty child in front of her, and I yearn for her hug. It also reminds me that time I have still got family around, but now... this made me even sadder.

Jiulin draws upon powerful imagery of light and darkness in this extract. His description of visiting his "shabby" house, even at night, just to feel connected to his lost family is very moving. It was his "dearest home" yet is now "in dark", surrounded by other homes which are "so warm and bright" in comparison. The sense of loss, longing and sadness is palpable conveying that absent parents, even through understandable migration decisions, can cause immense and enduring distress to the left-behind child. The scattering of his family has meant a further loss, where he feels invisible and with no-one would even know if he died. "I felt I was watching my childhood" metaphorized that how much he much he wanted to come back the time with his parents, and the significance of 'home':

People always say where the family is, where is the home, but for me, my family is dispersed. I still can see the physical house, it helps me to remember that happiness that I have had, and sometimes gives me encouragement or reminder that I used to have a home, and I must work harder to make my own home in the future.

"Where the family is, where is the home" was his understanding of what a real home is, combined the idea of both people and place, past memory, and future wish. The encouragement he gained from the old home brought his sense of will for creating his own home in the future, which suggests a nostalgia for the past and a pursuit for a better future. So, in the loss of home for this left-behind child emerged a drive to make a true home and cherish it in the future.

Despite very different experiences (sometimes floating) and a closeness with parents, Huixin held similar feelings to Jiulin about home: "where parents are, where home is". She also reported that being neglected was the major difference between when she was with her parents compared to being at her relatives' home.

...I have floated with my parents to different cities since I was 5yrs. Sometimes I would be sent back home and lived with relatives as a left-behind child, and sometimes I would be taken back to live with them in a new city, as a floating child, and this constant back and forth continued until my mother returned home to care of me when I was 12yrs. Before this, my life was not stable, sometimes we had to travel from a city to another and stayed there a few months and come back to the previous city. I remember one night my father held me and handed me to my mom and put me in a van while I was sleeping, then next day I woke up and found I was in a new city (laugh). I felt it is no different for me, because where my parents went, they would always bring me with

them, and I can always be a child in front of them, no matter of place, age. They told me this is called family and I feel that I am home when I stay with them. There is an old Chinese motto, where parents are, where home is. (Huixin, 22yrs, Female)

Home, for Huixin, was not a physical place but an abstract 'place' that always had her parents with her as "*where parents are, where home is*", equivalent in the UK to "*Home is where the heart is*". It did not matter how much her living place changed, as long as her parents were with her, then, "*it is no difference*" to her. The absolute security her parents have given to her brought her a sense of confidence that she would never be "*afraid that parents would leave me alone*", even though she was sometimes sent home to live with relatives:

The interesting thing is I have never been afraid that my parents would leave me alone, ignore me, or like other left-behind children's parents, disappear for years and suddenly came back and ask their children to perform obligations. Because what they have done for me makes me feel safe. During the time of living with relatives while I was home, I often felt I lived under someone else's roof, and I wasn't feeling safe and always cautious. My mother took me with them after I told her.

Huixin mentioned how parents of other left-behind children's parents disappear for years' and "*suddenly came back*", indicating how lucky she was of having parents around as she sensed "*where parents are, where home is*", as also was seen in Jiujin's stories. "*lived under someone else's roof*" for Huixin was a significant realisation for her to realise what the home meant to her.

Chao also expressed his sense of home after only being left by his father for half of a year; he recounted how upset he was after he realized his home was not home while his father was away:

...my father migrated to Russia for only half of a year. Compared to other left-behind children, the time was not long. But I missed my father more strongly than others, because only my mother and I stayed in the house, it was not a home. Home is where everyone is supposed to live together. During the time of being separated from my father, I asked my mother when my father would be home, every week. My mother in the beginning lied to me and tried to comfort me, then she gave up because I asked too many times, and I felt what my mother said was trying to make me feel better but not correct. But the place with only me and my mother is not called a home. After half of a year, my father finally returned, I kind of relaxed as this is the home for me. (Chao, 22yrs, Male)

This participant showed us again how important of family structure for children to see their homes, as *"parents and children are supposed to stay together"*. It reveals that both parents and children together, as a sense of complete unit, was the only view of family that Chao felt made sense. Chao's story also reveals that the length of separation time sometimes did not matter to some children's feelings that much; instead, it was about how children understand the concept of family. For Chao, his parents' absence created a sense of loss that is equated to losing his 'home'.

5.3.4.3 Home means reunion with parents

Qiangqiang's story is about living for the high moments of being a family and enduring the physical and emotional toil of what it meant to be apart and under someone else's roof. Home, for Qiangqiang, meant sparse reunions with his migrant parents. Qiangqiang reported how he saw himself as a *"guest"* living in his guardian's home, and this made it more important for him to feel at home where his parents reunited with him in their home.

... both of my parents left us and migrated to a city for several years when we were little children, and my sister and I had to live with different relatives. And sometimes I felt like I lived under someone else's roof, like we were guests living in a hotel and we have to take responsibility for what we say and what we do. I have never asked what my sister thought, but I believed we have the same feeling though she tried to hide her feelings, and this makes me long even more for my parents' return. (Qiangqiang, 22yrs, Male)

Qiangqiang expressed the trajectory of his life was since he was a child after his parents left. As with Xiaocao and Huixin, *"living under someone else's roof"* and feeling *"as guest"* were the main feelings while living with his relatives. Differently to Xiaocao and Huixin, Qiangqiang did not mention how his relatives treated him or how isolating the situation was, but gave more attention to how he longed for parental reunion over Chinese festival:

That year, I was 15yrs, my parents called us and said they were given too much work that couldn't come back. So, during that festival, I refused to celebrate anything, because, no parents, no home, and no home, there is nothing you can celebrate. I could feel my sister was upset too. We stayed in our relative's home. They were so happy, I was not, neither was my sister. I forced myself to smile, to be like others, but I failed. I found an excuse to not see this lovely scene and went out to calm down myself. My sister came to look for me... then we cried together.

The concept of his home, for Qiangqiang, is the opposite to his relative's home where he had lots of responsibilities and no freedom, and where he felt like he was living in a *"hotel"* not a home. Home for Qiangqiang is when the whole family gathers together and *"everyone is home"*. The

Spring Festival family reunion was given special meaning by him as *"no one is missing"*. The reunions with his family were *"the happiest times"* for him, enriched by small acts of love *'eats together and share food together'* even if *"no one talks"*. His sense of completeness and feeling so settled when they are all together, suggests that for the other 355 days of the year, he endured feeling incomplete and not being himself. When his parents could not return one festival period, he felt their absence deeply, and could not enter into the festival celebrations: *"no parents, no home"* and *"no celebration"*.

5.3.5 Discussion

This section presents an exploration of the meaning of 'home' as perceived by left-behind children who grew up with parental absence in China, including floating experiences. The meaning of home for most of participants, not just as a physical space, but as an emotional, social, and psychological construct that connected with their past and future wishes. All participants perceived that home means family; one participant perceived home as a place to be and become yourself; a pair of siblings perceived that home means reunion with parents. This discussion examined of the meaning of 'home' for left-behind children.

5.3.5.1 Discussion on *'Home means family'* and *'Home means reunion with parents'*

The present study showed that, for these participants, *'Home means family'* and *'Home means reunion with parents'*, that is, that parents are the critical elements of home. There are only two Chinese migration studies that have captured the concept of home from left-behind children's perspectives, and the meaning of home is different from the findings of the present study. Some studies indicated that left-behind children tended to associate the idea of 'home' with their schools. For instance, a study Murphy (2014) illustrated how these children often perceived their boarding schools as their homes because: schools offer a familiar environment filled with routine activities and companionship from peers; schools are a relief from living with older relatives, who frequently require assistance in their day-to-day lives; and schools provide a break from the tedium of living alone. Murphy's study presented a perspective where 'home' was linked to a practical and functional aspect of boarding school, rather than being emotionally intertwined with the presence of parents.

The present study, however, offers a contrasting perspective. Huixin, Jiuliu, and Chao perceived as home as strongly tied to their parents. Despite these participants also being in boarding

schools, their concept of 'home' went beyond its basic function, not only a place for accommodation and education, but also a spiritual and existential place to be who you are and what you want to be. Dong's (2017) study, much like Murphy's (2014), explored the varied interpretations of 'home' among left-behind children. In Dong's (2017) study, some children viewed their boarding schools - the places where their parents had left them - as their true homes, rather than their original houses in their hometowns. For example, one child explained her perception of boarding school as home was because it provided her with a sense of warmth that she had not previously experienced. To her, the boarding school was a nurturing environment where she could make friends and receive care. It seems that these children who viewed their boarding schools as homes do so because these institutions offer a level of comfort and care they did not receive in their own homes, which led them to assign the significance of 'home' to these schools. On the other hand, Dong's (2017) study also found that children who had faced major adversities, such as a family death, parental conflicts, or divorce, their concept of home was felt to be a deep sense of 'homelessness'. Family reunions were often unpleasant, marked by parents' complaints or being busy with their own social lives. These children saw their boarding schools as places where their parents dumped them and their homes as sources of conflict and pressure. As a result, neither of these major places felt like home to them.

In contrast, the present study's participants expressed much more positive sentiments towards 'home', despite some participants also experienced a death or conflicts in the family. 'home' was a safe place with loving parents; it represented positive values such as hope, warmth, inspiration, and desire. Their past happy memories shaped their understanding of 'home'. This suggests that the concept of 'home' provide an important knowledge that the way in which left-behind children understand parents may relate to the extent of care and love they receive from their parents, highlighting the importance of family gatherings such as reunions.

Some migrant children in Moskal (2014) drew their homes and neighbourhood back to the times when they lived in Poland, which illustrated this particular sense of connection and a sense of belonging when they were in Poland. This is also consistent with the present study that revealed that home represented the lived experience, as evident in Qiangqiang and Chao's experiences. Ahmad et al. (2013) also reported that home represented past and present, one is a lived experience of a locality, and the other is, the imagined, remembered place of origin. These are consistent with the present study, as evident in Jiulin's stories. Jiulin's concept of home was his past memorable experience that reminded him that he had family around, but the present absence of them was upsetting. Despite the existence of studies that explore the meaning of 'home' for migrant families, most of these are centered around transnational contexts. There is a noticeable gap in studies within China that examine the perception of 'home' from the

perspective of left-behind children. Future research should explore the legacy of this on their future home-making.

5.3.5.3 Discussion on *'Home is a place to be and become yourself'*

The present study also showed how, for the left-behind child, *'Home is a place to be and become yourself'*. This is consistent with some transnational migration studies. For example, Kaur and Prasad (2017) and Ndlovu (2010) reported that home denotes a sense of belonging and identity, and speaks of kinship networks as part of belonging, in which social relations validate an individual as human being. Mallet (2003) gives a clear summation of home as an emotional environment, a geographical location, for relationship. These studies can somehow explain why participants perceived *'Home is a place to be and become yourself'*, as home can offer you a place where you belong and who you are. Furthermore, the present study revealed that seeing what their peers had gained some left-behind children to acknowledge what they did not have, as discussed in Chapter 5.5. This is consistent yet in different way that in line with some transnational migration studies. For example, Olwig (1999) conducted interviews from left-behind children's perspective in the Caribbean. A left-behind girl reported great appreciation to her single migrant mother who provided her with a relatively comfortable life her in hometown after noticing other left-behind children's parents did not send any remittances to them and these children's lives were therefore filled with toil, with hunger and suffering. Comparison with what she had seemed to help her to strengthen the coherence of home as she realized her mother as home. This is similar to the present study as evident in Huixin's stories, also marked by appreciation towards parents that highlights the central importance of her parents in home.

In conclusion, this discussion section has considered how and why left-behind children in China conceptualise 'home'. The notion of 'home' as a place where children can be themselves highlights the constraints of living with extended kin. The overall positive outlook towards 'home' underscores the significance of nurturing meaningful and affectionate interactions during parent-child reunions. This study shows once again that the impact of staying behind is not so much about the absence of the parents as it is about all that the parents bring with them - home, security, unity, consistency. Future research could look at positive examples of how families do these things well during migration, in order to learn from the experience of 'successfully' establishing a 'home', even when they are separated.

Chapter 5.4 Warmth and Hope

This chapter presents two themes: The power of gifts and The heroes and villains around left-behind children. Taken together, these themes report nurturing and hopeful experiences which held significance for the participants. The power of gifts explores the profound impact of the material gifts of affection bestowed upon these children by their absent parents, friends, left-behind family members or neighbours. The heroes and villains around left-behind children explore the interpersonal dynamics these children experienced, revealing a variety of supportive characters and adversaries in their experience of being left-behind. This chapter aims to shed light on the varied facets of the left-behind children's existence and the impact of broader experiences after separation from their parents.

5.4.1 The power of gifts

An interesting and unexpected aspect of all participants' narratives was their recollection of receiving gifts, and the significance of those for them. All the participants reported that, during the time of being a left-behind child, they had received gifts from families, friends and sometimes neighbours. These gifts were homemade clothes, sweets, ongoing letters, or a plate of dumplings, and were understood as a meaningful act, capturing gift-givers' intentions and feelings towards the left-behind child at the time. Receiving gifts was also perceived by participants as an enjoyable and important process, from anticipation to receipt. They expressed the feelings of being remembered and how happy that made them. When and where gift-giving occurred, and what meaning was intended by the giver and felt by the receiver, mattered to the participants as they reflected and made sense of their left-behind experience. Three sub-themes were generated to capture the different impacts of gifts from different people: when receiving gifts from parents or left-behind family members (i) gifts as an experience of love and being cherished or were seen as (ii) gifts to repair and rebuild relationships. They could also be (iii) a double-edged sword of love and doubt. When receiving gifts from others (friends, neighbours) (iv) gifts were an indicator of being noticed and saved.

5.4.1.1 Gifts as an experience of love and being cherished

For all participants, gift-giving was understood as an act of love and warmth to them, and receiving gifts was a heart-warming moment. Here, Wenwen explains how her mother brought gifts when she returned home to visit after one year living apart and how that conveyed so much to her:

... I had to live with my maternal grandmother due to the one-child policy. My mother always brought some gifts for me - homemade gifts, clothes, and snacks - because we were so poor. I know she wanted me to eat well and live well. I could feel her love through these gifts even though I was a little girl at the time, her love was conveyed to me. It is a precious moment for me. (Wenwen, 25yrs, Female).

The memory of receiving gifts appeared poignant for this participant; even after many years she remembers "feeling" her mother's love through her gifts. The gifts were understood as more than just physical objects, but a demonstration of maternal nurturance (clothing, food) and of being kept in mind by her mother despite her absence.

Another participant, Qiangqiang, was separated from his older sister and lived with different extended family members after both of their parents had migrated. During the time of being apart with his sister he received a "bag" from her. Qiangqiang expressed how he felt when he received gifts at the time and how surprised and touched, he was when he knew the gifts were sent by his sister:

...I remember, my teacher asked me out and told me 'Someone left this bag at the doorman's office, saying 'it was for you' while I was in a math class. I was confused, but I thought might be my paternal grandfather left this. Because at the time I was living with him, and my sister was in another town's boarding high school. So, I took this to my seat, everyone looked at me, with that...envious glances. I felt embarrassed but I was so excited as well, like it was a glory moment for me. I felt like I was so different. Because most of our parents were away and, like who else received something, shows you have family around, or at least, you have someone who remembers you. Inside the bag was some exchanged clothes, my favourite snacks, and a pair of new sport shoe. I gave some snacks to my classmates. I was so happy and touched and thought I must be filial to my grandfather and buy lots of nice stuff for him. But two years later, I accidentally found it was sent by my sister, I was surprised, because I hadn't seen her for a while. Her school was away, and she was busier than me, but she crossed the town just sending me this, must be difficult for her to squeeze her time and her living expenses to give me all of these. She dropped them off without telling me because she didn't want to disturb me. She never mentioned this until I accidentally found out, she did good things for you but never spoke out or expected something. This is what is called 'family'. Till now, whenever I think of this, I feel a warm present flowing into my heart. (Qiangqiang, 22yrs, Male)

The gifts Qiangqiang received were a significant marker of knowing he was being cared for. Receiving it in front of his peers and teachers was a witnessed moment that tells everyone he was cherished, and how proud that made him. To be publically affirmed in this way, for Qiangqiang's peers to see he was deserved to be treated nicely, was an acknowledgement of the importance of him, despite the absence of parents. It was also a hard moment for his classmates, being "*envious*", noticing their situation and being without gifts or visits. The description about his classmates' envy suggests a shared understanding among the classmates, and that their envy reflected their wish for similar gestures of care, or at least, "*someone who remembers you*". A strong part of the extract is where Qiangqiang summarises the humble gift-giving of his sister as "*this is what is called family*". Although he had to be separated from his sister, his sister still treated him like family should; she enacted family for him through gift-giving. Qiangqiang's sister's gift-giving was done without asking for recognition or pay-back, and so was for him a sign of unconditional love. It inspired him to do the same, as "*that is family*".

Hence, for this left-behind participant, the gifts were an influential way for 'left-behind family members to reconnect and 'do family'. It shows that who you are left-behind with, and the relationships with those people, matter, and that even relatively basic acts of gift-giving could elicit powerful feelings of being, remembered, loved unconditionally and as being part of a family.

Another participant, Yujie, expressed how his father brought her a 'gift' and the subsequent 'gifts' whenever he came home, despite busy work and long distance, and what that meant to her. She expressed as follows:

It was hard to contact my dad after he migrated. My dad brought us a puppy when he came back home from another city, and my siblings and I were so surprised. I was thrilled, because I know, he was so busy with his work, and his workplace was very far away, but he still remembered to bring something for us. I felt as his children, we were being specially treated (smile). Then, I always looked forward to my dad's return because every time he came back, he brought us presents, and he did. You know, at that time, communication technologies were underdeveloped. So, we were not able to know where he was until he connected first. We took care of that dog until he died. (Yujie, 26yrs, female)

For Yujie, the gift of a puppy was a major and objective marker of being remembered and of being special to their father. The puppy, and subsequent gifts, were all the more significant given the perception of her father's work commitment and busyness. To be remembered amidst that, and to be treated as special enough to deserve gifts, was a very nourishing experience of being cherished by her father. The statement that they looked after the dog so well also signifies,

perhaps, the cherishing of the father. Hence, for this left-behind participant, the gifts became a significant way by which parents could, in an uncomplicated way, show that, despite being apart, they loved and remembered their children. It perhaps also shows how fervently the left-behind child was looking for indicators of love and experiences of feeling they mattered to their parents. It is also shows that the gifts were also important as phone calls or other communication technologies were hard.

Lu, provides a unique perspective about the impact of receiving ordinary gifts (clothes, shoes, books) and special gifts, namely, handwritten letters, from her parents. She expressed how the different feelings she had between an ordinary gift and a handwritten letter. Here, Lu explains the efforts her parents put into the letters, and how that made her feel.

...as I told you before, my parents and I had been writing letters to each other before I went to boarding middle school. Besides, they also brought me gifts whenever they came home. The gifts were new clothes, shoes, or books, and looked very nice, I liked them, but I liked receiving their letters more, because I felt, in this way, they treated me more seriously. I thought, they worked hard for me, like they at least had to find a pen then to write, to think what they wanted to share with me, finally to send it to me, then had to wait me writing back and reading it. That's different than just getting me a gift at a gift shop. Also, in the early days, I felt, parents usually do not treat their children this way, because they are always too busy, especially for the parents who were not at home, but I was lucky enough that my parents done this to me (Lu, 25yrs, Female).

For Lu, receiving letters from her parents showed her mother "treated me more seriously" than "just getting me a gift at a gift shop". Her presumed process by which her parents wrote letters, for her, was the process of verifying that "they treated me more seriously", and that the reassurance of "they worked hard for me". The statement that how lucky she was that her absent parents cherished her so much, as is evidenced by the letters.

5.4.1.2 Gifts as a double-edged sword of love and doubt

However, for some participants, their stories of 'gifts' offered a different perspective, namely that gifts were understood not only as a measure of love but could also raise doubts of love. The consistency of receiving gifts over time mattered to some participants. For Lu, following up with the previous extract, she expressed how frustrated she was when her parents stopped sending her letters.

... Every Thursday I would be first one gets up and wait for the delivery man to come, because I knew I would receive letters from my parents. I would run to him and ask, 'is there anything for me?', if there was, I would be so happy, forget about anything that was upsetting me and read it as soon as possible. If there were no letters, I would be down for a few days and ask my grandparents what's happening to my parents. I collected these letters in a thin locked box and put them under my pillow. Whenever I missed my parents, I read them. Sometimes I cried because reading letters was not enough for me. I wanted to see them, like touch them, cuddle them. I wrote about anything to them about me, my new paintings, my exam scores, and I promised that I would study well to not disappoint them. They told me to eat well and study well. But they stopped it when I went to boarding middle school. I didn't know why. Maybe they didn't want to disturb my study. I was quite upset, like our connection had vanished. I didn't know what to do, so I stopped as well. That was sad. Sometimes I thought it would have been better if I hadn't received their letters in the first place, so I wouldn't have had anything to look forward to and wouldn't have been unhappy. I still keep these letters as it they are special for me (Lu, 25yrs, female).

For Lu, receiving letters from parents and being able to write back was a critical part of her childhood connection with her absent parents. The continuous letters with her parents represented love in both directions for Lu, showing being cherished and being involved in one other's life. The poignancy of the letters kept in a treasured box under her pillow is very moving. The participant describes longing for physical contact with her parents, "to touch them". The letters were as close as she could get to them and were, despite the distress, a sufficient tool by which she could feel parental care and express her love in return.

Yet the cessation of the letters raised doubts for Lu that she continued to matter to her parents as their "connection had vanished". She could not, as a teenager, figure out how to respond, and the relationship communication died. For this participant, the gifts become a double-edged sword provoking major questions, like 'am I loved, do I matter'? It also raised questions about the constancy of love when gifts stopped, like 'do they still love me'?

Another participant, Xiaocao, expressed "how happy I was when I received a gift, how double disappointed I was when I did not receive it."

... my parents used to bring me gifts every year they came back. I didn't like it very much, but I think it's their way of making it up to me for their absence. but I felt it was their way to compensate me. I knew it, so I took it every time. I never spoke out my thoughts to them. One year, they stopped, no gifts, they said gifts were too heavy to bring, and some of them could be found in hometown and promised to buy me, but it never came true. I felt kind of sad because I felt they were giving up compensating me, or at least, they were not caring for me much. How happy you were when you received a gift, how double disappointed you were when you did not receive it. They started to come home once in two years, our separation was becoming longer, I felt like, oh, I was right, they didn't care about me because they even didn't want to see their daughter. (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female)

For Xiaocao, consistently receiving gifts in her early left-behind years symbolized her parents' compensation due to their years of absence. Gifts were understood as the process of reaffirming her importance, from seeing the efforts her parents made and acknowledging their efforts and noticing that she mattered. For Xiaocao, gifting and the implied compensation were constant in the early years, so the cessation of gifting was difficult to comprehend and marked the beginning of further emotional and physical separation from her parents. For this left-behind participant, Xiaocao, gifts became an influential tool to measure and predict her parents' love. It seems both parents and the child thought compensation was necessary, which possibly suggests that they both saw that the left-behind situation was not what the child was entitled to, although we do not have the parent perspective.

5.4.1.3 Gifts repair and rebuild relationships

Other participants conveyed their understanding of gifts as a reassurance of the parent-child relationship, especially for participants whose parents were absent for years. Here, Zhihong expressed how relieved he was when his mother brought gifts after a prolonged separation when he was 9yrs.

... I hadn't seen my mother for a long time, only coming back once every two years. Sometimes I think she forgot about me and didn't love me anymore, or maybe I was not her child, I cried a lot... I was upset and kind of angry with her, not angry, like not very satisfied with what she had done to me. Because she is my mother, she is supposed to remember me. She finally returned and brought me many new clothes and asked me to try them on and I can't stop talking to her. Then she cooked me food, I was so happy, because I felt she could home without gifts, she had options, but she came with gifts, and these gifts were all the clothes for me. I felt we were closer, not because of gifts, it was because of she did something nice for me. I felt I was important to her and was not an unwanted child anymore - I have a mother, and she loves me as she came back and bought me clothes. (Zhihong, 20yrs, Male)

For Zhihong, having no mother around for a long time made him doubt his mother's love and whether or not he was actually still her child. Zhihong expressed his distress as a child, thinking he was forgotten by his mother and that he was no longer loved. The power of gifts, above and beyond the physical return of his mother for a visit, was pivotal in confirming his mother's love. That he described being upset and angry with his mother conveys his desperate need for care. Zhihong, like others (Xiaocao, Wenwen), seemed aware that gifts were not entitled and that the choice of his mother to bring gifts back was unequivocal evidence of maternal love: *"she bought me clothes."*

Ming symbolized gifts as a compensation from her parents, seeing the efforts that her parents made was a way for her to understand their love:

... my parents left when I was 8yrs, and I went through lots of difficult times on my own. They may feel guilty and sorry for me, and they bring candies or clothes to me every year. Every time I saw them come back with gifts, I felt that they tried to be close with me. My mother usually asked me to try the sweets she brought, to see if they were delicious. I said yes, but it wasn't (laugh). Sometimes she asked me to try those old fashioned-e clothes she bought and asked my opinion. I often said I liked them, but I didn't like them. Because I didn't want her to feel bad about the gifts she brought for me. They were too far to know me and my life. But over this process, you could feel I became closer with my mother, because we had to talk or communicate based on the gifts she brought. I also felt it was a compensation. She tried to get involved in my life through these gifts as a way to know me, and this did work for me. Every time she came back with gifts, I felt we were closer. Because she cherished me more, and her compensation is useful to me. Because I saw their efforts through these efforts. (Ming, 22yrs, female)

Ming understood gifting was the act of making up for damage or harm her absent parents may have caused. The experience of trying the gifts was a crucial part of repairing relationships with her mother and becoming closer. Ming's mother's constantly asking about the gifts was understood as a way to get to know Ming. It, perhaps, shows that the common fact that both the parents and the child thought that compensation was necessary, and that gift-giving was an effective way to repair relationships.

5.4.1.4 Gifts as an indicator of being noticed and saved

Receiving gifts from others seemed to be a powerful way of being noticed and recognized. Here, Yue explains how surprised she was when she received a cake from her friends, and how much that conveyed to her:

...I was very surprised and felt touched when my high school friend bought a cake on my birthday. I had never talked about my birthday, when or how, because I felt no one really cares and my family are not there because they are busy, but she did, she did it without asking, she saved money from her living expenses and bought me a cake...for me. I asked her why, she said 'because you are my friend'. I feel, like, I am important... at least, I am important to her (Yue, 22yrs, Female).

Yue had felt "no one really cares" so her friend's purchase of a cake helped her to feel newly noticed and cared for. The relatively humble and simple gift in this context was, for Yue, a remarkable and memorable objective marker of care, and seemed a deeply important experience, perhaps challenging her lifelong script of not being important.

Similarly, Limin expressed how she was saved by her neighbour with a plate of dumplings when no one was there for her, and how that influenced her in the years to follow.

...it was a winter festival; our boarding school gave us a two-day off to celebrate it. Everyone was so happy to be home, not my brother and I. Because nobody else was there for us, no food, we had to cook it on our own. Eating dumplings is the tradition, but we didn't have it. I went out and tried to buy some vegetables because we didn't have enough money to buy meat. I felt everyone was being with their family, happy, and excited waiting for eating dumplings, but not us. My heart was crying, and I was sad enough to die. A neighborhood guy saw me and asked me 'have you eaten dumplings yet', I said no. Then he asked me to wait there. A moment later, he brought me a plate of hot dumplings, and said to me 'you better hurry to eat, these would not be delicious if you wait'. He left me with my surprising and crying face. Those dumplings were stuffed with meat, and I knew, it was not easy for every family to eat meat at the time, but they were willing to spare some to me. I felt like he was my lifesaver. You know? My life was a mess and there was someone who came to offer help. It was a mixed feeling at the time - sad, happy? I don't know. But I know without him, that night would definitely have been a disaster night for me. Now, every time I pass by their house, I stop to say hello - they may have forgotten about it, but I remember it. (Limin, 25yrs, Female)

Limin over the years was able to hold on to this memory of being noticed, and "saved". For Limin, her memory of the festival day appeared bleak and painful for this participant given on this family holiday "no-one was there for us". That she described being sad enough "to die" conveys her distress and desperate need of care. The neighbour, and the dumplings she received, and the subsequent description of poverty, intensified the meanings of being noticed and "saved". She conveyed her ongoing feelings of appreciation, and gratitude to the neighbour. For this left-behind participant, the gift at such a critical time was sufficient salve in an overwhelmingly difficult situation.

5.4.2 Discussion

This section will discuss the impact of the gifts that they received while being left-behind. Participants' stories revealed the significance of this kind gestures (gift-giving) given by others, and family members, and highlighted how frequently they looked for signals of love and care. Receiving gifts from parents or family members was perceived as a gesture of love or to measure the extent of love, i.e., whether they were loved. Receiving gifts from others was perceived as a signal of feeling noticed, recognized, and even saved.

5.4.2.1 The role of gifts between migrants and left-behind communities (relatives, friends, and wives) in the context of transnational migration

The present study revealed the multifaceted significance of gifts in migration families within rural China, a topic previously only marginally explored. Existing studies that have looked at the role of gifts in migration families have primarily focused on transnational contexts, examining the layered meanings and functions of gifts within such families (Cliggett, 2005; Singh et al., 2010, 2012; Yeoh et al., 2013). However, they did not specifically investigate the role of gifts between migrant parents and their left-behind children. Instead, the existing literature has emphasized the role of gift-giving between migrants and the communities they have left-behind, including not only relatives but also friends and spouses. For instance, Cliggett (2005) found that gift-giving served as a form of social investment to maintain connections with those in the home village, particularly with the potential for eventual return. The act itself, rather than the value of the gift, symbolizes affection and remembrance and creates a system of mutual recognition between migrants and the communities they have left-behind.

Baldassar (2008) further explored this idea, proposing that gifts function as "*special transnational objects*" that represent the absence of a person. These tangible items can take the place of missed migrants, fostering a sense of closeness despite physical separation. From the perspective of the migrants themselves, Singh et al. (2010) observed that gifts communicate ongoing concern and care for the family left-behind, typically parents. They can also alleviate strains in caregiving responsibilities among non-migrant siblings, smoothing the process of care within left-behind families. Singh et al. (2012) elaborated on this by noting that gifts act as a caregiving bridge that transcends the physical and cultural boundaries of national borders, fortifying familial bonds. Gifts, in this context, become more than material objects; they are expressions of love, care, and connection, weaving a complex web of relationships that both mirrors and mitigates the challenges of migration.

However, when compared to providing care from a distance, physical presence and the related caregiving efforts were often valued more than gifts. McKenzie and Menjivar (2011), working with non-migrant mothers and wives in Honduras, reported that receiving gifts meant happiness and being remembered for left-behind women. Some wives reported extreme happiness when receiving parcels from overseas migrant husbands, and gifts for them seemed to minimize the potential breakdown in their relationships. However, the gifts did not alleviate the pressure and difficulties that the mothers and wives faced in their home country.

Both the present and previous studies highlight the powerful role of gifts can play in fostering positive familial connections across both time and distance, which provides migrated people with a practical way to extend care as evident in all subthemes in the present study. Furthermore, both of present and previous revealed that the process of gift-giving often appeared more significant to the recipients than the gifts per se, which highlights the symbolic and emotional value of the act itself and the connection it represents. Despite these studies emphasising the influential role of gifts and the gift-giving process, they all acknowledge that the influence of gifts has its limitations. Gifts, while potent symbols of affection and connection, cannot wholly replace the physical presence of loved ones or address all the complexities and challenges left in the wake of migration. They serve as a bridge, fostering connection and care, but they cannot fully span the gap created by distance and absence.

5.4.2.2 The role of gifts between migrant parents and left-behind children in Chinese and global migrations.

Studies on gift-giving between migrant parents and left-behind children in Chinese internal migration families is limited, but the available studies largely align with the finding that gifts hold a significant yet constrained role. These gifts often function as a means of repairing family relationships and symbolizing love and care (Pan & Lu, 2011; Mu et al., 2018). However, some parents appear to use gift-giving as a way to absolve themselves of parental responsibilities, consistently sending gifts but seldom returning home (Lu, 2013; Pan & Lu, 2011). For example, costly gifts are used as incentives to encourage left-behind children to study well, such as offering a piano as a reward for hard work. Additionally, some parents use gift-giving as a strategic tool to keep track of their children's scholastic progress, for instance, by offering gifts to teachers as a sign of respect while simultaneously seeking feedback on their child's academic performance (Pan & Lu, 2011).

These are consistent with present study findings, both of these studies underscored the notion that the role of gifts is powerful and limited, the love from parents is irreplaceable through gifts. However, the focus of previous studies has often been directed towards gift-giving between

migrant parents and their children, neglecting to examine the gift-giving within left-behind communities (such as peers, neighbours) in shaping left-behind children's experience. In contrast, the present study provided multiple ways of gift-giving, and receiving gifts from peers and neighbours were perceived as a significant moment or process that saved them from "*sad enough to die*" and "*no one really cares*" situation as evident in the sub-theme '*Gifts as an indicator of being noticed and saved*'. This provides a new insight to understand the role of gift-giving among peers, and other members of the left-behind communities, in shaping the experiences of left-behind children.

Consistent with the findings of the present study, gifts are seen as a double-edged sword that represents love and doubt within transnational migration families. For example, some transnational migration studies have suggested that sending gifts has become a practical means for migrant parents to offer "*mothering at a distance*" as these gifts often turned out to be the only means that was available to them (Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005). This was primarily because these gifts can help reduce the frequency of border-crossing while allowing parents to fulfil some of their obligations (Horton, 2008, 2009). Horton's studies (2008, 2009), conducted from the perspectives of both left-behind children and their migrant parents in Mexico-US migration families, revealed that these gifts offered great joy among left-behind children, with responses such as "*jumping, shouting*" and "*my happiness cannot fit in my chest, I love that bracelet*". They explained that, for the migrant parents, these gifts acted as a constant reminder to their left-behind children of their enduring love and a symbol of the hope that they would soon be reunited in the US. They suggested gifts act as a substitute for parental care, but also can alleviate the feelings of abandonment experienced by left-behind children (Horton, 2008, 2009). From the perspective of Philippine migrant parents, McKay (2018) indicated that the act of sending birthday gifts could incentivise the caretakers or relatives of these children to participate more actively in the children's birthday celebrations or childrearing. Lam and Yeoh (2019) conducted in-depth interviews in Indonesia and Philippines with left-behind children. They reported that some left-behind children strategically called their parents' visit as a gift for them; a left-behind child asked her father "*Dad, come home quickly for a visit and will you buy me a doll?*". This reflects those gifts served as a component of social practices, which was also found in Yeoh et al. (2013) studies.

In discussing the beneficial role of gifts in migration families, previous studies proposed a broader range of ways in which gifts can be interpreted by left-behind children, such as family visits, compared to the present study. Prior studies have also provided multiple perspectives of both migrant parents and left-behind children on gifts, however, the outcomes leaned heavily towards the parents' perspectives. In addition, although previous studies reported the emotional

responses of left-behind children when receiving gifts, these feelings were more frequently associated with the physical gifts themselves rather than any meaning they may represent or are given. It seems, in these studies, that gift-giving was some-way efforts from migrant parents to maintain emotional ties with their children. In contrast, the present study provided a more profound exploration, left-behind children as first accounts, to capture how they felt and interpreted emotionally and personally when receiving gifts from their absent parents. Many participants provided more comprehensive details about the gifts (where, how, when), and discerned multi-layered meanings beyond the gifts per se, as reflected in the theme of *'Gifts repaired and rebuilt relationships'* and *'Gifts as a double-edged sword of love and doubt'*.

Consistent with present study, other studies have proposed that gifts could elicit feelings of doubt surrounding love (Horton, 2008, 2009). Horton (2008) reported that some left-behind children expressed that they would prefer to experience poverty over receiving countless gifts if it meant they would not have to endure loneliness; other left-behind children harboured doubts about their parents' love, despite continuing to receive gifts from them. Horton (2009) also reported that gifts can seem like a poor substitute, especially when parents establish new families. In such instances, these children expressed considerable fear and disappointment, fearing their parents would forget them and never return (Horton, 2009).

Gifts also have been found to serve mixed functions in transnational migrant families. For instance, some migrant parents expressed their desire to *"give them (their left-behind children) everything that I couldn't give them before when I was living with them"*, which inadvertently promoted their ongoing work in migrant cities and the consequent prolonged separations (Horton, 2008). Hoang and Yeoh (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with carers of left-behind children in Northern Vietnam. They discovered that some parents, with the help of material gifts, managed to bridge the gap with their children to some extent during migration. However, they pointed out that this temporary closeness was short-lived, only enduring until the migrant parents' next departure. As the separation was prolonged and the children continued to grow up in the physical absence of their parents, it was uncertain whether gifts would remain effective in bridging the growing gaps in the future.

In discussing the limited role of gifts in migration families. Previous studies' findings are consistent with the present study. However, previous studies found that the power of gift-giving can become constrained and conditional within the migration context, such as major family disruptions. The present study did not capture this aspect; however, it provided new perspective into the gift-giving process itself, showing how left-behind children cherished the experience and actively participated in forming meanings, as evident in *'Gifts as a double-edged sword of love*

and doubt'. This reveals the strong longing left-behind children in this study had for signals of love from their migrant parents. Future studies should explore the dynamics of gift-giving and its perceived value under different migration situations, familial structures, and cultural contexts, to further uncover the multifaceted role of gifts in the migrant families' narrative.

5.4.3 The heroes and villains around left-behind children

This section begins with descriptive context around left-behind children and their living environment and explains two types of main figures of left-behind children's life that appeared, in the data, to be associated with particular participants' experiences (represented as subthemes). The first figure are heroes who offered small yet significant help that brightened their lives while being left-behind; and the second is villains who exerted their power on left-behind children causing more harm in their left-behind life.

5.4.3.1 The Villains around left-behind children

As mentioned before, floating children are defined as a type of left-behind child; these children temporarily float with their parents to the migration city yet eventually return home alone (for schooling) and become left-behind children. This was the case for Wenhao; he floated with his parents when he was six years old. His parents ran a small grocery store in the new city, and he was sent to a nearby public school where most students and teacher were locals. The school was the only one accepted him due to educational restrictions (Household Registration System, called Hukou system as seen in Chapter 2). He recalled how bitter he was during those four years in the local primary school:

I was one of the few who didn't know how to speak dialects. Also, I was a newcomer to the school. I was like an outsider, watching them chatting and playing. They called me Waixiangren (people from rural areas who do not belong in the urban cities) over primary school. I didn't know why they did this. The teacher knew it but didn't say anything. One day they used a knife to cut my finger, others held me to not move. My fingers were bleeding, they were laughing at me. I hate them. My teacher also didn't like me, he felt I was supposed to stay in the poor countryside rather than sharing the same resources in a city with them, so he always humiliated me, and my parents. He kicked me when he thought I misbehaved, but I didn't. He often asked my mother to come over and humiliated publically by saying I was the worst student and I looked dirty. My mother just stood there and said nothing, because if she did, the teacher would be harsher on me, and school maybe dissuade me. Once I saw, she wiped her tears. I hate them and hate that teacher most, because the teacher is supposed to be fair and kind to students. I only had two friends; they were also the children of migration workers, non-locals. Now, when I travel to a new city, I am kind of aware of my behavior as I am Waixiangren. (Wenhao, 22yrs, Male)

Wenhao's floating experience indicates that he was even abused by the locals. His classmates taught him the privilege of urbanites, and the teacher's response was a way for Wenhao to be totally 'left-behind' by the school. Wenhao's teacher was a perpetrator rather than a saviour felt particularly hard for Wenhao. Wenhao's sense of resignation turned to hatred when the bullying turned on his mother. His mother's compromise taught him to remain silent when facing injustice. However, inaction was temporary for Wenhao who reacted differently when bullied after he was sent back to hometown in after 6 years to continue his education:

My classmates didn't like me, and I did not like them. We sometimes fought together due to small quarrels. It was because I didn't want to tolerate it anymore, I fought back. But sometimes I fought with them for no reason, maybe also because I was alone, I maybe need tehri company through fight? I got injured but I had no one to tell. My life was out of order since my parents left, like living in a panic, and I couldn't do anything, I was extremely lonely, life without parents around is an experience of bitterness.

Wenhao's accounts suggests a shift from frustrated victim to aggressor, fighting for no reason "but also maybe because I was alone". He implies his aggression was a survival tactic in a life that felt out of order and full of panic without his parents. Peers' 'company' was a way for him to forget the loneliness while being left-behind – loneliness was perceived by him as 'bitterness'.

Another participant, Limin, faced similar bullying from her neighbour while her parents were away when she was ten years old. Limin in the beginning tried to resolve it herself because she did not want her mother worried, yet the bullying escalated. Limin had no option but to tell her mother. Her mother asked her relatives to help yet none of them did. Limin recalled her resentment towards her neighbour and relatives and how that made her reluctant to talk to them even now:

My neighbour knew my brother and me were at home alone, so he found all sorts of reasons to hassle us during those two years. He sometimes knocked on our door at midnight saying that our tree was blocking his view of the house or accused me of going to their house to clean it because he thought I was the one who had made the mess. So, most of time, I didn't turn on lights in the house because he would have come to verbally abuse me. I lived each day carefully. But he seemed very intimidating, I was scared but... I had to fight back because my brother needed my protection (he feared him and cried a lot), and if I didn't, he would have done more harm to me. But I was also afraid he would hit me or kill me. My neighbour started a rumour about me, saying that no man would if no man wants me, I will fight with you until I die'. I cried hysterically after this fight and wanted to die because there was no spark of hope around me. I asked myself 'why did he say no man wants me? I took pity on myself and thought about why this thing was happening to me, why me? (Limin, 25yrs, Female)

Limin's account portrays serious vulnerability to the 'villain' neighbour who harassed Limin and her brother, creating a life of fear to the point where they did not even turn the lights on. Both Limin and the neighbour lived in acute awareness that there was no adult to protect Limin and her brother. Her view of herself was deeply tarnished by the neighbour's harassment, evoking gendered rejection as "no man would want you". The villagers' inaction shows us the vulnerable and isolating community Limin lived in: when the villain comes, everyone remained silence. However, Limin was more furious about her relatives' lack of help:

Everyone around my town knew this, but they just, stood over there, or sometimes asked me to not fight, but how? I had to protect my house and my brother. They didn't do anything. I was helpless but had to find a solution. I hate them, my relatives, they knew but didn't help me, if they stopped him, he might stop, and I didn't need to be bullied for two years. I hate this neighbour; he took his chance to bully me when there were no adults around. You don't know how happy I was when we finally left this town. Now, I am trying to stay away from my new neighbour, they seem good, but I somehow don't believe them, and I don't accept any help from my relatives even they want to help.

For Limin, relatives and other neighbours were additional villains because of their inaction to protect her and her brother. The way she tried to make sense of it was appearing to blame her relatives and living community - an isolating village where no one was willing to help. She had no way but to act as a hero to protect her brother. Her experiences with her neighbours have shaped her present lack of trust in others and has bolstered her self-reliance. Her account shows that being left-behind not only involves physical separation from parents, but also being immersed in a specific, often highly vulnerable, physical, and social environment which can inflict particular, serious and long-lasting harms on left-behind children at the time, and as young adults.

Another participant, Wenwen, shared her frightening experience of being pursued by a man on a motorcycle while she was cycling home when she was 13yrs.

In our village, there were rumours that young left-behind girls, with both parents migrated, were at risk from unscrupulous men. I was always vigilant because of this. One day, whilst cycling home, a man on a motorbike came close to me. Out of nowhere, he tried to yank me towards him and onto his motorbike. I was scared and fought back, screaming and kicking as hard as I could. There were no people around. I tried to keep moving and to ride my bike away, but I fell off. He was probably surprised too that I had such huge strength. God save me, he didn't hop off his bike. I was left there, crying my eyes out. I just sat there, crying. Once I was sure he had gone, I got back on my bike and hurried home.

I called the police, but they couldn't do anything. They just told me to stay at home for a while. I also told my parents, but they were far away and could only worry; they couldn't do anything else

to help me. Thereafter, I refuse being touched, and has influenced my romantic relationship. (Wenwen, 25yrs, Female)

Similar to Limin, Wenwen's extract revealed another layer of vulnerability of a left-behind girl being easily become the target of rural people. Although she was able to escape, she was under extreme fear while fighting alone. Her past knowledge made her cautious of men, her left-behind experience made her later refuse "being touched" and negatively influenced her romantic relationship. That the police could not provide any help revealed the inefficacy of enforcement and lack of protection of left-behind children. Wenwen's story presents, how the inability of parents and local police to render the left-behind child vulnerable.

Altogether, Wenhao, Limin, Wenwen reported villains from classmates, neighbours, strangers, and how these villains in different ways detrimentally affected their lives. Their accounts underline that besides parents, key institutions such as schools, local communities, and the local government failed to protect these children.

5.4.3.2 The Heroes around left-behind/floating children

Some participants reported some positive experiences with social groups, like teachers and peers. They felt cherished and valued again after their parents had left which gave them courage to try to be positive during their left-behind / floating period. This was the case for Huixin. She had a two-year floating period and then a six-year left-behind experience, and she received a great kindness from teachers during these periods, as Huixin says:

My parents sent me to kindergarten after we floated to a city, and they left me alone as they had work to do. I was upset and a bit afraid because I knew no one and a newcomer. I stood over like a fool, then she came to me, saying 'hello, little girl, we both wear red today. I am your today's teacher and friend...' Then we started to talk. She was so nice and so patient with me, like a mom, she was so caring. She paid attention to me when she found I looked upset, and she came to save me but without embarrassing me. I became not afraid anymore. She introduced many friends to me. Though I didn't have lots of time with my parents as my mother was busy with business and my father went to another city for work, that teacher really brightened my life at that time. (Huixin, 22yrs, Female)

Huixin recalled how even small gestures to her were significant meanings and she believed that her teacher 'saved' her like a "mom". She portrays a sense of gratefulness to being noticed and made to feel safe by an adult. This inspired her career choice:

I had never met a person who could be so nice to me, apart from my parents. So, when I had this experience, the next thing occurred to me was becoming one of them, I like this job. And this is what I am now – a kindergarten teacher. Just like her, I am more caring to the children who were like me, I want to help them, to warm them.

Huixin's story is notable in that being 'held' by one significant adult at this time had a profound effect on her. It is possible that parental absence means a left-behind child is more sensitised to such acts of care compared to children for whom this is routine.

Apart from receiving support from teachers, two participants reported they received support from peers. The perceived support was small but had great meaning for them. It was a physically and mentally exhausting and devastating period for Linyuan, who had just turned 16 at the time. His father migrated when he was 4yrs and returned home once every year. His father was an alcoholic and hit Linyuan when intoxicated; he eventually disappeared and was seen lifting bricks in the city afterwards, but he never came back. Linyuan's mother died when he was 4yrs. He was the oldest brother that had to take care of two younger siblings and his old grandfather. The burdens of his family weighed on him and he recalled suicidal ideation because he felt there was no hope in life. However, there was a friend who was also a left-behind child and the same age as Linyuan that consistently supported him after noticed his situation and inspired him by sharing his left-behind story. Linyuan recalled how he was comforted and stayed strong at the time:

...he talked to me about his family; his parents left him when he was three, and never come back, only sending money to his grandparents every year, which was not enough, so he considered migrating to support the family. He looked at me and said 'parents are all jerks, it is their fault to throw us away, but we are strong, and we don't need them. We will make lots of money and have our own family'. I nodded my head, tears just went down my face one by one, I didn't know what to say, just crying. Then during that time, he came to me from time to time, just check whether I am alright, he talked to me sometimes, or just to be with me. (Linyuan, 18yrs, Male)

Linyuan experienced a great loss yet had to take a huge responsibility for his family when he was a teenager. For him, the presence of his friend, who shared the similar background with him gave him a sense of acceptance of their identities, gave Linyuan a sense of acceptance and validity to what he suffered and great courage to stay strong. It was the second example from left-behind participants who felt there was no hope for them (Limin's stories) due to the circumstances in which they were left-behind. Both Linyuan's and his friend's accounts as left-behind children showed their need to find courage to face life adversities without any guidance or support. Both of them had to drop out of school and become migrants to support their family afterwards:

I migrated to support my family one year later, so did he. I have really appreciated him, though we don't have much contact now. He is still my best friend. Whenever I feel upset about life, I will think of him, because I know there is a person the same as me, who tried so hard to have a normal life, and so will I. Our friendship is shared hardships and bitterness together, he saw the worst part of me, and he chose to help me and that means a lot to me.

As with Limin and Huxin, Linyuan's accounts also shows that how the acts of being noticed, being encouraged, can do much to him. Also, being heroes for Linyuan, was not about being encouraged but also about facing and overcoming adversity together, which adds a profound depth to their connection. This extract reflects a deep and enduring friendship marked by shared struggles and a common drive for a better life between left-behind children. It is provoking to see them becoming migrants too. Linyuan's also highlight the vulnerable situation for him as he *"tried so hard to have a normal life"*.

Chao also reported the warmth he received from his friend. Both of their fathers migrated, and they missed them very much but had no one to talk to, as their mothers were busy with households. They often played together, walked around, and kept each other company and expressed thoughts of their fathers. Chao recalled how he felt relieved after seeing his friend:

Our fathers both migrated, so we were in a similar situation. I could be opened to express my missing to my father, because he also missed his father. We talked together, sometimes we just walked together, keep each other company. When we played together, we forgot about our fathers (a big smile). Our friendship is naturally built in this way. He is a real truly friend, and we still hang out together whenever I am home. (Chao, 22yrs, Male)

As with Linyuan, the support Chao received was from a friend who was also left-behind and experienced of the separation of pain deeply. For Chao, being companied, being able to express ideas of missing his father also meant very much to Chao.

5.4.4 Discussion

This section represents how individuals were perceived as heroes and villains in their participants' lives. Findings show that, individuals who were perceived as heroes were so because they noticed and understood the experience of the left-behind child. Conversely, those perceived as villains often exploited their advantageous position, showing the ways in which left-behind children can be vulnerable to 'dangerous' people in their worlds.

5.4.4.1 The significant individuals of positive impacts on left-behind children

The present study's findings underscored the positive impact of significant individuals including peers, teachers, and neighbours, in shaping the experiences of left-behind children. Some of

these influences were beneficial, while others had harmful effects. This is consistent with findings from previous studies.

Many studies have documented the people who surround left-behind children, such as teacher, peers, neighbours who have positive impacts on left-behind children's lives. Studies have reported that teachers can offer company and emotional encouragement to left-behind children (Li et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2015), and this support is particularly important for vulnerable left-behind children because they are often unable to overcome left-behind adversities alone (Liu et al., 2015). It explained that left-behind children are eager for teachers' attention due to the absence of family care, and a positive left-behind children-teacher relationship is a protective factor for left-behind children, supporting better coping with academic pressure and emotional adjustment (Wu et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2021). For example, with a positive teacher relationship, left-behind children can get more opportunities to participate in school activities (Li et al., 2018).

Furthermore, left-behind children might view their teacher as an attachment figure, and positive relationships with teachers could help these children better regulate their emotions and behaviors (Liu et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2017). This may be beneficial from the success of boarding school. These children spend most of their time in boarding school and are likely to spend more time with teachers, which might form strong relationships with teachers (Liu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017). In addition, in their school lives, the head teachers of their classes to which they belong are in charge of everything and spend most of the day with them (Wang et al., 2017).

Peers can have a positive influence on left-behind children, a finding which has been well-documented. Some studies have reported that close and supportive peers not only provide emotional support but also promote the growing child's confidence in social interactions, and overall positive development (Wen & Lin, 2012; Sun et al., 2015). Other studies report that peer support has been linked to lower levels of behavioural problems and depressive symptoms (Fan et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2021). Some studies have indicated that the number of friends a left-behind child had were both positively and significantly related to the left-behind child's psychological resilience, which would in turn increase their interpersonal skills and problem-solving abilities (Lan & Wang, 2019; Xiao et al., 2019). For example, peer support was positively associated with the self-esteem and self-concept of left-behind children, and they are more likely to have positive view of themselves (Lan & Wang, 2019; Wang et al., 2005).

However, these studies talked about peers and teachers in a broad way, and most of them used standardised measures to evaluate the association between outcomes and relationships with peers and teachers. The present study extended beyond the surface-level of positive influence

of these people to the deeper meanings that these children assigned to them, and they were perceived as heroes in left-behind children's lives. For example, the present study showed how a teacher's encouragement can elevate career inspiration while simultaneously nurturing a sense of self-worth and belonging ("*so cherished me and made me feel special*") for the left-behind child (Huixin). Similarly, the bonds forged with select peers not only offers emotional support but also cultivated a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding, which was vital for the left-behind child (Linyuan) to stay strong in a "no one cares" situation. Furthermore, the present study has presented a fresh perspective on the role of shared experiences among left-behind children in fostering emotional bonds and generating support as seen in Linyuan's and Chao's stories. It also offered a new perspective that for some participants (Limin, Huixin, Linyuan) just being noticed, understood and encouraged meant so much to them.

Besides positive role of peers and teachers, many studies reported that neighbourhood is closely related to the quality of left-behind children's lives. This can be understood through two aspects. One is an ancient Chinese proverb, "Distant kinsmen mean less than close neighbours"; that is, people highly value the role of neighbours in daily life in China. In migrant families, most left-behind children are cared for by fragile grandparents. Thus, the nonparental adults in the neighbourhood may be important compensatory sources of support. Also, Chinese culture values mutual assistance and harmony, and neighbours are vital source for left-behind children from a cultural perspective (Zhang et al., 2016). Some studies suggested that neighbourhood is positively related to the well-being of left-behind children. For example, Chai et al. (2019) and Li et al., (2018) found that neighbourhoods can offer social cohesion that is helpful for left-behind children to build a strong social network and bonds outside the family, which in turn help them to cope with adversity, get more social support, strengthen the sense of belonging and promote their well-being. Li et al. (2018) pointed out that neighbourhoods are often the long-term, common living environments for left-behind children. The level of a left-behind child's living has been found to partially mediated between the left-behind children's resilience and subjective well-being (Chai et al., 2019; Li et al., 2018). Mu (2018) also found that, the help, support, and caring shown by neighbours might have played a crucial role in encouraging left-behind children to survive, especially when both parents migrated. These neighbourhoods not only offer frequent contact opportunities for the children but also serve as places for these children to stay where parents or caregivers are too busy, which is a common practice in rural China (Fan et al., 2010; Mu, 2016). In addition, living in a good community atmosphere, teachers are more willing to educate and interact with children to help them face challenges (Li et al., 2018).

The positive impacts of neighbors on left-behind children, as documented in previous research, align with the findings of the present study. However, the majority of these studies have treated neighbors or neighborhoods as peripheral factors, potentially overlooking the considerable influence they can have on left-behind children, whether detrimental or profoundly positive. The present study has captured this nuance, as illustrated in Limin's and Wenhao's stories. These accounts emphasize that a supportive community may at times be as critical as migrant parents in shaping the atmosphere and attitudes of teachers and peers towards left-behind children. It suggests a more complex interplay of relationships and influences that can affect the well-being and development of these children, calling for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the various roles that community members can play.

5.4.4.2 The significant individuals of negative impacts on left-behind children

Conversely, the present study also illuminated the detrimental effects of peers, teachers, neighbors on left-behind children. These are consistent with previous studies. Many studies reported that teachers can have negative impacts on left-behind children (Du & Li, 2010; Mu & Jia, 2016). For example, a recent study Mao (2022) indicated that urban schoolteachers often held negative attitudes to floating children and considered these children as undisciplined, and these children are also often labelled as impolite and loud. Some studies indicated in the urban school, schoolteachers, peers and their parents also viewed floating children as 'waixiangren' problematic (Kwong, 2011; Murphy, 2020). It is a label that does more than just highlight their geographical origin; it is a derogatory term hinting at their supposed lack of desirable qualities. Urban parents feared that these children would have a negative impact on their offspring (Kwong, 2011; Lin & Yun, 2017; Ming, 2013; Murphy, 2004). Some studies have identified that bullying was often associated with the negative influence of peers (Yang et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). For example, Zhang et al. (2021), involving 742 rural left-behind adolescents aged 12 to 16yrs, has indicated that poorer physical health, substandard academic performance, and strained relationships with peers and parents potentially rendered left-behind children more prone to bullying. Hu et al. (2018) reported that poor peer relationships were closely related to poor emotional well-being (depression, anxiety), and more behavioural problems of left-behind children.

With regards to neighbours, studies have indicated that neighbours can increase the vulnerability of left-behind/floating children. For example, Wang (2008) conducted interviews with floating children in Beijing reporting that they felt that they were not welcomed and accepted by their host communities. They lamented that their new neighbours were "*not friendly*", "*bullying*",

"detesting" and "isolating". Being excluded from neighborhoods often made them feel *"very uncomfortable", "angry", "lacking in a sense of security" and "annoyed"*. Other studies have reported that left-behind children were more likely to experience sexual abuse if their neighbourhood was less supportive and left-behind girls are at risk of being sexual abused by nearby neighbours (Yan et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020).

In summary, these studies suggest that the left-behind identity and lack of parental protection are the primary factors that make these children susceptible to harassment from people around them. However, the focus of these studies has been largely on the reasons for these children's vulnerability, rather than exploring the individuals who negatively impact the lives of left-behind children and the significance of these influences. Contrastingly, the present study shines a light on how various factors, such as a rural unsupportive community, urban neglectful teachers, and urban peers, can negatively and significantly affect these children's lives. This not only adds to our understanding of how to assist children in different contexts but also introduces a fresh perspective on how gender roles can negatively influence and be utilized by neighbours to heighten vulnerability among left-behind children. By uncovering these insights, the present study paves the way for future research that should delve into the roles of the left-behind community, including teachers, peers, and neighbours, in shaping the lives and protection of left-behind children. This more nuanced approach may uncover complex relationships and mechanisms that have yet to be fully explored, deepening our understanding and potentially leading to more effective strategies to keep left-behind children physically and emotionally safe.

5.4.4.3 Project Data, ecological systems theory, attachment theory

Through the lens of ecological systems theory, policy, culture, and law are crucial components in shaping layers of protection or risk of left-behind children. As discussed in Chapter 2, the 'Reform and Opening up Policy' and Household registration system (Hukou) in China has engendered a phenomenon where millions of children are left-behind by their migrant parents, and these children have no access to enter public school system even when they float with their migrant parents to cities. Despite the government's commendable efforts to relax the Hukou system regulations and several policies that admit left-behind children into urban public schools, numerous obstacles persist (Hu et al., 2018). These children are burdened with extra school fees, and suffer discrimination rooted in their lower socio-economic status and rural origin (Kwong, 2011; Murphy, 2004) evidence show that some urban public schools are not willing to accept left-behind children despite policy relaxed (Li et al., 2020).

Cultural norms further compound these difficulties by reinforcing social discrimination against migrant parents and their children in the minds of urban dwellers. This discrimination is exacerbated by the struggles migrant families often face in comprehending the local language, adapting to the city's dress code, and conforming to urban manners and customs. Besides being marginalized by urban schoolteachers and urban peers and their parents, migrant parents and children also face the brunt of blame for issues such as traffic congestion, urban degradation, or city crimes (Kwong, 2011; Li et al., 2007, Murphy, 2004).

From a legal perspective, while recent years Chinese government released and amended laws or programs related to left-behind children and protecting their rights, interests, such as 'Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas' by State Council's in 2016, the amendments of People's Republic of China (PRC) Law on the Protection of Minors (Gu, 2022). However, these laws or opinions are known as the 'law without teeth'; they are just a kind of guiding law on protection, which consists of general simple contents and lack of feasible operation and specific protection rules (China Court, 2014; IFENG NEWS, 2016, The paper, 2015). Also, law based on left-behind children tried to punish or threaten migrant parents for their inability to be physically involved in their children's lives, or stripped caregivers' or migrant parents' guardian roles, while ignoring the institutional, social, economic, constraints between rural and urban that makes migration become the only choice for parents (Gu, 2022). Studies reported that Chinese legislation is failing to safeguard left-behind children's rights, including rights to provision, protection and participation (Zhang, 2018). That said, left-behind children often have less access to certain services (e.g. basic living conditions, health care, education). These children are more likely to suffer maltreatment, and they often cannot have a right in participating in their life decisions (Wen & Lin, 2012). Together, these factors contribute to the lack of children's rights, making them more vulnerable and unprotected (Zhang, 2018).

Chinese policy and legislation help the present study to understand why left-behind children are vulnerable. Economic development, rather than the well-being of migrant families, emerges as the priority in policy, setting a tone that has real consequences for how urban dwellers perceive and treat migrants. Despite migrants' significant contributions to urban economic development, there is a stark absence of policies that recognize or celebrate their efforts. This neglect feeds into a prevailing sentiment among urbanites that taking these contributions for granted is acceptable. Coupled with Hukou system regulations that keep most migrants tied to rural areas and the high living costs in cities, a societal consensus has formed that there is no consequence for mistreatment or discrimination against migrant people. Institutions like schools are empowered by these policies to make decisions about accepting or refusing left-behind children. This power imbalance not only disadvantages migrants but also encourages urbanites to hold

and express negative attitudes towards them. A poignant example from our data is Wenhao's case, where his mother urged him to remain silent about the discrimination he faced. Her resignation of the unfair system serves as a powerful illustration of how policy and societal attitudes combine to create an environment where the abuse and discrimination of left-behind children are not only tolerated but seemingly endorsed.

The stories of Limin and Wenen in our study bring attention to the inadequacy of existing legislation in China to protect left-behind children. In these examples, where both children faced harassment, the absence of intervention from those around them and a lack of viable solutions highlight a concerning weakness in the application of the law. Such instances, as captured in Limin's stories, illuminate the common phenomenon of 'law without teeth' in rural China, where legal frameworks fail to protect those they were meant to safeguard. These troubling experiences challenge prevailing notions in legislation that mainly focus on the protection of children from harm by parents and temporary caregivers. They expose the broader and multifaceted threats that left-behind children can face from various people and entities. Furthermore, the stories of Wenwen and Limin underscore the legislative gap in providing specific protection for left-behind girls, who may be more vulnerable in traditional rural settings. What these stories reveal is that existing legislation operates at a level too broad to be effective. Future legislation must recognize the serious vulnerability of left-behind children and adopt a comprehensive approach that considers their lives in all aspects, including community, neighborhood, and school. Such a multifaceted perspective can ensure that every single aspect of protection is examined, creating a legal framework robust enough to genuinely safeguard the welfare of left-behind children in China. The experiences of Limin and Wenwen provide a powerful impetus for legal reform, urging a more detailed and empathetic understanding of the unique challenges these children face.

In addition to this, the concept of harmony in Chinese culture has restricted the reach of the judicial system in rural areas. Deeply rooted traditional beliefs and the primacy of interpersonal harmony over legal and formal institutions have also weakened the legal system, hence many cases of left-behind children are deliberately unreported and hidden. For example, studies indicated that rural society in China is essentially an 'acquaintance society' based on interpersonal relationships and sentiments, not on legal procedure and litigation (Yan et al., 2018). Rural residents therefore avoid exposing the sexual abuse of their children publicly; instead, they seek to settle these issues privately and in an extra legal context (Wang et al., 2020). Hence, the actual sexual abuse remains unreported and hidden, the actual number of sexual

assaults is likely higher (Zhang, 2016a, 2016b). Furthermore, migrant parents and caregivers often lack knowledge and awareness in delivering knowing knowledge to left-behind children or protecting these children by using law (Gu, 2022). It is hence that left-behind children continue to be subjected to a situation of vulnerability. Together, the culture, policy, and law in China contribute to fostering a negative attitude towards left-behind children, disadvantaging them in various ways. Indeed, these elements introduce additional harmful effects on the lives of these children. It is therefore unsurprising that left-behind children in the present study were marginalised by both key institutions and influential individuals.

The significant individuals and their impact on left-behind children can also be interpreted through the lens of attachment theory. Studies within the feature of attachment theory suggest that as children mature, their focus of attachment often transitions from parents towards peers and schoolteachers (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Laible et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2015). While early adolescents continue to consider their parents as a secure base, they tend to maintain closer proximity to peers and view them as a safe haven (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005). Given that most left-behind children spend a majority of their time in boarding schools and that teachers in China often oversee not only school life but also academic development, these children, in the absence of parental care and support, may consider kind, sensitive, and responsive teachers as attachment figures (Liu & Villa, 2020; Wang et al., 2017). This predisposition would likely make these children more receptive to warm relationships with teachers, thus highlighting the positive role that peers and teachers can play in shaping the development of left-behind children (Liu et al., 2015). However, negative experiences with peers and teachers, viewed through the lens of attachment theory, may also contribute to adverse experiences for left-behind children, suggesting further exploration in future studies.

In conclusion, the themes discussed in this chapter revealed the influence of gifts and the significance of key individuals; 'heroes' who provide warmth and hope to left-behind children and 'villains' who often had a detrimental impact. Culture, policy, and law, viewed through the lens of ecological systems theory, introduce layers of risk for left-behind children. What emerges from this chapter is not merely a description of these influences but a profound insight into how teachers, peers, neighbours can interact and influence, offering a rich perspective for future interventions and policy developments to truly support and protect left-behind children.

Chapter 5.5 Love-hate Relationships with Parents after Years of Migration

This theme, and its broader context, is described first before the three sub-themes. Love-hate relationship, and its three sub-themes, represents participants' overall feelings towards their migrant parents during the years when they were left-behind. Three coping mechanisms (captured as sub-themes) were conveyed by participants to deal with left-behind adversities, which were often responses to complex feeling about their parents and changed over time. Participants felt anger and doubt about their parental love, and many withdrew from communication with their parents. They loved their parents, and still loved them at the point of interview, but felt that they were not sufficiently loved by their parents and, mixed with anger, developed love-hate feelings towards parents.

It is worth noting that participants' experiences often fell into more than one coping experience. The next section offers two illustrative narratives for each of the sub-themes reflecting how their perceptions of their parent-child relationship and their parents, changed over time.

5.5.1 Unresolved anger

Anger had built up for participants during the left-behind period, stored, and never resolved, and led to lingering tension in their adult parent-child relationship. Two participants reported that after the initial heart-breaking separation from their parents, and later happy reunions, they become used to living this pattern. They reported they knew that their parents did not want to hurt them by migrating, but they, as children, did feel angry about it. The anger remained unresolved (i.e., unspent, unspoken and not repaired), and in the interviews, many emphasised how it affected their relationships with parents now as young adults. Their unresolved anger lingered but they felt it was ungrateful of them to express their feelings to their parents given their sacrifices.

This was the case for Xiaocao. Both of her parents migrated when she was 10yrs and left her brother and her to live with their paternal grandparents until her early adulthood. In the extract, she conveys slow burning anger, and how she lowered her expectations, and built her resolution to cope given no other choice:

...I have been getting used to them leaving and returning, so have they. In the first two years of migration, I frequently asked them to come more often they always said they needed to make money, then I stopped asking. They have increased my pocket money, but care for me emotionally

less. My level of sadness and tolerance have become higher when they leave and my expectations of them have become lower. They have migrated for more than 15 years. In these years I experienced everything alone. I gave up hoping hope this would change for me. The most painful period was when I was boarding at middle school, I remember...when I was 13yrs old, I was very scared when my first period came. I saw the blood I thought I would die. No one had ever told me about this beforehand. When I was 14yrs old, I had toothache and couldn't eat solid food for the whole month. I only drank liquid food and during this painful time I also had to study. It was so painful, but I had to hide my feelings. I didn't want to tell them at the time because I knew they could do nothing. I also didn't talk with them for nearly a year. Because I didn't want them knowing my life and even know I don't want to share with them, because they don't know me. (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female)

Xiaocao expressed how she suppressed her emotions and tried to limit how much her parents' absence and apparent disinterest in her could hurt her. It also reveals an important finding that it is not just the separation that has an effect - but the way connection is or is not kept during separation. Xiaocao's middle school experience was at times very lonely, scary and painful. Her daily life examples revealed how, as a child, she had to do everything alone even when she needed her parents most, and how painful for her to realize that at the time. Xiaocao's anger led to refusal to talk to her parents for nearly a year, her anger was not just at being a left-behind child but also from the lack of any care, interest, concern, or love while she was left-behind. The strong statement ("*even know I don't want to share with them*") she made reflects anger and also how the anger triggered withdrawal of herself from them. Xiaocao was particularly angry when she compared her experience to her peers' whose parents did not migrate:

I saw other families, they didn't migrate, they still lived well. I was angrier. Every time we spoke on the phone, they just asked me whether the money they sent was enough, or how was my studying going. It seemed money was their only way to express their love or manage not feeling guilty, rather than spending time together. Sometimes my mother said she loved me, but I felt nothing, because – she loves me, but she couldn't stay with me like other mothers, then what's the point of love? I felt disgusted and angry, so when they called, I refused to answer for almost a whole year. I didn't know why at the time, but I know now, it was because at the time I felt they didn't deserve my love after I had been through everything alone. I felt I had totally grown up; I didn't need them. I don't want to share with them how I was feeling even now.

For Xiaocao, the perceived gap between other families and her actual family was painful. She felt her parents valued money too much. Her statement that "*they didn't deserve my love after I had been through everything alone*" implies lingering resentment and withdrawal of love by Xiaocao. It is interesting to note that she refused to talk to her parents right after her period of suffering with toothache, where she felt acutely alone and without parental care. This was felt by Xiaocao

as emotional abandonment by her parents, and her withdrawing and refusing to communicate with them was a protective move to avoid further hurt and perhaps to hurt back in return.

Migration and money were becoming necessities in Xiaocao's family and so her suffering and desperation of wanting her parents to stay / and for her to be cared for were unnoticed by them. Xiaocao's repeated statement she *made "I don't want to share with them even now"* shows her ongoing, sustained, deep anger and upset. These harboured emotions affected her relationship with her parents as an adult, showing the legacy of migration on some parent-child relationships well into adulthood.

Another participant Xingxing shared similar experiences. She relayed how enraged she was. Unlike Xiaocao, her adaptations to the emotional absence of her parents were to treat them in the same way as they treated her when they got older. Unlike other participants in the study, Xingxing spent her early childhood with her parents before she was left-behind when she was 10yrs. She expressed how meaningless she felt before migration and she learned that she was like a servant to her parents:

... I was angry with my parents, and I am still. They have never been involved in my life. They asked me to wash their clothes and cook for them when I was a kid. I was like a servant to my parents. I wanted them to do things with me. This is maybe because we were too poor, and they were too busy with making money. Everything has become worse after they migrated. I had no chance to see them until they wanted to. I felt so alone and lonely. Although sometimes they returned home, they never tried to engage in my life, like check my homework, communicate with me like other normal parents, you know, treat me like their child, rather than an object. This is so unacceptable and why? They had time, they just didn't want to. (Xingxing, 25yrs, Female)

As resonated with Xiaocao, Xingxing's emotional pain emerged before migration and continued to accumulate during and after migration, ultimately leading to the unsolved anger she experienced. Differently to Xiaocao, Xingxing's expectations of her parents was relatively low although she wanted them to be engaged in her life and to be able to see them. She desired affection and attention. Xingxing's strong statement that *'everything has become worse after they migrated'* suggests that being left-behind amplified her feelings of loneliness and neglect. However, her parents kept ignoring her needs and remained absent from her life, which she found *"unacceptable"* as *"they had time"*. As for Xingxing, her unresolved anger and the destructive and ongoing damage to the parent-child relationship led her to plan revenge:

... I know they were working hard to make a living, but we could have a good relationship if they wanted. I asked myself WHY my family was like this, and I thought, and thought again and again,

and now I give up, the reason doesn't bother me anymore. I know there is no love between us, only orders and responsibility. When they become old, I will treat them the way they have treated me, I will offer them shelter and food to eat, but there is no love for them; when they experience it, they will know how much I have suffered.

Xingxing tried hard to justify her parents' hard work, but she found it hard as she perceived "we could have a good relationship if they wanted". Her repeated questioning reveals that her pain was from feeling unloved by her parents rather than being left-behind per se. Xingxing's statement that "I thought and thought again" may seem straightforward, but it likely involved a significant amount of reflection and introspection. Xingxing may have struggled for a long time. It was only after letting go of the idea of wanting love and accepting the reality of her situation that she was able to verbalize the lack of love between them. Xingxing's desire for revenge was as a form of coping with unresolved anger.

Overall, two participants (Xiaocao and Xingxing) revealed how they established mindsets and relational practices to manage their emotional pain and limit further hurt by their parents. Xiaocao's and Xingxing's stories reveal that expectations of their parents were simple - to be unconditionally loved and engaged in their lives. This highlights that their adaptations were the last options for them to cope with their circumstances. Their stories also highlight that having a solid and fundamental family relationship prior to migration may mitigate the harm that children suffer from being left-behind and the consequences that follow.

5.5.2 How could you go?

Two participants reflected on the choices their parents had made and what they ought to have prioritised. They felt that they logically understood their parents' migration, yet when looking at the entire experience, they struggled to emotionally accept it. This resulted in them frequently questioning the love they received from their parents and questioning the hurt came from that.

This was the case for Wenhao, who had a six-year floating experience before being sent home to live with extended family when he was 10yrs. This developed into an eight-year experience of being left-behind, before his parents finally returned home. Wenhao felt that his parents perceived him as an obedient child that was always understanding and kind. Wenhao understood his parents' reasons for migration and never told them that he suffered. However, he realised that something was not right when things started to change for him and he began to self-harm, drop out of school and fight with his classmates and his parents during early adolescence.

Wenhao shared his perception of his parents' migration and how this has affected his present relationship with them:

... I really loved my parents, and I was grateful for what they did, and I still love them. Things changed when I was in middle school, I felt a child should be living with only their parents, like my peers. I asked them, they said they migrated for my education, and they asked me to study hard. But I saw other parents living with their children, I felt was it possible for them to stay with me and make money? Especially when I saw others' parents coming to pick up their children over school breaks; I was like a homeless person that had nowhere to go. Then I felt I shouldn't have this thought, I kept telling myself that I should feel content and happy about my parents, as they have sacrificed their life for me. My situation was much better than orphans or other left-behind children, so I felt I should be grateful. However, I didn't, I wondered why they had to leave me behind and why I had to be alone. I felt I was ungrateful and a bad child. If they ever knew I felt like this, they would be sad. (Wenhao, 22yrs, Male)

When Wenhao, as a teenager, wondered why his life was different from others, his parents made him feel that everything they did was for him and that felt for him like a moral dilemma. He got caught up in mental gymnastics trying to understand conflicting views, emotions, and stories about whether they had to go. It is striking that many participants seem to have developed a sense of what they wanted and needed from looking around them at other children and families. Wenhao portrayed how jealous and distressed he was when he saw other parents staying with their children and coping financially which led him to try to untangle why his own parents left. Wenhao also conveyed emotional dilemmas as he managed the reality of his hurt, with the narrative that he should be grateful and that his life could be worse. Wenhao felt he could logically but not emotionally accept his parents' migration, as he kept saying:

Also, this made me extremely unhappy in school, especially after they said to study hard, because it reminded me of their sacrifice. I can't blame my parents given their sacrifice. I also didn't want to see or talk to them because it reminded me of their absence. I became distant from them, and I got easily irritated by them. I was confused and angry at myself and my parents. I fought with them a lot, and I cut myself, and dropped out of school for a semester without telling them. I was depressed but had nowhere to go. The thing that torments me now is whenever I feel my parents are not good with me, my anger is doubled, then my sadness is doubled, and I cannot get away from it, it seems it's never going to end.

Wenhao became increasingly distant from his parents as a way to manage his complex feelings. He portrays a cycle of confusion, sadness, and anger, and how this changed over time, eventually leading to severe distress and experiences around mental health and self-harm. At the point of interview, his 'torment' felt to him as though it will never end as the legacy of being a left-behind child, and resenting his parents, continued.

Wenhao was not the only one to experience such personal and relational conflicts about his parents' migration. Xiaorui's mother migrated when she was 4yrs; her father had to work in a nearby town, so she lived with her paternal grandparents. Xiaorui expressed how difficult it was for her to make sense of her emotions and portrayed similar mental gymnastics to others in managing competing perspectives:

When I was a kid, I never thought that my parents could be wrong, but things changed when I started to develop my own understandings of migration. I still believe that it was hard for them to leave me behind, but wondered was it necessary to leave me? Did we need a lot of money? Are they doing this for me? Or for them? Why did they lie to me? If my parents had told me their real thoughts, I would have understood. I asked myself, then I thought I should not have these thoughts, it must be necessary, for my education, because they told me this, but...because there were some families similar to my family, whose parents didn't migrate, and it seemed affordable for their children's education and living. My parents maybe didn't have to leave, maybe they left because they wanted to, but... I feared my thoughts. (Xiaorui, 19yrs, Female)

Xiaorui experienced new ways of perceiving and making sense of her parents' migration, and her feelings, as she grew – showing that, as with other participants, the experience of being a left-behind child was constantly shifting, especially it seems when new developmental capacities for complex thoughts and perspective-taking emerge. Notable here again is that, as participants grew, they began to compare their own family with others whose parents still lived at home and appeared to cope financially. This perspective appeared particularly painful. Xiaorui developed her own understanding of her parents' migration that pained her to think about ("*I feared my thoughts*"). Xiaorui perceived thoughts of "*they left because they wanted to, but...I feared my thoughts*", which must be the greatest fear to doubt her parents' migration drive. The difficult thing for Xiaorui was that she was found herself trying to cope with complex tension between logic and emotion. However, the way she coped with it was to become more silent and withdraw her feelings:

Normally, my parents always ask a lot, like my studying. They always said what they have scarified for me, this made me feel like I was a burden to them. I wanted to tell them there was no need to do this for me, but it was difficult to even mention migration. So, I had to accept that they chose to do this for my benefit, despite me feeling unhappy that I was being left-behind. Once I have these thoughts, they stick with me, they distress me. All of these made doubt about my parents' love, although I can see they love me very much, but...I don't know, maybe I am overthinking. But, my feelings towards my parents changed, there is no understanding about being left as a child, I still love them, but I doubt what they tell me, maybe that's not correct. But I know I have to bury my thoughts; I wouldn't tell anyone.

Xiaorui perceived that her parents were proud of their decision to migrate for her sake, making it impossible for her to express her own distress at the situation, complicating the relationship. The repetition of the word "*sacrificing*" suggests the realities of how migrant parents unknowingly make their children feel that they are a burden. Xiaorui persistent expresses her internal struggles ("*All of these made doubt about my parents' love*") between what she saw and what she felt about her parents, as she intellectually knows she is loved, yet emotionally doubt about whether she was being unconditionally and sufficiently love, further complicating her relationships with parents as she decided to not tell anyone. Xiaorui's account shows the difficulty for a left-behind child to be open with their parents, even as a young adult. They perceived a huge and intangible moral debt has been imposed on them which creates complexity in managing the hurt and anger at being left-behind.

Xiaorui's and Wenhao's stories show that the dilemma they experienced did not emerge in a day or by a singular event, but was a result of time, self-reflections, observations, and comparison with other 'normal' families, and personal development (growing up). This process went from their early adolescence to early adulthood, and their perception towards their parents and migration changed from their parents' account, to their own, although this was conflicted. Sense-making about being a left-behind child was particularly impacted when the young person felt their parents had choices and did not have to migrate. Their stories also reveal how participants developed contradictory feelings towards their parents from childhood into adolescent and early adulthoods. This is also true of participants in the first theme '*Unresolved anger*'. The accounts portray the silencing of the left-behind child in the parent-child relationship, where there is no space for open expression about the impact of the migration on them as children, but also now, as young adults.

5.5.3 Withdrawal from conversations

This sub-theme conveys a shift in parent-child communication, from engagement to withdrawal as a way to signal, and partly manage, their feelings of hurt, distrust and resentment towards their parents. Some participants relayed a sense of helplessness at eventually 'seeing' that their parents were not interested in them as people, but only in what they could achieve. Xiaocao was such an example.

Xiaocao recalled how their conversation was in the first few years when they were separated:

...when I was a child and they left, we occasionally talked via phone. When they called me, they only asked me to eat well and study well. In the beginning, I listened. And I also shared them everything when they just left, slowly, I lost in interesting in sharing my lives as they seemed not interested in my life and only cared about my study and this made me feel their love is fake and conditional. I wanted their notice, or attention maybe, but they kept saying there is no future if I didn't study well. My parents kept mentioning this even they returned. I was tired of this but couldn't do nothing about it. (Xiaocao, 22yrs, Female)

Xicao recalled how she went from willingly sharing everything to slowly losing interest in the conversation with her parents after migration. Xiaocao wanted their "notice or attention" yet felt their expressions of care were "fake" and "conditional". It was not what Xiaocao needed yet felt powerless to address this void. Xiaocao relays how her parents' perceived superficial care made her angry:

My parents now still tell me to do things and treat me as a child, like asking me to wear more clothes in winter. I am kind of angry. Of course, I know how to take care of myself. There is no need for them to say. I have become a grown woman; I have learnt to do things on my own and was forced to be independent. I know sometimes they wanted to talk with me. But I didn't want to, and I still don't want to. I refused to let them know more of me and my life. Because they 'disappeared' from my life since I was 10yrs, why when they now want to know my life, do I have to say? I don't think so. I feel like maybe it is my way to be distant to them?

The strong statement Xiaocao made 'there is no need for them to say' reveals her now only relies on herself in her life. Xiaocao's parents' attempted communications, were, to her, very misplaced, orienting to her as a child who would respond to their guidance, completely missing that Xiaocao was a grown, independent woman. For Xiaocao, withdrawing communication was a type of weapon for her, as an adult, with newly acquired power to control the narratives with her parents, to both protect herself and to administer hurt or retribution. Now, as a grown-up, Xiaocao sees the situation is irresolvable as she realises what they have missed will never come back:

Looking back the overall experiences (left-behind), I know it is hard for us to really communicate, very hard. Because we didn't have too many mutual memories, this left us with nothing to talk about other than money or my studies. They missed too much of my life, they really don't know me. There is no foundation base that allow us to talk openly. Sometimes communication can be worse when we argue, and there is no end resolution. Also, I wished they would have said something nice if they talked, but they've never done (laugh). We just sit in silence and let the time pass. When I sat there, all my feelings have accumulated for years- sadness, pain, loss, disappointments, and anger, but still, there is no way to resolve it.

Xiaocao conveys the impact on their relationship of no shared experiences and subsequently, of not feeling known by her parents who *"missed most of my life"*. The silence between them now is heavy. Xiaocao's withdrawing communication is one of the few she has to protect herself from further hurt but also to let the consequences of parental migration play out in front of them. That she feels *"there is no way to resolve it"* also highlights that she sees the situation between them as adults as still holding the legacy of their migration.

Another two participants (Xue and Xingxing) also experienced feeling powerless in the conversations as their parents had no time to communicate with them. They expressed how hard it was, as Xue said:

...when I was a child, they were too busy to talk to me. Now we don't have much to say as we don't really know each other, especially when my parents separated when I was 10yrs and they dislike each other, so situations in which the three of us spend time together have become less. I know we love each other, but I don't want to communicate with them or for them to know my life. We are distant, as there is no connection between us, also I don't want to. I've been disappointed enough. (Xue, 22yrs, Female).

Being unknown, the silence, and the distance, shows that the drift, and how it became destructive for Xue. Rejecting communication was her choice and represented a denial of the gift to the parents of 'being known'. Another participant, Xingxing, withdrawal of being known and planning retribution, made sense to her:

I know we are distant, and there is no communication between us as I don't want it. Even when we talk, they only asked me about study. I have been fed-up. After all these years of suffering and disappointments, I give upon our relationships, and I think they deserve this. I know they want to have more communication with me, but I refuse as they are too late. When they become old, I will treat them as they have mistreated me, only food and money, but with no care and no talk. I will not meet their emotional needs. I choose this, having no more emotional connections with them, maybe I will change in the future, but for now this is how it will remain. (Xingxing, 22yrs, Female)

Xingxing being distant with her parents suggests an emotional and communicative gap between Xingxing and her parents, and the distancing is not just perceived by Xingxing, but actively maintained by her as well. For Xingxing, the specific reasons for this *"disappointment"* aren't detailed, but her narrative suggests it is related to the lack of meaningful communication and perhaps the lack of mutual understanding or validation. *"I refuse as they are too late"* suggests that there might have been a time when communication and reconciliation could have been

possible for Xingxing, but she now believes that moment has passed. The use of "too late" indicates regret, resentment, and finality in her decision. Xinxing expresses a desire for retribution, choosing to sever emotional ties in order to guard herself.

Overall, Xiaocao, Xue, and Xinxing as adults reflect back, choosing to withdrawal from conversation as a coping mechanism to protect themselves and manage their retributions. These enact karma, reflect the depth and enduring nature of their hurt and rejection from being left-behind and poorly parented. Their stores show that being left-behind per se seemed manageable but missing out of parental love and attention was painful and irresolvable. Xiaocao, Xingxing and Xue, paint a picture of a broken relationship, characterized by emotional distance, years of suffering, disappointment, highlights their pain is tooted in the ongoing relationship with their parents.

5.5.4 Discussion

This chapter presents how adults who were left-behind during their childhood navigated and coped emotionally with the absence of their parents, their decision to leave and how it felt when parents still expected a relationship with their child over time. Three sub-themes captured participants' experiences here. First, the participants harboured unresolved anger; second, the participants experienced rational but not emotional acceptance of their parents' decisions; and third, withdrawal from communication was not merely a reflection of their anger or ambivalence, but an active strategy to experience and exert some control, even if only over what they give to the parental relationship now.

5.5.4.1 Understanding 'Unresolved Anger' and 'How Could You Go'

The present study captured those participants frequently experienced anger and doubt following parental absence. Very few studies have captured how left-behind children cope, and existing findings are mixed. For instance, Xiao's (2014) study presented two contrasting mechanisms employed by left-behind children (aged between 11-14yrs) to cope with the absence of their parents. Some left-behind children could grasp the necessity of parental migration on an emotional level but found it practically challenging to maintain close relationships with their parents, whether through phone conversations or reunions. Other left-behind children appeared to manage the situation flexibly – they easily rekindled their closeness when their parents returned and accepted their parents' absence when they left again. Zhao et al.'s study (2018) shed light on a group of left-behind children, aged between 7-14yrs, who demonstrated a deep

understanding of the need for migration both logically and emotionally. Some children expressed considerable gratitude for their parents' sacrifice and accepted migration as the most viable option for family survival and prosperity, particularly concerning their future education. They seemed to reconcile their desire for their parents' presence with the reality of their parents' migration decision effectively. Other left-behind children tended to internalise their distress, in some cases, growing resentment towards their migrant parents. This is partially consistent with the present study by discovering that some left-behind children preferred an inward way of dealing with the absence of their parents, fuelled by varying levels of understanding and emotional distress. The age of parent-child separation, according to Zhao et al. (2018), appeared to be a key factor influencing the children's coping. When separation occurred after early childhood (i.e., over 12yrs), the children tended to openly express their feelings about their parents' migration and tried to persuade their parents to spend less time away. However, the investigation into the specific age range of separation in Zhao's study was underexplored. In addition, age of when being asked about one's feelings will make also a big difference.

Yu's (2011) study, on the other hand, found that left-behind children often experienced enduring anger about parental migration, which persisted even during family reunions. This study suggested that this unresolved anger was frequently provoked when parents exerted considerable academic pressure on their children. Even when the children understood the sacrifices made by their parents and the importance of their educational performance, they felt conditionally loved due to their parents' narrow focus on academic achievements. This finding resonates with the present study's findings, where participants felt the focus on their academic performance was a poor substitute for unconditional love. However, the present study goes a step further by providing a more holistic understanding from the perspective of left-behind adults. The participants' viewpoints were drawn not only from their experiences as left-behind children but also from their personal experience into adulthood. The present study illuminated that the anger left-behind children harboured was not merely related to their parents' singular focus on academic performance but was tied to multiple factors with a historical effect, such as having to endure adversities alone, infrequent parental visits, and a communication gap. Taken together, these factors instilled a sense of emotional abandonment in the children and diminished their hope for parental love. Their unresolved anger was thus not an isolated reaction, but a result of accumulated frustration and disappointment over years.

5.5.4.2 Understanding 'Withdrawal from Conversations'

The present study delved deeper into the coping strategy of '*Withdrawal from conversations*' with migrant parents, often observed among left-behind children managing parental absence. While previous research, such as Ye (2011) and Zhang et al. (2018) also reported this, they generally attributed this withdrawal from communication to external circumstances or other contributing factors rather than the children's own conscious decision or desire. For instance, Zhao's (2018) study suggested major family disruptions or prolonged periods of separation as possible reasons behind a child's reluctance to communicate with their migrant parents. However, the present study provides a fresh perspective, attributing this withdrawal from conversation as a demonstration of increased personal power, enabling left-behind children to control their relationships by controlling communication with their migrant parents.

Furthermore, the present study further identified two key reasons for why participants often chose to distance themselves in and from conversations with their migrant parents (as evident in Xiaocao's, Xingxing's and Xue's stories). One reason was parents' lack of interest in left-behind children's emotional well-being, and this reason aligns with prior studies. For example, Zhao's (2018) demonstrated that left-behind children often felt disempowered in dialogues with their migrant parents. Left-behind children were perceived as either too young to express their emotions by their migrant parents or, when they could, their expressions were largely ignored by them. These left-behind children longed for affection and asked their parents to visit them at home more often, which often went unheeded, and their migrant parents' main concern on the phone was their academic performance. Moreover, some left-behind children attempted to discuss the unnecessary of earning money as they would rather their parents were at home, but this was criticised by their parents as thoughtless. Their perceived lack of attention and affection heightened their reluctance to communicate. Similarly, Guang et al. (2018) found that when parent-child discussions focused on the children's feelings, the children reported decreased depression levels and a positive attitude on life. Conversely, conversations that centred around academic performance led to increased stress and depressive symptoms in left-behind children. Su et al. (2013) and Cai et al. (2021) also underscored the correlation between high-quality parent-child communication and children's life satisfaction and happiness.

However, these studies fell short of explicating what 'high-quality' communication entails. Both previous studies and the present study suggest that parent-child communication often deteriorated because of non-emotional-conversation, this was seen by left-behind children as an indicator of being unloved. The present study highlights the left-behind children's need for genuine parental engagement and recognition in their lives. They craved emotional connection and meaningful interaction that acknowledged their individual experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

The second reason for participants' withdrawal was their belief that their migrant parents lacked sufficient knowledge about their day-to-day lives, thus reducing common conversational grounds. This resonates with Xiao (2014) which suggested that the absence of shared experiences and memories between left-behind children and their migrant parents could negatively affect their relationship. Attachment theory also affirms this view, positing that shared experiences form the basis for secure attachments, fostering understanding, trust, and emotional connectivity (Ainsworth, 1989). Specifically, the parent-child relationship becomes a place of trust and safety because of multiple opportunities to forge, test and experience this (Ainsworth, 1989; Gelkopf & Jabotaro, 2013). Xiao's findings revealed that this void in shared memory causes children to fear misalignment in perspectives and potential communication barriers with their parents. From the perspective of attachment theory, the absence of shared experiences and memories between children and their migrant parents can significantly influence the children's willingness to engage in conversations with their parents as it is not a relationship in which they feel known and safe (Bost et al., 2006).

Attachment theory posits that the quality of early attachments significantly impacts future relational patterns and emotional wellbeing (Morgan, 2010). Shared experiences and memories serve as a cornerstone for close attachments, fostering an environment of understanding, trust, and emotional connectivity (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2015). In the case of left-behind children, the lack of these shared experiences with their migrant parents can lead to insecure attachment. This might manifest as a reluctance or hesitation to initiate or engage in conversations with their parents, stemming from a fear of not being understood or a feeling of emotional disconnect or even rejection (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2015). Moreover, the lack of shared experiences reduces the common ground upon which meaningful and enriching conversations can occur, making communication feel forced or superficial, and thus less appealing to the children (Morgan, 2010). The present study offers valuable insights into why left-behind children '*Withdraw from conversations*'.

5.5.4.3 Acknowledging the loss comparing to non-left-behind children

The present study also identified how the presence of their peers whose parents were around intensified the participants' complex and ambivalent emotions towards their own parents. The ACEs framework suggests that loss plays a significant role in shaping adversity (Gravelle 1997; Felitti et al., 1998). For the present study, although participants experienced more or less any forms of loss, how they understood loss through the social mirror in the community of 'intact' happy families is significant in shaping their relationship with parents. The participants had to navigate various forms of loss, not only related to their trust in their parents but also the lost opportunities for experiencing life like other children who lived with their parents. These losses required the participants to cope with a new understanding and awareness of their circumstances, which seemed to coincide with key developmental changes, such as the alternatives their parents had of make a living rather than migration and thinking that the reason for migration may not solely be financial. This newfound awareness and knowledge heightened the participants' internal conflict and gave rise to mixed feelings, especially when they saw their peers how had parents around.

The process of this social comparison orientation and hence finding being different was also found in previous studies in 'normal' (non-migration) families in China. For example, Fu et al. (2018) indicated that it is common for Chinese adolescents to compare themselves to their peers as a way to see their position in the social world. Chinese culture (Confucianism) also expects individuals to learn their roles within hierarchical systems, and in this context, social comparison is seen as necessary for children to maintain desirable behaviours and stay attuned to social environments (Chen, 2012). Fu et al. (2018) indicated that the effect of making comparisons to others can lead to have negative self-perception and unhelpful internal attributions, amplified when they lack social support or in the face of stressful events (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006). Most importantly, the attributional style in processing negative comparative information may contribute to an increase in emotional distress over time, such as constantly feeling powerless (Fu et al., 2018). This helps us to understand the situation of participants in the present study. Compared to peers and s 'intact' family, doing 'normal' things like picking the child up from school, highlighted to them what they did not have. Yet they were expected to be silent about what they noticed.

Few studies on left-behind children in China have captured such social comparison. For example, Zhao et al. (2018) reported that left-behind children felt jealous when seeing their peers nagging or acting cute with their parents. Xiao (2014) reported that observing this difference was a painful experience for them. These children reported that seeing what others has made them realise their loss, the loss of having no-one supervising their schoolwork, and the loss of not being able to talk to their parents on a daily basis, as well as the loss for the opportunity for better nutritional care. Although these children acknowledged that they were loved by their parents, the love was functional as they only could see it by remittance sending but they felt 'untouched' by this kind of love.

Lu (2011) also recorded how much hurt and doubt left-behind children had about parental love that emerged from observing peers and families around them. One example they reported was a left-behind child who frequently saw other kids accompanied by their parents to school, reporting how sad he was and how he slowly developed ambivalent feelings towards his father. Another left-behind child felt so angry and had a big fight with her classmate as they questioned why her migrant parents never returned. Lu (2010) also reported from teacher's perspective the difference between left-behind children and non-left-behind children in school life, from an outsider's perspectives, and how that difference made left-behind children felt inferior. For example, left-behind children had to go to school alone and over considerable and often dangerous distances despite snow or rain, whilst their peers who had parents accompany them never worried about this. Also, left-behind children often needed to do farming and house chores and often fell sleep in the class due to this. Lu (2011) argued that ambivalent feelings towards parents are not felt immediately by the left-behind child but develop over time and by their lived experience. In Lu's (2011) study, participants reported that they longed, and still long for their parents' love, whilst experiencing mixed emotions of love and hatred, estrangement and care along with questions like 'you don't love me anymore' and 'why couldn't you come back?' In sum, both previous and the present study report a painful process for left-behind children and how life without parents and a 'normal' childhood and family was perceived as loss, doubts about being loved, and feeling inferior to non-left-behind children. The present study uniquely shows the change in left-behind children's' feelings over time – how the painful perspective comes as people grow and see things differently, often from social comparison, which builds understanding of what is 'normal' and what is 'love'.

In conclusion, the participants' response and coping strategies were multifaceted, borne out of intractable circumstances between the left-behind children and their migrant parents. Not feeling unconditionally loved or cared for, and facing left-behind adversities alone, contributed to a love-hate feeling from the adult left-behind children and their parents. It is important for future research to explore how it seems (for some left-behind children) impossible to undo the emotional and relational harm of being left-behind as a child. Additionally, a deeper understanding is required to identify what encourages positive parent-child relationships from both ends—what helps left-behind children maintain positive relationships with their parents, and vice-versa. Moreover, given the significant role of educational institutions in these children's lives, a comprehensive examination of how schools can be substitute for care for left-behind children. However, most of existing studies examine coping mechanisms from left-behind children or adolescents' perspectives. Future research should broaden the scope to include a wider age range when exploring the coping strategies of adults who were left-behind during their childhood.

Chapter 6 Final Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter synthesises and discusses the key aims, findings and implications arising from this doctoral work. This chapter concludes with a reflection on the strengths and limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

The aim of this thesis was to understand the lived experiences of being left-behind in China from the perspectives of young Chinese adults who had been left-behind during childhood. With the following questions:

1. What are the key experiences recounted by Chinese young people about their left-behind experience as a child, and over time into young adulthood? What meaning is assigned by Chinese young people to these experiences?
2. Do Chinese young people experience any long-term effects on their psychosocial wellbeing from their early left-behind experiences, and if so, how do they explain this? What new knowledge has been appended to the existing literature?
3. What implications do first-person accounts of being a left-behind child have for policy and practice in China pertinent to the left-behind population and their surrounding communities.

This thesis is, to the best of our knowledge, is the first study to recruit and interview in-depth young Chinese adults (aged 20-25yrs) to understand and learn from their broad lived experience as children through to young adulthood. By adopting IPA, this thesis prioritised open exploration of how the young adults perceived and made sense of their experiences, and did not impose any limits of what aspects of their experience was worthy of study nor defined in advance what outcomes were importance (e.g. educational or financial impacts). Critically, this work aimed to 'give voice' to young people who are often without a platform to be heard and understood. Without this voice, our understanding of the nature and impact of parental migration in China will remain poor, and action for them will not be informed by them.

6.1 Thesis: key components and outcomes

Chapter 2 set the stage for the thesis by explaining the global prevalence of left-behind children, with an emphasis on the distinctive socio-political-economic context driving parental economic migration in China. Ecological systems theory was introduced, offering a holistic point of view to understand the micro, meso and macro layers of influence on children's development, experiences and outcomes. Chapter 3 investigated existing knowledge about the effects of being a left-behind child by comparing their nutrition, physical, and psychological states with their non-left-behind counterparts, and among left-behind children from different demographic backgrounds. This chapter also explored recent studies on psychological and emotional well-being among young Chinese adults with left-behind experiences and identified the considerable knowledge gaps and the lack of methodological diversity in this field. This doctoral work aimed to contribute to some of these knowledge gaps. Chapter 4 outlined the core methodological approach and data collection method of the study, explaining the rationale behind the chosen timeline data collection method and IPA methodology. This chapter also included reflexivity notes, documenting my personal position in the research.

6.1.1 Addressing research question 1:

What are the key experiences recounted by Chinese young people about their left-behind experience as a child, and over time into young adulthood? What meaning is assigned by Chinese young people to these experiences?

By answering research questions, it is clear that long-term effects in the study meant to explore the enduring and sustained consequences from being left-behind as a child to the time of participating in the interview as an adult. This research question can be answered with following chapters. Chapters 5.1 through 5.5 provided key experience and the main findings are below. The following reports, meanings, the key insights and new knowledge produced in this work.

Chapter 5.1 Turning Point – the Initial Separation (two phases)

This chapter explored the initial separation from migrating parents within various contexts, and identified that this was, from the child's perspective, often traumatic. Two significant moments or periods were conveyed - feelings of abandonment and adjustments within sadness were common experiences for participants both before and after the separation. It highlighted that being kept in dark about migration was extremely frightening for children and led them to feel abandoned afterwards, yet being told, being heard, being involved in the family decision mattered to how left-behind children understood separation and parental migration. This

chapter emphasized the critical importance of preparing children for parental migration, including establishing a clear communication and care plan in place to lessen the distress of separation.

Chapter 5.2 Pushes and Pulls of Family Layers

This chapter provided an insight into the lives of left-behind children under the care of extended kin. Various experiences were discussed, such as *'Being harmed or protected by family conflicts'*; *Competing for love*; *'Left-behind children as tools of seizing control and power'*, all were experiences of left-behind children being completely cared by extended kin. *'Being isolated and feeling helplessness'* captured left-behind children's experience of being partially or not cared for by extended kin. This chapter also identified several sources of vulnerability, with factors such as remittances, the number of left-behind children in the household, gender, and pre-existing relationships between parents and extended kin contributing to negative caregiving experiences. It revealed a vulnerable situation where left-behind children were often 'pushed and pulled' by adults' feuds and felt helpless. This chapter provided key insights into the crucial role of extended kin in providing care, of migrant parents in identifying good guardians and that who one is left-behind with matters.

Chapter 5.3 Family Dynamics under Migration & the Meaning of Home

This chapter documented how changes in a mother's role resulting from a father's migration impacted the lives of left-behind children. This chapter also revealed how societal perceptions of migrant families could hinge on who stayed behind and who migrated. It also reported the concept of 'home' from the perspective of left-behind children - how they yearn for it, the significance they attached to it, and the connection they establish between their homes and their migrant parents, as *'Home means reunion with parents'*, *'Home as a place to be and become yourself'*. It showed that there are multiple layers of loss and adversity for the left-behind child, beyond the loss of parental presence.

Chapter 5.4 Warmth and Hope

This chapter captured insights into the positivity and warmth that many left-behind children encountered during parental absence. It discussed *the power of gifts* and revealed how left-behind children perceived gifts as a loving sign (*'Gifts as an experience of love and being cherished'*; *'Gifts repair and rebuild relationships'*; *'Gifts as an indicator of being noticed and saved'*) as well as a means to measure whether love remained consistently (*'Gifts as a double-edged sword of love and doubt'*). This chapter highlighted how small yet significant acts of kindness received from nuclear families, peers, or neighbours had a significant impact on the

children's experience of care and love. The villains highlighted vulnerability and raised questions about who is responsible for the safety of these children. Additionally, it discussed the broader impact of other community dynamics on left-behind children, noting negative attitudes from urban schoolteachers and peers. This chapter concluded by pointing out that neither Chinese culture, policy nor law currently provides adequate support for these children.

Chapter 5.5 Love-hate Relationships with Parents

This chapter reported how these children often grappled with complex feelings of love and resentment towards their absent parents (*'Love-hate relationships with parents'*), which connected their past experiences as left-behind children to their present time as young Chinese adults. The development of ambiguous emotions (*'How could you go'*, *'Unresolved anger'*) and withdrawal (*'Withdrawal from conversations'*) were common responses to parental absence. It illustrated the challenges of seeing peers with present parents, and how noticing different families shaped what meaning they gave to their own. It also reported how the limited interest of parents was a further way of 'being left-behind' by them, even after they were gone, and how this compounded complex and torn feelings. This chapter captured how participants made sense of the long-term impacts of being left-behind on their relationships with their parents as they enter adulthood, how the relationships suffer and are not easily repaired. Chapter 5.5 added knowledge on how what left-behind children wanted from their absent parents in the form of meaningful communications, emphasising that asking about children's well-being, feelings and daily lives were perceived as care and love, rather than focusing on academic effort and the 'goodness' of the child. Overall, though, this groups of participants reported a heavy, significant and enduring effect of being left-behind on themselves and their relationships with their parents. As a result, many participants in their current life stage of early adulthood were experiencing a need to take control in those relationships with parents marked to large degree by withdrawal and planned retribution.

6.2 Key contributions to knowledge

6.2.1 Key contributions of IPA

Emphasising lived experience and learning

IPA's foundation in phenomenology proposes significant knowledge gains can be made by analysing the lived experience of people (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Existing literature on left-behind children has mostly adopted quantitative methodologies to examine, for example, correlational relationships between factors defined a priori as important (e.g. length of left-behind experience and academic attainment). The small body of existing qualitative work in this area has not been fully exploratory and has often been imbued with assumptions (e.g. that left-behind children struggle with loneliness) (Liu et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2018). There are no existing studies that have been fully exploratory or of the overall lived experiences of people who have, at some point in their childhood, been left-behind and to allow them to express what was important to them in their experiences and how they make sense of its legacy, if any, on them. The research approach presented in this thesis, to the best of our knowledge, is first to set out to learn from what these young Chinese adults considered important, with no preconceived assumptions. Such an exploratory approach is critical to ensure a wide lens of learning, and that the experts by experience are driving the knowledge gains.

The value of IPA

IPA focuses on offering a direct, first-person account of the exploration of lived experiences (Smith et al., 2002). By focusing on the individual's direct account of their lived experience, IPA facilitates a 'deep dive' into the nuances, subtleties, and complexities of participants perceptions and feelings, and how these emerged in their unique context of family and community. Such depth can keep our knowledge connected to the complex realities of their lives rather than reducing the experience to measurable 'factors'.

Sensitivity and flexibility

IPA fosters respect, empathy, and sensitivity to individual's experience, especially when exploring subjects that may evoke emotional distress (Alase, 2017). In the present study, which deals with a sensitive subject, IPA empowered the researcher to approach the interactions without preconceived assumptions, embracing a mindset open to the unknown and unexpected. This not only arguably enhanced the authenticity and richness of the data but also created a space where participants may have felt more understood and therefore more comfortable sharing their personal experiences. In other words, IPA (and associated exploratory interviewing) allows for the demonstration of respect for participants that may not be possible through more rigid or less personal research methods. IPA's flexibility permits the researcher to adapt and

respond creatively during the interview process and analysis (Smith et al., 2002). This adaptive quality ensures that the research is not just methodologically sound but also ethically considerate, cautiously navigating the potential emotional vulnerabilities of the participants.

Dynamic process in understanding

IPA involves a double hermeneutic process where the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense making world (Smith et al., 2009), reflecting the central role of researcher in interpretation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In the present study, IPA required the researcher to put herself in participants' shoes in interpreting their lived experience (e.g. 'what is the person trying to convey here', 'what does it mean to them').

Facilitating richer data with timeline

The successful blending of IPA and timeline in this study has led to an innovative and comprehensive approach to data collection and analysis. Listing out their key events on the timeline allowed participants to feel prepared (reported by participants) and gave them a sense of ownership in the interview, underlining its value in this type of life story research. It also provided a clear view of events and helped the researcher to pose relevant questions. Although both approaches are often employed separately in qualitative research, their joint use presents a novel research method. The main reason for bringing two tools together was that I recognised that it could be very complex conducting life story interviews, and that both the participants and I might benefit from a tool to put some structure on the story. It was also helpful in gathering key information about when people left and returned, as well as what the participant felt were significant events to them.

The next section examined whether being left-behind has long-term effects on young Chinese adults, and identified how the insight from the present study adds to our understanding/new knowledge of left-behind experience from young Chinese adults. It synthesises key points from the mini discussions of each analysis chapter and extends the discussion to consider overarching learning and implications.

6.2.2 Addressing research question 2:

Do Chinese young people experience any long-term effects on their psychosocial well-being from their early left-behind experiences, and if so, how do they explain this? What new knowledge has been appended to the existing literature?

It was evident that being left-behind as a child by migrated parents in China did have long-term effects on young Chinese adults' psychosocial well-being. These long-term effects come from multiple ACEs while being left-behind from participants' stories, such as separation, family conflicts, neglect, competition, community vulnerability, which adds new knowledge to the literature.

6.2.2.1 The new knowledge

The new knowledge from this thesis is understood through the ecological systems theory. This theory helped to frame the literature reviews in Chapter 2 and 3, as it resonated with the importance of context on the left-behind experience. The study finding has also aligned well with this theory, as participants reported a range of micro and meso influences directly and pointed indirectly to macro influences.

1) Left-behind children should be helped to prepare for the departure of their parents

From the micro layer, parents understandably emerged as the most significant influence on participants' left-behind experience. Whilst many studies have examined the effects of parental migration on left-behind children, none have captured the moment / point of separation on the children, and its significance. That this is not commonly reported in the literature reflects the importance of our exploratory, participant-led narratives which place the 'origin' of their left-behind experience largely in the moment of separation. The present study reported the importance of helping a child understand the parental decision and need to migrate, to be emotionally prepared for this, and to be fully aware of their care arrangements as well as how parents will love them and communicate with them from a distance. This will help them to have a clear understanding of separation and 'what is going on' rather than being kept in the dark, which can lead to feelings of insignificance and being easily abandoned.

2) Guardianship and expectations should be as clear as possible

Extended kin as guardians of left-behind children represent a key influence on the child from the micro layer. Plenty of research on left-behind children has suggested the mixed roles and effects of guardians in childrearing the left-behind child; however, little research has highlighted that what kind of guardian arrangement is in place can diminish or mitigate the potentially traumatic effect of parental absence. The present study contributes valuable insights by identifying the potential vulnerabilities that may arise from unresolved issues or things not all sorted before parental migration. Factors such as the child's gender, the number of left-behind children, and

financial matters can further complicate these arrangements. As such, it becomes essential for migrating parents to outline clear contingency plans and set well-defined expectations with those entrusted with their children's care. It is unlikely to avoid left-behind children do not get hurt under migration, but it is likely to protect them to have these things in place, and to be monitored; and of course, the competitiveness of families, power struggle, financial status, etc means this will not always be possible.

3) Attention should be paid to the relationship between migrant parents and guardians

From the mesosystem layer, the relationship between guardians and migrated parents can exert significant influences on left-behind children. While some research has been conducted in this area, there is a significant knowledge gap in understanding how the dynamics between guardians and migrant parents can affect the quality of caregiving provided to the children. The present study contributes new insights into the power and complexities of adult relationships within migration families, emphasizing the cascaded hurt it can have on left-behind children. The present study contributes a new knowledge that unhealthy relationship between them will affects the child's caregiving quality, which in turn will affect the relationship between the parents and guardians, and/or the relationship between the parents, all of which in the end will all put the child into a very vulnerable environment. When the whole family enters into a vicious cycle of relationships, and the left-behind child will be affected most. It aligns with the ecological systems theory, where the person is affected by the interaction between the systems, by the person, and by the environment. It adds a new perspective by recognizing that migrant parents can influence left-behind children by affecting the relationships with guardians. To best protect left-behind children, migrant parents should be more aware of the importance of their relationship with guardians for the lives of left-behind children. In the time where conflicts arise with guardians, instead of making things worse, parents should take active role in resolving issues, or else find alterations.

4) Migrated parents should convey consistent and unconditional love to their left-behind child

While research has explored the psychological impact of parental absence on left-behind children, there is limited knowledge regarding the specific ways in which psychological impacts might arise. Along with the new insights on the trauma of separation and the hurt from family conflict, the data also showed that the left-behind child experienced enduring and significant doubts about their self-worth, and if they were loved by their parents. The data is a call to action for migrant parents who could potentially mitigate the impact of their absence by maintain and strengthening emotional connections with their children from afar. The present study contributes knowledge in understanding what are felt to be essential for left-behind children

during parental absence. It was commonly felt that migrant parents should express and engage consistent and unconditional love through various means such as gifts and via interest in them as people during their communications. Reunifications was seen as a way of observing parental care by left-behind children, often by comparing it to the amount of time parents spend with other people. Efforts to show love were felt to be as important as the love itself. As such, it becomes essential for migrated parents to make the best use of reunions to build family affection and express loving language to children. Whether through regular communication, meaningful gifts, or scheduled reunions, these acts could significantly contribute to the child's feeling of being loved and cared. These suggest that the role that intentional and loving interactions can play in mitigating the potential negative effects of parental migration, which provides a more nuanced understanding of how left-behind children can remain emotionally connected despite physical separation, and practical meanings in long-distance parenting.

5) Policy and practice need to rapidly evolve to protect left-behind children

Policy and practice need to rapidly evolve to protect left-behind children, particularly at the neighbourhood and community levels. This perspective is informed by the macrosystem layer of the ecological systems theory, highlighting broader social, political, and economic contexts, and their interactions in influencing individuals. Policy on migration and the Hukou system are influencing everything, as is the economic situation and poverty. Government should release policies that migration parents must be allowed see their children for short periods of time. Making adaptations of Hukou systems, ensuring left-behind their children should be equally having access to education, health, education system as with urban peers. In neighbourhoods, a comprehensive protection plan for left-behind children is essential. 'Villains' in many ways can exploit these vulnerabilities, revealing the need for special attention, particularly for left-behind girls, and ensuring that supportive and legal support is available when needed. This calls for collaboration between local authorities, urban community (where some left-behind children temporarily live in), legal institution, and child welfare organizations to create an environment where left-behind children feel safe and are protected. In schools, the present study reported the often negative attitudes held by teachers and peers towards left-behind children, leading them to feelings of exclusion and alienation. These findings reveal an urgent need for schools and communities to foster positive and compassionate attitudes towards left-behind children. Efforts must be concentrated on helping these children find a sense of belonging and feel welcomed, thereby facilitating their social integration and emotional well-being.

6.2.3 Ecological systems theory, ACEs and attachment theory

The application of ecological system theory, the adverse childhood experiences framework, and attachment theory have together provided a multidimensional lens for understanding the complex phenomenon of left-behind children in China, as well as the data from this study.

Ecological systems theory, with its layered "onion" model, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted influences on a person (Burns, 2015). From politics, society, culture, neighbourhood, family, friends, to personal psychology, each layer and their interactions contribute to shaping who we are (Darling, 2007). In the context of left-behind children, this theory aided in recognizing how cultural values around family, gender and generational roles, local traditions, governmental policies, the quality of immediate familial relationships and family financial status, all interplay to influence left-behind children. It helped to sensitise the thinking in this thesis that a change in one has potential to produce a change in another. For example, a change in cultural values around academic success could shift the focus of parents' interest in their child, perhaps to more holistic interest, which could benefit them. A positive change in how parents and schools interact could reduce the vulnerability of the left-behind child in school settings. The study data fully resonated with this theory, in finding that left-behind children's experience can be influenced by the relationship between guardians and parents, or by the care the child receives from guardians, and by the care the child receives in neighbourhoods that are not friendly. Political and economic considerations at the macrosystem layer further contextualized these experiences in the context of migration. The present study might challenge the conventional stances of the ecological system theory by revealing unique patterns specific to the Chinese context. For example, the role of migration within China might present a specific dynamic not fully captured by this framework. The way how it understood through ecological systems theory might not can be universally recognised.

Understandably, participants talked most about proximal influences, i.e. the microsystem in influencing their psychosocial wellbeing. The study findings introduced the potential trauma and challenges faced by left-behind children. The experiences reported by many ways of reminder, ACEs are highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person's safety, security, trust or bodily integrity (Young Minds, 2018). Decades of research has established that ACEs can have long-lasting impact on the physical, psychological, and social development of an individual's health and well-being (Howell, et al., 2022; Moore & N Ramirez, 2016). This 'framework' (i.e. defining concepts of adversity, trauma and pathways to outcomes) provides a focused perspective on the potential risks and traumatic experiences that

left-behind children face (Schilling et al., 2007). The data from the present study strongly indicated that the neglect, emotional abuse, or loss of parental care is a chronic and frightening process for left-behind children and can be considered an ACE. It can then be argued that these children are at elevated risk of a range of poor outcomes, and many examples were presented by our participants, particularly in terms of relational and individual wellbeing.

The study data adds a context-specific form of ACE to the broad literature on ACEs. Chinese left-behind children's experiences include the trauma of parental separation and feelings of abandonment, chronic adversity via inadequate guardianship arrangements, long-term uncertainty about the security of one's home and family, exposure to familial conflict, and enduring marginalisation and feelings of being unsafe associated with being left-behind. Hence, literature on adverse childhood experiences suggests that the impacts of ACEs are complex and that it may not be feasible to address all negative effects (Finkelhor et al., 2013). It would be better to prevent these effects from the beginning rather than focusing on resolving them. NHS (2021) suggested that it is essential to make schools, home, and communities safe, nurturing and protect as schools are the common place where children play and interact. The perspective that ACEs bring therefore emphasises the importance of preventing ACEs, reflecting the need for a comprehensive support system to prevent children from being affected by ACEs.

Attachment theory was understood to reside within the broader ACEs framework in the present study; ACEs framework offered a foundational understanding of how early adverse experiences influenced children's development, and attachment theory highlighted the vital role of secure attachment bonds between a child and their caregiver in mitigating or escalating the adversity (Fiver, 2020). Attachment theory, and the huge body of empirical evidence it has to support it, was used in this thesis to sensitise data interpretation about the importance of early child-caregiver relationships and how, when they are experienced as unsafe or not secure, that can lead to a raft of poor psychosocial outcomes (Ainsworth, 2003). Literature on attachment theory indicated that the kinds of interactive experiences and representations that shape emotional bonds to places are likely to become more salient after migration (Lewicka, 2011). The place where triggers positive memories and feelings, which can be a safe haven that offers a sense of security where can help them regulate their emotions (Juang et al., 2018). The theory also brought understanding to the trauma of the separation moment and why so many participants felt utterly overwhelmed, frightened and without a 'safe place' emotionally to navigate this. It also helped to understand why the study participants consistently sought signal of love and connection from their migrated parents, and key caregivers, as this is a foundation of psychological security and emotional safety.

The present study perhaps informs attachment theory by finding that the connection to home is an extension of attachment. Many participants yearned for 'family' and 'home', perhaps as symbols indicative of security. They longed for the experience of being emotionally safe, settled and contained, and without this (as attachment theory proposes) they felt emotionally vulnerable, and left to navigate turbulent emotional and psychological waters without a 'secure base'.

6.3 Addressing research question 3:

What implications do first-person accounts of being a left-behind child have for policy and practice in China pertinent to the left-behind population and their surrounding communities?

This question can be answered in two parts, one is the implications for future studies as detailed in 6.3.1; the other is the implications for policy and practice as detailed in 6.3.2. The aim of this question is centred on how to keep left left-behind children as safe as possible and how to limit the short- and long-term implications of being left-behind as an orientation for future studies, policy and practices.

6.3.1 Future studies

This section will evaluate the study, illustrating the implication of findings and suggesting what should do for future research. Future research needs to focus on how to better understand and protect children left-behind both as children, and as they grow into young adults and consider their own future, potentially, as parents.

1) Dynamics between guardians and parents before/post migration

Particular areas of focus could include exploring the relationship dynamics between parents and extended family relatives before/post migration, and how their interactions affect the lives of left-behind children. This is because prior relationships between them might influence the level of care and loved received by left-behind children. It would be helpful for future research to try to identify the conditions under in which guardians works well in care arrangement, i.e. to study the family systems that seem to protect children and consider how this can be used as a basis for supporting families in distress

2) Interactions between siblings and left-behind children sharing the same household

Attention should also be paid to competition between siblings and left-behind children, including competition between left-behind children living in the same household, in order to understand how these factors affect the quality of care. Left-behind siblings and other left-behind children sharing in the same household have invisible competition in terms of care, attention, educational

resources. This has been seen in many studies (Lu, 2011; Ye & Lu, 2011), and in the present study. The number of left-behind children and their genders were felt to be relate to the caregiving from extended kin. This could inform guidance to schools to monitor especially vulnerable children if they are known to be in 'competition-high' households, this also could inform some knowledge to parents trying to avoid putting the care under 'competition-high' households if they are more potential guardians.

3) Parental dynamics associated with difficulties faced by left-behind children

The present study has captured that family structure, like in father-only migration families, as shown in chapter 5.2, can change the mother's role and further impact the left-behind child's life. This impact was felt to be related to society's perception and expectation of the mothers' role, rather than insufficient care from the mother. There are no existing studies that have captured this. Future studies should add more knowledge in understanding how a father's migration adds difficulties for the remaining mother's and left-behind child's lives, or, exploring if mothers' migration would add difficulties in remaining fathers' and left-behind children's lives, and how. By exploring the effect of different family dynamics on left-behind children may help parents form effective migration plan, like parents can take in turn for migration.

4) Pay attention to the initial separation and its impact

The detrimental, often traumatic, effect of the initial separation from parents was reported in chapter 5.1. Research should aim to discover the best ways to prepare for and mitigate the harms of separation, reunification and subsequent separations and reunifications. Future research should explore what is considered as important for left-behind children in facing separation, and what kinds of arrangement the children prefer if parents must migrate. Such child- and youth-led perspectives will help to bring previously excluded voices and needs into dialogue with adult and economic needs. Generating practical strategies to mitigate the impact of the initial separation, and enduring positive communication between children and their parents, could have significant benefits.

5) Neighbourhoods and school

Exploring neighbourhoods and schools is essential to enhance the lives and safety of left-behind children. It was reported that neighbourhoods and schools were key environments where left-behind children spent most of their time, and could feel either safe or unsafe. Nationwide data should be collected on the nature and extent of the vulnerabilities of left-behind children to unsafe environments and people in order to advocate for immediate policy and practice changes. Also, focusing on positive examples that key individuals have on left-behind children also provides valuable models for improving their lives.

6) More qualitative studies on young Chinese adults with left-behind experiences

The present study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first set out to explore young Chinese adults' left-behind experiences, permitting investigation of change over time and how early adulthood provides a particular retrospective sense-making. Early left-behind experience was perceived to have significant impact on their overall lives, through childhood to young adulthood. However, there is a need of longitudinal studies that can understand how developmental transitions are influenced by being left-behind children and also how it may influence them as they become adults and start their own potential journey to parenthood.

6.3.2 Implications for policy and practice

Immediate action is needed to protect left-behind children and the impact of their experiences on their psychosocial and relational wellbeing. Zhang (2018) has argued that the root cause of left-behind children is the long-standing urban-biased developmentalist model of society, where economic growth is the dominant goal. However, the pursuit of modernisation and urbanisation is unlikely to end in the short-term, and a large number of rural households will not yet be able to achieve prosperity in the rural countryside on the basis of land and other livelihoods. A large number of rural labourers will continue to migrate, and will not be able to bring their children, spouses or elder parents to live with them, acknowledging that the Hukou system eventually means that a floating child must at some point be separated from the parent (Lu, 2011). Therefore, it is highly likely that the phenomenon of a left-behind population will continue to exist for a long time. Hence, actions must be considered based on this context.

For left-behind children, whether they accompany their parents in migration or remain at home, they are often subject to discrimination or marginalisation by society, without those responsible facing penalties or discipline under the existing system. Therefore, relevant policies, systems, and media must work together to recognise and value the national economic growth brought about by migration, as well as acknowledge the benefits migration brings to the entire country. The media can also play a role by drawing attention to news about left-behind children on popular social platforms, helping to change perceptions of them (Ye, 2011). Legal measures should be put in place, such as imposing fines or prohibiting the admission of new local students to urban schools that refuse to accept left-behind children. These policies and mechanisms should collaborate to provide the best possible protection for left-behind children.

In addition, policymakers should direct solutions to the protection of guardians, as they are the immediate group that directly affect children. Existing laws and policies are failing to protect left-behind children because they seek to punish inadequate guardians or parents rather than help them, and therefore the children in their care are also affected (Zhao et al., 2017). Policy should

foster the creation of supportive system for both guardians and left-behind children. Government agencies can work to create comprehensive resource programmes to provide guardians with the information and resources they need to care for left-behind children. Zhang et al. (2018) and Yan (2013) indicated that policy should aim to build more supportive communities, and these communities should ideally build a variety of supportive measures that include education, psychological support, social engagement, and healthcare for the left-behind child, psychological support should be led by professionals.

The psychological support department should prepare a booklet covering detailed information for each household, including parental migration/return dates, details about caregivers, educational progress, financial situation, and parents' relationships. This information should be properly recorded and maintained. Special attention or support should be made available for left-behind children before/post separation. Having this booklet under the management of the psychological support department enables them to more effectively help children and provides a comprehensive record of each household's situation to facilitate the provision of appropriate support. Society should be aware of the overall health of young Chinese adults with early left-behind experience. It should aim to offer free counselling in communities and schools to help them process and understand their experiences. Their voices are typically unheard, and their needs are not cared for. They seem invisible in their community. Hence, it is important to offer emotional care, even if from professionals, so they do not feel left-behind by everyone.

6.4 Strength and limitations of research method and data analysis

This section discusses the strengths and limitations of the methods in this research. This discussion will also be based on participants' opinions and feelings about taking part in the study.

6.4.1 Strength of the study

6.4.1.1 Empowering participants

In research, there is often a power difference between researcher and participant (Archer, 2002; Ganda et al., 2006). Participants have power and this can often be taken away either consciously or unconsciously (Varga-Dobai, 2012). Literature on power in research suggested that it is important to give choice and empower participants where possible. Kvale (2006) and Vähäsantanen and Saarinen (2013) indicated that giving choice is a way to have control and safety, particular in research encounters involving personal or sensitive issues.

I embedded choice in this study for the participants and did my utmost not to take this away. For example, there were tasks to perform such as drawing timelines, which could be drawn in many

ways. Three of 20 participants did not draw a timeline but listed their major life events and texted it to me. At point of interview, I asked where they wanted to be interviewed, although the research was conducted online, 11 of 20 participants chose their home as a safe place to be interviewed. Two university students decided to be interviewed at an empty school dormitory where their parents were not around after they agreed to be interviewed at home. During the interviews, five participants took a break as they were emotionally charged, and after a few minutes, they continued their interviews. During interviews, I made no attempts to lead the direction of the interviews and indicated that they had the authority and self-determination to express their understanding in their own way. Participants were given other standard but important choices in the research; for example, they were to that they could withdraw their data anytime up to two weeks after finishing interview, that they had a choice to withdraw during the interview if they felt uncomfortable.

6.4.1.2 Self-pilot

The use of self-pilot was a strength of this study. I had not been an interview participant or had experience of interviewing before I began this doctoral work. As described in Chapter 4, I first participated in two self-pilot interviews about my own left-behind experience to fully experience the interview process and gain interview skills from a position of interviewee. I designed my own timeline based on my stories and used the timeline to share my account in the interview. Being interviewed by my two supervisors allowed me to learn many things that I brought to my interviews. I also conducted two practice interviews with Chinese friends (aged between 20-25yrs), who were currently studying in the UK, about their early left-behind experience in China. These training experiences helped me to understand how participants might feel at every stage, as well as what kinds of questions researcher should pay attention to and what kind of response is helpful to participants. Knowledge from both sides (interview and interviewee) meant I could try to design and conduct my interview sensitively and in ways that could generate rich data.

6.4.1.3 Participants' reflection on research methods

After the third participant, I started to ask participants to share their views about the study and their experience of the process from designing their own left-behind timeline to the interview. Responses were obtained from a few.

Most participants expressed the study was a "*healing*" process and the study benefitted them personally. Two reasons for these were dominant. First, it gave them an 'chance to speak' (a

phrase from Linmin's, Xiaorui's and Xiaocao's accounts) to someone to share their stories. Second, it led to some helpful self-reflection in the context of their past and their present experience.

Many participants expressed it to be a relief to "*get things off their chest*". For example, Xiaorui explained how participation gave her the chance to share her left-behind experience where she normally would not have done so:

No one is curious about my past as everyone is busy, and no one would specifically ask me to recall my left-behind experience, because it seems so normal for people like me. So when you invited me I was like 'ok, I will do as a job and will have no expectations'. But after I done it, I am feeling very relaxed and a bit appreciated (laugh), it feels like something has taken off my body, refreshed me.

For example, Limin said:

I feel quite free as I sensed that you didn't judge me during the interview. This made me talk a lot with no filter on and share with you about my story. My left-behind experience is quite bitter, and I grew many resentments in my heart, so I never wanted to share as I thought people would judge me.

Another participant, Jun, also expressed his relief after participation, as he said "*it is a pleasant and relief experience as you know you are safe even though you are different.*"

The second reason (identified from the accounts) why participants found that participation was a 'healing' process was because it gave them scope for self-reflection. The timeline facilitated this by providing laying out their experiences in terms of events and when they occurred. For example, in the following lines, Yunwen expressed the way the timeline helped her organise her thoughts and her past experiences to inform, and at the same time reflect on, her experiences:

As you can see, my timeline was like a mind map, which made my past life look very clear and in order. When I looked through the instruction you sent, I can see this method is very smart but simple in operation. During the interview, it made me easier to follow after I talked a lot, you know, to drag your thought back on truck. It also helped to check my memory, because sometimes you lost in your memory, but it gave you a direction. So it helped me a lot to go through the events that I wrote down.

Organising the events in a form of visual representations gave a "*direction*" to Yunwen's experiences, as she also reflected:

After I listed all my major left-behind events, my eyes became red. I can tell from timeline that I went through a lot, a lot very difficulties, there were many moments I thought I wouldn't have been able to live through after my father passed away, but here I am, I did. I am very proud of

myself, I will cherish my life more, my families more, because this timeline vividly presented for me. It was really a healing process for me when I talked, to see who strong I could be. So I am very grateful that I took the participation.

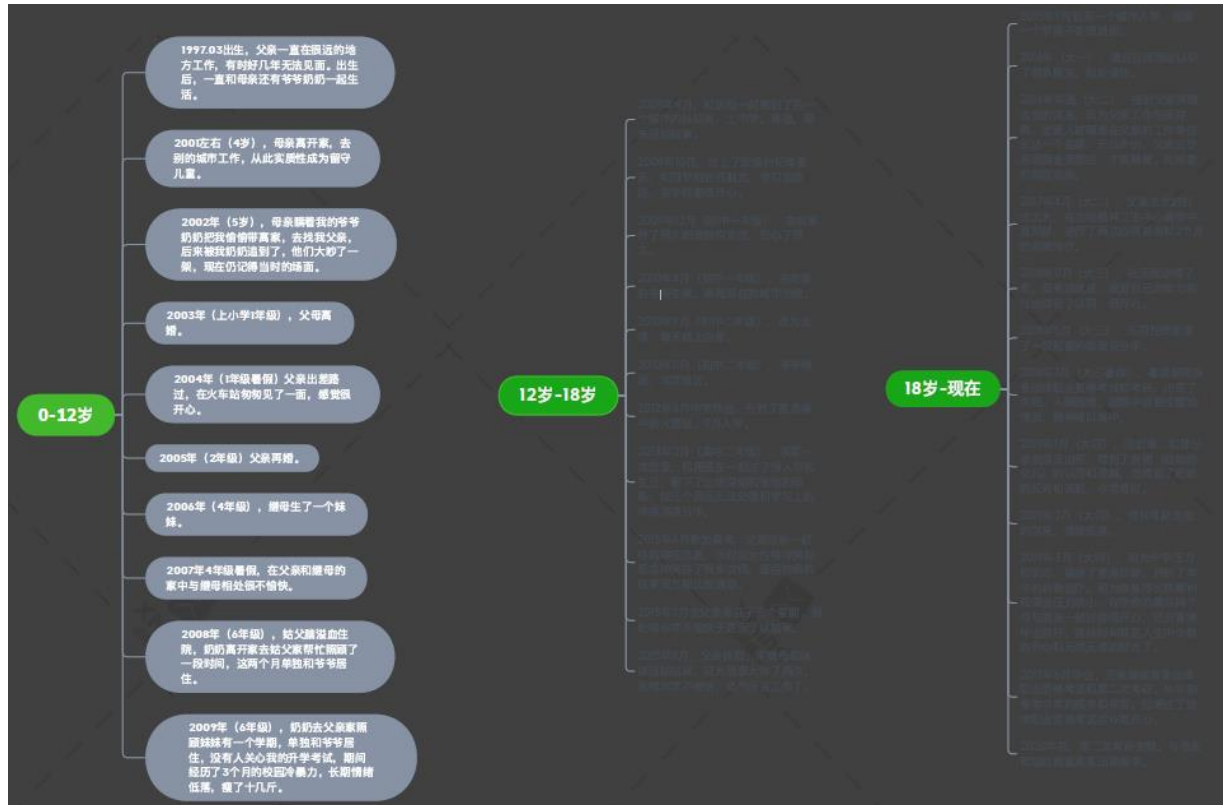


Figure 7 Yunwen's timeline

As evidenced in her timeline, Yunwen neatly organised events according to age, providing a chronological order to her experiences. The timeline acted as a tool for recalling memories, triggering valuable self-reflection. Described by Yunwen as a *"healing process"*, the timeline not only aided her narrative by consolidating essential information to share her story, but also fostered a realization of the challenges she had surmounted. This recognition of her resilience became a source of inspiration for her, enhancing her appreciation for life. For Yunwen, the timeline served dual purposes - as a visual tool for information recollection and as a catalyst for continued inspiration.

There was just one participant who reported difficulty using the timeline. Linyuan found it hard to manage and display the events in the timeline:

I followed the instruction you gave, I felt it was hard to design my timeline story, I had no idea of how to put events in according to the line you draw. Also I felt it was hard for me to differentiate what is major and what is not a major events while being left-behind, they seemed all major and impactful to me, should I just simply write on a paper.

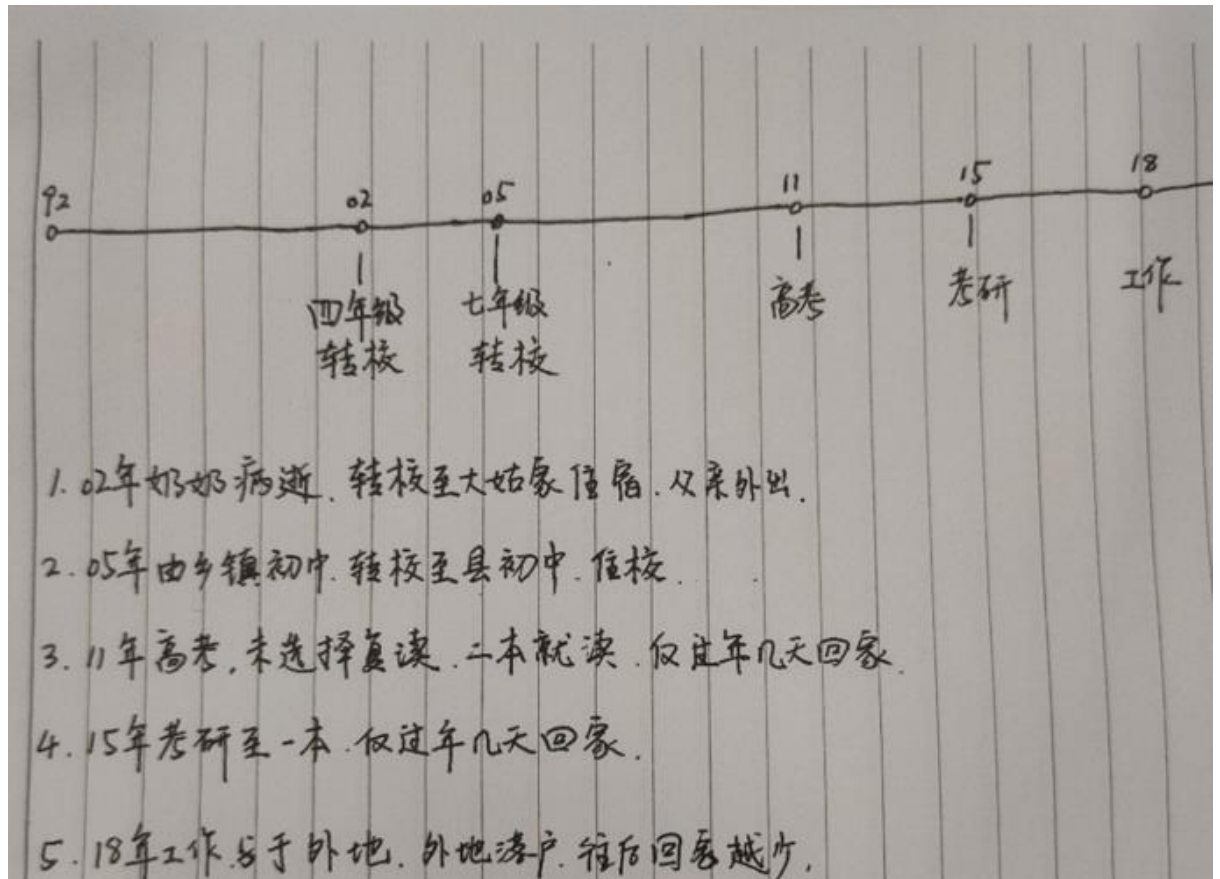


Figure 8 Linyun's timeline

From Linyuan's experience, there is a sense that timeline limited his expression of events in a visual form. This suggests that the creating-your-linear fashion in which the timeline is drawn and represented creates a standard with which not all participants might be comfortable. Linyuan was the youngest participant in the study and was the only participant who expressed difficulty with the timeline. His timeline was rather simple, with marked turning points from his perspective, compared to Xingxing's and Yunwen's. The interview with him went very well and was nearly two hours.

For *Xingxing*, the timeline gave them a sense of authority and flexibility to 'design' her stories, as she said:

Creating your own timeline is easy as you just listed the events as the way you wanted. It was also very flexible for me as when I forgot something I just needed to find somewhere proper to put, I don't need to redo the whole thing. I can put the event that I wanted to share, so it made me feel comfortable and powerful during the interview.

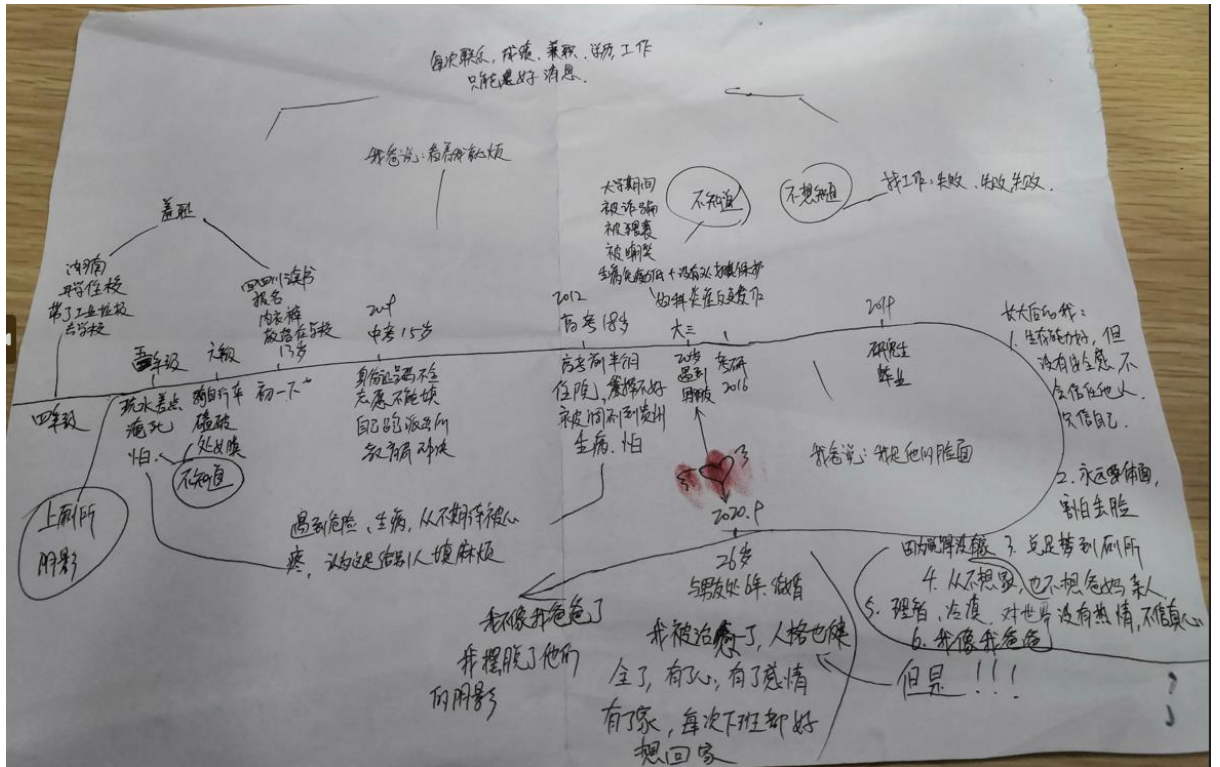


Figure 9 Xingxing's timeline

Being able to put or change the events as Xingxing wanted gave her freedom and authority in the interview. As shown in Figure 9, Xingxing's added events and with pointy arrows to different directions in the interview itself. Hence, the whole process of recalling, adding or taking the event off the timeline itself is a "healing" and "comfortable" process.

6.4.1.4 Unstructured interviews and the richness of data

A key strength of this study was its generation of rich data. The interviews were, on average, 1.5hrs, and generated approximately 25 pages of transcripts per interviewee. The richness of the data is exemplified in the generation of new insights. In the cooperation of timeline and strong listening skills, interviewing people proved to be easy and effective. Zhang (2002) suggests that being responsive and adapt situation quickly to individuals for the interviewer are crucial to the unstructured interview. As seen in the previous section, timeline can help participants to prepare themselves in the process from past to present, with a sense of flexibility and ownership; and with the guidance of two supervisors and self-reflection every time, working together make unstructured interview went well.

The diversity of the participants recruited ensured a rich and varied data. This selection comprised of 20 participants with nearly an equal gender distribution (11 females and 9 males) which are from six different provinces in China: Henan, Guizhou, Gansu, Jilin, Sichuan, and Anhui. These provinces are characterised by their socio-economic standing, either being the poorest,

relatively poor, or having the largest population of left-behind children. Some participants also had life experiences of parental separation or death, or the death of a close family member. Interestingly, one pair of siblings participated in the study, with their mother, who is both mute and deaf, having migrated.

Sample included a good level of diversity that had helped generate insights about some contexts and life circumstances but that it is not comprehensive and that much is still to be learned about other demographics.

6.4.1.5 The transparency of the data

It is evitable that language and culture challenge interview translation and data interpretation. For translation from Chinese to English for the first five transcripts all participants' narratives were in word documents and an initial crude translation into English was done by using efficient language tools such as deePL and google translate were used. This basic translation was then checked line by line for accurate translation. Some parts of transcripts were reviewed by Chinese and English my colleagues to ensure Chinese-English made sense and that the English made sense to English speakers. Then I sent the 10 whole translated data alongside with my coding to my supervisors. At times, their review required me to revisit the translation to improve clarity of meaning or to double-check accuracy. After gaining skills, from the eleventh participant, I started to only send coded data to my supervisors, while I retained sole responsibility for translation and checking. It is possible that despite these processes, things were 'lost in translation'.

6.4.2 Limitations of the research

6.4.2.1 Recruitment and Sampling

The findings from the present study should be considered in light of a number of limitations. The sample size was limited by difficulties with recruitment. There were around 25 participants who agreed to do the interview, yet only 20 participants were included in the data analysis. In terms of the diversity of the same, 11 were university/colleague students, which means that they still relied on their parents for financial support and their parents were still migrants. 5 participants' families were in debt before migration, which means that these family lived under relatively poverty and their migrant parents might come to home less compared to other migration families. There was also huge difference in which of being separated from parents, ranging from birth to 10yrs old. Whilst this captures some diversity, it makes it difficult to identify what is similar or different in experiences of people with comparable periods of being left-behind.

Additionally, it is possible that the study attracted participants who had a particular reason for opting into the study to tell their story. Although some participants indicated they had no

expected to have much to say, most participants had quite harrowing experiences. The broader literature on left-behind children suggests this is more typical than atypical. However, it is possible that there are families and young people who cope well with the impact of economic migration. Therefore, this thesis can be understood as capturing difficult impacts of being a left-behind child.

6.4.2.2 IPA-based limitations

There are some limitations in using this methodology in the present study. The findings of an IPA study usually focus on a small, homogenous group of participants. The findings in this study cannot be uncritically generalised to the wider population of left-behind children. IPA aims to understanding people's lived experience rather than why these experiences occur; this might limit our knowledge in knowing the reason behind (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Tuffor, 2017). However, Smith et al. (2009) argued that by adopting through hermeneutic, idiographic and contextual analysis, these allow researcher to explore the conditions that triggered the experiences which are located in past events. Furthermore, participants (as seen in the present study) often imbue their perspective on causation into their accounts.

Studies on consistency in adult reporting childhood experiences show that current mood can influence the likelihood of a negative experience being recalled (Clark & Teasdale, 1982; Dalgleish & Watts, 1990). However, in IPA, it is not the accuracy of recollection that is important, but the perceptions and sense-making associated with it. Whilst this can change over time, evidence suggests that people are reasonably consistent in this. Another important methodological concern in this study is that the age at which adverse experiences occur has also been found to influence recall of such experiences (Colman et al., 2016; Hardt & Rutter, 2012). Since some of these recollections occurred when participants were very young (e.g. around 4yrs), and memories may decay over time. However, it can be true at any age, and Meaning-making process is placed in the contexts of narratives, extracts, hence, IPA gains insight through and is intertwined with language (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). The question might arise in doing IPA research – whether participants and researchers have the necessary communication skills and whether they can successfully understand each other (Tuffour, 2017). This might be challenging for some people who are less able to form an effective communication. However, in the present study, nearly all interviews took 1.5 hours average, the communication went well and understood each other.

6.5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was i) to examine the key experience identified by young Chinese adults with left-behind experience, and over time into adulthood, the meaning assigned by them to these key experiences; ii) to learn if they have experienced and long-term effects on their psychosocial well-being from their early left-behind experiences, and how they explain this; iii) through first-accounts, to generate implications for policy, practice, in a broader level to best protect left-behind children in China. Overwhelmingly, the study data indicated multiple immediate and enduring impacts of being a left-behind child on the participants' wellbeing, relationship, social position and safety. Legacies of the left-behind experiences were reported into adolescence and early adulthood, centering around disrupted relationships with parents, low confidence in managing current relationships and some continual doubts around self-worth and being loved. The study recommends immediate action should be taken to better protect left-behind children from such experiences and outcomes, and to ensure their physical and psychological safety.

Reflexivity: end note

As I analysed the data, I discovered participants' experiences of being left-behind and the ups and downs of their relationships with their parents, which also affected my overall state of being. My life has also changed dramatically over the course of my PhD in this. I had previously stated in the beginning of this thesis that my relationship with my parents was an irreconcilable one, and I recognised this irreconcilability and felt a deep sense of despair, self-pity, and fearlessness over the unavailability of my family to me. I had always considered that my being left-behind was my parents' fault. I had seen myself as an innocent individual, pushed along by policies, migration, and family struggles. I felt that I was subjected to many injustices, and I felt a level of self-pity and I felt I deserved to be treated well. I had anticipated that my own understandings would map onto those of my participants.

But slowly, from their stories, I saw different understandings and realisations. The whole process of collecting data was during the Covid-19 pandemic. The numbers of deaths reported daily on the news seemed to make everyone start cherishing their families. At that point, I had been estranged from my parents but I wanted them to be safe more than anything else. I also had been living alone and I realised I needed to socialise.

I've gradually and slowly started to give my family more contact and share my life. All of this may have made my relationship with my parents less distant. This appreciation of the status quo, since the pandemic? may have also influenced my participants. They mentioned more than once when referring to the experience of left-behind, "I just want to live well now, life is priceless, the left-behind experience is painful but it is nothing compared to death, let it pass". As I gradually interpreted their understanding of their relationship with their parents, the desire to live in peace with their parents slowly became more important, even though they still loved and hated their parents. But it seemed as if their past, and in some cases painful, experiences of being left-behind were less important in the face of illness or death than the pandemic was threatening. In this, I was similar to the participants.

As I began to write about my first theme, the power of gifts, I also received a big gift from my parents. This gift made me feel that, even though they should not have left me at a young age to be taken care of by someone else, now as an adult, with the experience, understanding, and knowledge of life, I am coming to feel that they do, at least for now, truly love me. I wondered, is it possible that the participants felt as I did That is, acknowledging and blaming their parents for leaving them in the care of others at the time, but also being able to feel their parents' love and care for them now as they move into adulthood. Receiving gifts, too, I, like my participants,

felt cherished and loved while wanting more. Gifts may be proof of a parent's love for them, but they cannot fully manifest the breadth of unconditional parental love.

When I was analysing my extended family, my grandpa and grandma, who took care of me when I left-behind, both passed away one after another. I had no way to go back to China because of the pandemic, and the especially strict restrictions in China. These two significant losses of my closest relatives gave me a new perspective on my family and my extended family. Suddenly my heart ached for my father and mother because they had lost their own parents, and I still had mine. I felt powerfully the fragility of life. Here, I thought of one of my participants who also wanted family harmony more than anything else after experiencing the death of her grandfather and the death of her father. Even after she had learnt that her grandma (guardian) had made her and her mum estranged, she was more just powerless and suffered in silence. This experience, brought about by loss at the time of being left-behind, may have played a role in sense-making their own lived experience.

At this moment where I am submitting my thesis, I have gained a new perspective. The problem of left-behind children is not a problem of my generation, it is a problem of several generations, only my generation started to pay attention to it. So, the need to solve its problems requires long-lasting and bold national policies as well as for family members and social groups to help together. The other problems brought about by the left-behind issue will not be said to be cleared all of a sudden by short term efforts, suffering and hardship will still happen, it may happen where we cannot see it, but the difficulties brought about by their status will stay with them as long as they are left-behind children. My research on the left-behind experience helped to recognize and validate my own loss and suffering, but also led me to cherish life as it is today. I feel I was saved by conducting this research, so from now on everything is extra to me. Thank you for reading.

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Appendix A: University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee Application Form

Please read each question carefully, taking note of instructions and completing all parts. If a question is not applicable please indicate so. The superscripted numbers (eg⁸) refer to sections of the guidance notes, available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/UoLEthicsApplication>. Where a question asks for information which you have previously provided in answer to another question, please just refer to your earlier answer rather than repeating information. Information about research ethics training courses: <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsTraining>.

To help us process your application enter the following reference numbers, if known and if applicable:

Ethics reference number:	PSC-876
Student number and/ or grant reference:	201350302

PART A: Summary

A.1 Which [Faculty Research Ethics Committee](#) would you like to consider this application?²

- Arts, Humanities and Cultures (AHC)
- Biological Sciences (BIOSCI)
- Business, Environment and Social Sciences (AREA)
- FS&N, Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS)
- Medicine and Health (Please specify a subcommittee):
 - School of Dentistry (DREC)
 - School of Healthcare (SHREC)
 - School of Medicine (SoMREC)
 - School of Psychology (SoPREC)

A.2 Title of the research³

The long-term effects on young Chinese adults of living without parents in childhood for at least six months: a qualitative study.

A.3 Principal investigator's contact details⁴

Name (<i>Title, first name, surname</i>)	Miss Shuhan Dong
Position	Ph.D. student
Department/ School/ Institute	School of Psychology
Faculty	Medicine and Health
Work address (<i>including postcode</i>)	School of Psychology, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT
Telephone number	07895682228
University of Leeds email address	pssd@leeds.ac.uk

A.4 Purpose of the research:⁵ (Tick as appropriate)

- Research
- Educational qualification: **Please specify:** _____ *PhD* _____
- Educational Research & Evaluation⁶
- Medical Audit or Health Service Evaluation⁷
- Other

A.5 Select from the list below to describe your research: (You may select more than one)

- Research on or with human participants
- Research which has potential adverse environmental impact.⁸ **If yes, please give details:**
- Research working with data of human participants
- New data collected by qualitative methods
- New data collected by quantitative methods
- New data collected from observing individuals or populations
- Routinely collected data or secondary data
- Research working with aggregated or population data
- Research using already published data or data in the public domain
- Research working with human tissue samples (*Please inform the relevant Persons Designate if the research will involve human tissue*)⁹

A.6 Will the research involve NHS staff recruited as potential research participants (by virtue of their professional role) or NHS premises/ facilities?

Yes No

If yes, ethical approval must be sought from the University of Leeds. Note that [approval](#) from the NHS Health Research Authority may also be needed, please contact FMHUniEthics@leeds.ac.uk for advice.

A.7 Will the research involve any of the following:¹⁰ (You may select more than one)

*If your project is classified as [research](#) rather than service evaluation or audit and involves any of the following an application must be made to the [NHS Health Research Authority](#) via IRAS www.myresearchproject.org.uk as NHS ethics approval will be required. **There is no need to complete any more of this form.** Further information is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/NHSEthicalreview> and at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/HRAapproval>.*

You may also contact governance-ethics@leeds.ac.uk for advice.

- Patients and users of the NHS (including NHS patients treated in the private sector)¹¹
- Individuals identified as potential participants because of their status as relatives or carers of patients and users of the NHS
- Research involving adults in Scotland, Wales or England who lack the capacity to consent for themselves¹²
- A prison or a young offender institution in England and Wales (and is health related)¹⁴
- Clinical trial of a medicinal product or medical device¹⁵
- Access to data, organs or other bodily material of past and present NHS patients⁹
- Use of human tissue (including non-NHS sources) where the collection is not covered by a Human Tissue Authority licence⁹
- Foetal material and IVF involving NHS patients
- The recently deceased under NHS care
- None of the above

You must inform the Research Ethics Administrator of your NHS REC reference and approval date once approval has been obtained.

The HRA decision tool to help determine the type of approval required is available at <http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/ethics>. If the University of Leeds is not the Lead Institution, or approval has been granted elsewhere (e.g. NHS) then you should contact the local Research Ethics Committee for guidance. The UoL Ethics Committee needs to be assured that any relevant local ethical issues have been addressed.

A.8 Will the participants be from any of the following groups? (Tick as appropriate)

- Children under 16¹⁶ **Specify age group:** _____
- Adults with learning disabilities¹²
- Adults with other forms of mental incapacity or mental illness
- Adults in emergency situations
- Prisoners or young offenders¹⁴
- Those who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator, eg members of staff, students¹⁷
- Other vulnerable groups
- No participants from any of the above groups

Please justify the inclusion of the above groups, explaining why the research cannot be conducted on non-vulnerable groups.

The study aim is to gather data on the personal experience of people who lived without parents for at least 6 months when they were children (see A.9 section for more details). This data cannot be collected by interviewing other groups.

It is the researcher's responsibility to check whether a DBS check (or equivalent) is required and to obtain one if it is needed. See also <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/healthandsafetyadvice> and <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/agencies-public-bodies/dbs>.

A.9 Give a short summary of the research¹⁸

This section must be completed in language comprehensible to the lay person. Do not simply reproduce or refer to the protocol, although the protocol can also be submitted to provide any technical information that you think the ethics committee may require. This section should cover the main parts of the proposal.

Over the last 30 years, the sweeping trend of globalisation and the 1978 'Reform and Opening UP' policy in China have brought great economic development which has led to the migration of labour from rural areas to big cities. However, due to the restrictive urban household policy and higher living costs in cities, nearly 61 million children and adolescents had some experiences **of living without parents** in their childhood for at least 6 months, which is sometimes referred to as **Left-behind Children** (LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN). While studies have often reported on the psychological and emotional distress experienced by from being a LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN, little is known about the legacy of this on people as they enter adulthood.

Our aim is to enhance understanding of this complex experience, and how it shapes life for Chinese young adults. Twenty young Chinese adults aged between 20 and 25 who have lived without parents for at least six months will be recruited in Huaiyang town, China for a semi-structured interview study in Xicheng School (small town of Huyaiyang around 700km south of Beijing). All interviews will be conducted in the local school office (easy and safe community venue) or online, and will last up to two hours. Two trips will be made to China to conduct the interviews at different points; this is to allow analysis of a first tranche to inform interview focus in the second tranche, to address any early obstacles, to ensure the interviewer has a break in intensive data collection and to also for good levels of supervision of the data quality.

A.10 What are the main ethical issues with the research and how will these be addressed?¹⁹

Indicate any issues on which you would welcome advice from the ethics committee.

Although the interview will be carefully prepared and managed, it is possible that some participants may become upset when they recall their experiences. Therefore, 20-25 year olds with early experience of living without parents will be recruited rather than people under 20 as the older group are likely to have more personal resources to manage this interview.

How issues will be addressed:

- The researcher is Chinese and has lived without her parents during childhood. She therefore brings cultural awareness and empathy to the interview. Interviews will be conducted with the assistance of an adult researcher with the knowledge of the topic and under the supervision of Drs Siobhan Hugh-Jones and Hayley Davies. Pilot interviews will be conducted to build interview skills and to test the process.
- Before the interview: Participants will be given the study information and a personal (historical) timeline task and will be asked about what they would like to talk about. In this way, it will help them to feel more in control of what they want to disclose as well as what they feel comfortable talking about. The researcher will also get signed written consent statements from participants in person ahead of interview or via email in case of online interviews.
- Participants will be free to withdraw before or during the interview study without the need to give a reason. During the interview they can take breaks. They can withdraw their interview data up to two weeks after their participation using a personal identifier.
- Privacy and Confidentiality: The confidentiality of personal information will be maintained and participants' names and any identifying details in the data will be anonymised. Participants will be asked to generate a unique participant code (consisting of participants' the numbers of their date of birth) known only to the participant and immediate research team. All audio recordings and other data (notes, transcripts, etc.) will be stored on password-protected devices. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Confidentiality will be broken for standard reasons that will be clear to participants as part of seeking informed consent (i.e. disclosed risk of harm to self or others). For example, if they try to harm themselves and others after participation, the researcher will ask police (the only available support source in rural China) to give the participants support and guidance.
- Participants will be provided with a list of free psychological and emotional supportive resources in Chinese if they would like to access help after the interview.

PART B: About the research team**B.1 To be completed by students only²⁰**

Qualification working towards (eg Masters, PhD)	PhD
Supervisor's name (Title, first name, surname)	Dr. Siobhan Hugh-Jones
Department/ School/ Institute	School of Psychology
Faculty	Medicine and Health
Work address (including postcode)	School of Psychology, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT
Supervisor's telephone number	0113 343 5744
Supervisor's email address	s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk
Module name and number (if applicable)	

B.2 Other members of the research team (eg co-investigators, co-supervisors) ²¹	
Name (<i>Title, first name, surname</i>)	Dr. Siobhan Hugh-Jones
Position	Main Supervisor
Department/ School/ Institute	School of Psychology
Faculty	Medicine and Health
Work address (<i>including postcode</i>)	School of Psychology, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT
Telephone number	0113 343 5744
Email address	s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk

Name (Title, first name, surname)	Dr. Hayley Davies
Position	Co-supervisor
Department/ School/ Institute	School of Education
Faculty	Social Sciences
Work address (including postcode)	School of Education, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT
Telephone number	0113-34-39699
Email address	h.m.davies@leeds.ac.uk

Part C: The research

C.1 What are the aims of the study?²² (Must be in language comprehensible to a lay person.)

The aim of this study is to explore how young Chinese adults make sense of their early experiences of living without parents for at least 6 months in their childhood due to parents' migration.

C.2 Describe the design of the research. Qualitative methods as well as quantitative methods should be included. (Must be in language comprehensible to a lay person.)

It is important that the study can provide information about the aims that it intends to address. If a study cannot answer the questions/ add to the knowledge base that it intends to, due to the way that it is designed, then wasting participants' time could be an ethical issue.

This is a semi-structured interview study. Interviews will take place in person or online via WeChat. In person interviews will be in Huaiyang town, China. We anticipate 15 face-to-face and 5 online. These will be preceded by a pilot study of the face-to-face interviews in the UK.

C.3 What will participants be asked to do in the study?²³ (e.g. number of visits, time, travel required, interviews)

Participants will get the poster / flyer online or through the school noticeboard, if they are interested in the research, they can contact the researcher via email or WeChat, and if they want to further participate in the research, they will: first, participants will be asked to accept the interview invitation and sign the consent forms; second, they will be asked to prepare for the interview by creating a personal timeline of key events that they want to bring to the interview; third, they will travel to the local school where a face-to-face interview will take place for 1 to 2 hours OR to take part in an online interview.

C.4 Does the research involve an international collaborator or research conducted overseas?²⁴

Yes No

If yes, describe any ethical review procedures that you will need to comply with in that country:

There are no additional ethical procedures required in China, the University of Leeds application covers the conduct of the study.

Describe the measures you have taken to comply with these:

No additional measures are required to comply with country-specific procedures.

Include copies of any ethical approval letters/ certificates with your application.

C.5 Proposed study dates and duration

Research start date (DD/MM/YY): 01/04/2019 Research end date (DD/MM/YY): 31/03/2023

Fieldwork start date (DD/MM/YY): 10/1/2020 Fieldwork end date (DD/MM/YY): 31/12/2020

C.6. Where will the research be undertaken? (i.e. in the street, on UoL premises, in schools)²⁵

Pilot study in the UK

Main study in China (Huaiyang) and online (WeChat)

RECRUITMENT & CONSENT PROCESSES

C.7 How will potential participants in the study be identified, approached and recruited?²⁶

How will you ensure an appropriately convened sample group in order to meet the aims of the research? Give details for subgroups separately, if appropriate. How will any potential pitfalls, for example dual roles or potential for coercion, be addressed?

Identified: Eligible participants for the main study will be young Chinese non-student adults (20-25yrs) who have lived without parents during their childhood.

Approached and recruited: For the main study in China, we will secure permission from the researcher's ex-school to host the interviews on site and to also post the recruitment poster / flyer on school noticeboards in order to recruit older siblings via school-going young people. The researcher will also hand out flyers in Huaiyang town detailing the study. A recruitment call will also be posted on WeChat. The poster / flyer and WeChat post will invite people who are interested in the study to contact the researcher via WeChat or email to get the full study information letter and / or to ask questions.

Once confirmed, the researcher will arrange a convenient time for the interview. Signed informed consent will be secured in face-to-face interviews. For online interviews, participants will be asked to email the signed consent form to the researcher in advance of the interview. Interviews in Xicheng school will be available between 9am and 8pm. We will go beyond normal business hours of 9-5pm as the school hosts evening classes to 10pm and therefore offers a safe place for people to come after work for their interview.

Pilot study in UK - The only difference here is that the participants will be identified using 'snowball sampling' by recruiting Chinese young people currently resident in the UK from among the researcher's acquaintances using WeChat/email and then will be asked to attend a face-to-face interview at UoL.

C.8 Will you be excluding any groups of people, and if so what is the rationale for that?²⁷

Excluding certain groups of people, intentionally or unintentionally may be unethical in some circumstances. It may be wholly appropriate to exclude groups of people in other cases

People younger than 20 years or older than 25 years and do not have lived without their parents for 6 months or more will be excluded as they are out of study scope; those who currently are students will be excluded as we wish to access the lesser studied population of non-students; and those who do not have a stable access to Internet will also be excluded from the online interviews.

C.9 How many participants will be recruited and how was the number decided upon?²⁸

It is important to ensure that enough participants are recruited to be able to answer the aims of the research.

We aim to recruit up to 20 participants in the main study. This will generate a large qualitative dataset suitable for a doctoral thesis.

If you have a formal power calculation please replicate it here.

Remember to include all advertising material (posters, emails etc) as part of your application

C10 Will the research involve any element of deception?²⁹

If yes, please describe why this is necessary and whether participants will be informed at the end of the study.

There will be no deception involved in this study.

C.11 Will [informed consent](#) be obtained from the research participants?³⁰

Yes No

If yes, give details of how it will be done. Give details of any particular steps to provide information (in addition to a written information sheet) e.g. videos, interactive material. If you are not going to be obtaining informed consent you will need to justify this.

Each person interested in taking part will contact the researcher through email / WeChat and then will be provided with full study information, the timeline task, and will be invited to ask any questions they may have. If they wish to take part they will be asked to read and sign the consent statements at the start of the interview. For online interviews, the consent form will be sent via email prior to the online interview and it must be signed and returned via email before the interview commences

If participants are to be recruited from any of potentially vulnerable groups, give details of extra steps taken to assure their protection. Describe any arrangements to be made for obtaining consent from a legal representative.

Will research participants be provided with a copy of the [Privacy Notice for Research](#)? If not, explain why not. Guidance is available at <https://dataprotection.leeds.ac.uk/information-for-researchers>.

Yes No

Copies of any written consent form, written information and all other explanatory material should accompany this application. The information sheet should make explicit that participants can withdraw from the research at any time, if the research design permits. Remember to use meaningful file names and version control to make it easier to [keep track of your documents](#).

Sample information sheets and consent forms are available from the University ethical review webpage at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/InvolvingResearchParticipants>.

C.12 Describe whether participants will be able to withdraw from the study, and up to what point (eg if data is to be anonymised). If withdrawal is not possible, explain why not.

Any limits to withdrawal, eg once the results have been written up or published, should be made clear to participants in advance, preferably by specifying a date after which withdrawal would not be possible. Make sure that the information provided to participants (eg information sheets, consent forms) is consistent with the answer to C12.

Participants are free to withdraw at any stage during the interview without any need to give a reason. Participants can also ask to withdraw their data up to two weeks after their participation by providing their participation code and emailing the researcher

C.13 How long will the participant have to decide whether to take part in the research?³¹

It may be appropriate to recruit participants on the spot for low risk research; however consideration is usually necessary for riskier projects.

Pilot study in UK — The recruitment will be open from 10/12/2019 to 31/12/2019.

Main study in China — The recruitment will be open from 01/10/2020 to 31/12/2020.

Participants can decide to participate up to 24 hours before an interview and up until the close of recruitment period.

C.14 What arrangements have been made for participants who might have difficulties understanding verbal explanations or written information, or who have particular communication needs that should be taken into account to facilitate their involvement in the research?³² *Different populations will have different information needs, different communication abilities and different levels of understanding of the research topic. Reasonable efforts should be made to include potential participants who could otherwise be prevented from participating due to disabilities or language barriers.*

The recruitment poster / flyer / WeChat post will be written in easy Chinese and will avoid jargon. Also, people will be given different ways to engage in the project (face-to-face or online). If a participant who wishes to do a face-to-face interview has a particular need (e.g. wheelchair access or vision problems) then a reasonable adjustment will be made to ensure that they can take part equally to other participants.

C.15 Will individual or group interviews/ questionnaires discuss any topics or issues that might be sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting, or is it possible that criminal or other disclosures requiring action could take place during the study (e.g. during interviews or group discussions)?³³ *The [information sheet](#) should explain under what circumstances action may be taken.*

Yes No *If yes, give details of procedures in place to deal with these issues.*

Participants will choose aspects of their experience they want to share – upsetting or not. Therefore, They may recall upsetting experiences, in such event, If needed, breaks will be offered during the interview and people can stop the interview at any time. They can also withdraw their data up to two weeks after the interview.

C.16 Will individual research participants receive any payments, fees, reimbursement of expenses or any other incentives or benefits for taking part in this research?³⁴

Yes No

If Yes, please describe the amount, number and size of incentives and on what basis this was decided.

RISKS OF THE STUDY

C.17 What are the potential benefits and/ or risks for research participants in both the short and medium-term?³⁵

There is a risk of participants being upset during the interview, but by giving them the timeline task in advance allows them to prepare and to manage their disclosures to some extent. There is a good chance of benefit to participants in sharing their story by learning how their early experiences affected them, and that their experiences are being valued in research.

C.18 Does the research involve any risks to the researchers themselves, or people not directly involved in the research? Eg lone working³⁶

Yes No

If yes, please describe: There is a risk on the researcher as they will be working 'alone' during interviews and there are other safety risks.

Is a [risk assessment](#) necessary for this research?

If you are unsure whether a risk assessment is required visit <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/HealthAndSafetyAdvice> or contact your Faculty Health and Safety Manager for advice.

Yes No If yes, please include a copy of your risk assessment form with your application.

RESEARCH DATA

C.19 Explain what measures will be put in place to protect personal data. E.g. anonymisation procedures, secure storage and coding of data. Any potential for re-identification should be made clear to participants in advance.³⁷ Please note that research data which appears in reports or other publications is not confidential, even if it is fully anonymised. For a fuller explanation see <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ConfidentialityAnonymisation>. Further guidance is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchDataManagement>.

A digital voice recorder pen will be used during interviews and it will be in the safe possession of the researcher. The interview process will be shared in advance with participants. Participants' name and any identifying details in the data will be anonymised using a unique participation code (consisting of participants' numbers of their date of birth). Anonymised transcripts of the interviews and the recordings will be stored on a password-protected USB and then backed up on encrypted laptop to University standards and then the researcher will store all the data separately (audios and signed consent forms) on the N drive within 12 hours of recording the interview.

C.20 How will you make your research data available to others in line with: the University's, funding bodies' and publishers' policies on making the results of publically funded research publically available. Explain the extent to which anonymity will be maintained. (max 200 words) Refer to <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ConfidentialityAnonymisation> and <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchDataManagement> for guidance.

The data will be offered to University of Leeds repository.

C.21 Will the research involve any of the following activities at any stage (including identification of potential research participants)? (Tick as appropriate)

- Examination of personal records by those who would not normally have access
- Access to research data on individuals by people from outside the research team
- Electronic surveys, please specify survey tool: _____ (further guidance)
- Other electronic transfer of data
- Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers
- Use of audio/ visual recording devices (NB this should usually be mentioned in the information for participants)
- FLASH memory or other portable storage devices
- Storage of personal data on, or including, any of the following:
- University approved cloud computing services
- Other cloud computing services
- Manual files
- Private company computers
- Laptop computers
- Home or other personal computers (not recommended; data should be stored on a University of Leeds server such as your M: or N: drive where it is secure and backed up regularly:
<http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchDataManagement>.)

Unclassified and Confidential University data must be kept on the University servers or in approved cloud services such as Office 365 (SharePoint or OneDrive). The N: Drive or Office 365 should be used for the storage of data that needs to be shared. If Highly Confidential information is kept in these shared storage areas it must be encrypted. Highly Confidential data that is not to be shared should be kept on the M: Drive. The use of non-University approved cloud services for the storage of any University data, including that which is unclassified, is forbidden without formal approval from IT. Further guidance is available via <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchDataManagement>.

C.22 How do you intend to share the research data? (Indicate with an 'X') Refer to <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/research-data-deposit> for guidance.

- Exporting data outside the European Union
- Sharing data with other organisations
- Publication of direct quotations from respondents
- Publication of data that might allow identification of individuals to be identified
- Submitting to a journal to support a publication
- Depositing in a self-archiving system or an institutional repository
- Dissemination via a project or institutional website
- Informal peer-to-peer exchange
- Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive
- Other, please state: _____.
- No plans to report or disseminate the data

C.23 How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the study? (Indicate with an 'X') Refer to <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchDissemination> and <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/Publication> for guidance.

- Conference presentation
- Peer reviewed journals
- Publication as an eThesis in the Institutional repository
- Publication on website
- Other publication or report, please state: _____.
- Submission to regulatory authorities
- Other, please state: _____.
- No plans to report or disseminate the results

C.24 For how long will data from the study be stored? Please explain why this length of time has been chosen.³⁸ Refer to the [RCUK Common Principles on Data Policy](http://rcuk.ac.uk/infrastructure/infrastructure-research-data-policy) and

http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/info/71/good_research_practice/106/research_data_guidance/5.

Students: *It would be reasonable to retain data for at least 2 years after publication or three years after the end of data collection, whichever is longer.*

Explain why this length of time has been chosen ??

___5___ years, ___0___ months.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

C.25 Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above normal salary or the costs of undertaking the research?³⁹

Yes No

If yes, indicate how much and on what basis this has been decided

C.26 Is there scope for any other conflict of interest?⁴⁰ *For example, could the research findings affect the any ongoing relationship between any of the individuals or organisations involved and the researcher(s)? Will the research funder have control of publication of research findings? Refer to <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ConflictsOfInterest>.*

Yes No

If so, please describe this potential conflict of interest, and outline what measures will be taken to address any ethical issues that might arise from the research.

C.27 Does the research involve external funding? (Tick as appropriate)

Yes No **If yes, what is the source of this funding?** _____

NB: If this research will be financially supported by the US Department of Health and Human Services or any of its divisions, agencies or programmes please ensure the additional funder requirements are complied with. Further guidance is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/FWAcompliance> and you may also contact your [FRIO](#) for advice.

PART D: Declarations**Declaration by Principal Investigators**

1. The information in this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
2. I undertake to abide by the University's ethical and health & safety guidelines, and the ethical principles underlying good practice guidelines appropriate to my discipline.
3. If the research is approved I undertake to adhere to the study protocol, the terms of this application and any conditions set out by the Research Ethics Committee (REC).
4. I undertake to seek an ethical opinion from the REC before implementing substantial amendments to the protocol.
5. I undertake to submit progress reports if required.
6. I am aware of my responsibility to be up to date and comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of patient or other personal data, including the need to register when necessary with the University's Data Protection Controller (further information available via <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ResearchDataManagement>).
7. I understand that research records/ data may be subject to inspection for audit purposes if required in future.
8. I understand that personal data about me as a researcher in this application will be held by the relevant RECs and that this will be managed according to the principles established in the Data Protection Act.
9. I understand that the REC may choose to audit this project at any point after approval.

Sharing information for training purposes: Optional – please tick as appropriate:

I would be content for members of other Research Ethics Committees to have access to the information in the application in confidence for training purposes. All personal identifiers and references to researchers, funders and research units would be removed.

Principal Investigator:

Signature of Principal Investigator:

SHUHAN DONG

(This needs to be an actual signature rather than just typed. Electronic signatures are acceptable)

Print name: Shuhan Dong Date: (dd/mm/yyyy):20/12/2019

Supervisor of student research:

I have read, edited and agree with the form above.

Supervisor's signature:

S A Hugh-Jones

(This needs to be an actual signature rather than just typed. Electronic signatures are acceptable)

Print name: Dr S A Hugh-Jones Date: (dd/mm/yyyy): 20/12/2019

Appendix B: School Invitation Letter (to be translated into Chinese)



Shuhan Dong

School of Psychology
University of Leeds
Leeds, UK

«+44(0)7895682228»

Date and version number

«pssd@leeds.ac.uk»

Dear Changshen Dong

University of Leeds Research with Xicheng School: The long-term effects on young Chinese adults of the experiences of living without parents for at least six months in childhood.

I, Shuhan Dong, would like to ask Xicheng school be involved in my PhD research that is being hosted by the School of Psychology at the University of Leeds, UK. I am a former student and it would be of great help if the school could grant me intermittent access to a quiet space in school to conduct research interviews with young Chinese adults. The following information explains the project and what it will involve.

Why the research is being conducted?

As you know, the 'Reform and Opening UP' policy in China 1978 have brought great economic development which is led to the migration of labour from rural areas to big cities. However, due to the restrictive urban household policy and higher living costs in cities, nearly 61 million children and adolescents had some experiences of living without parents in their childhood for at least 6 months, which is sometimes referred to as (Left-behind Children, LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN). While studies have often reported on psychological and emotional distress experienced by these teenagers, little is known about the legacy of this occurrence on people as they enter adulthood. The study aims to enhance the understanding of this complex experience (i.e. 'iving with relatives or on your own for at least six months due to parents' migration) and how it shapes the lives of Chinese young adults. It will provide a chance for them to share their stories. The study has been approved by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee, ethics no _____; approved _____.

What am I asking of the school?

We are keen to work with the local community in the town and hope that your school is willing to support this research in a small way. I am seeking permission to use a quiet, private office / room during opening hours to enable me to conduct research interviews with people (over 20yrs) who come forward for the study from the

local community. Interviews will be completed before 8pm and I will abide by all of the school's policies on health and safety, will ensure all research participants are signed in / out and will take good care of the school premises. Each interview will last up to two hours. I hope to conduct interviews over the following two periods: (April to May, June to July). I will request one member of school staff to be my main liaison for the room, and will keep them informed of exact dates and times of needed use. I also will request the school guard are aware of an interview time and ask to pass by the room at least twice per hour. This safety plan has been approved by the University of Leeds that I can share with you upon request.

If you are interested, I am happy to supply the school with a report of my research findings which may help the school to better understand and support students who are currently living without their parents.

I would be delighted if the school was able to support this important research in this way. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have, and / or to indicate your willingness for your school to support this research by emailing me at pssd@leeds.ac.uk,

My supervisors are Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones (s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk Tel: +44(0) 113 343 5744) and Dr Hayley Davies (h.m.davies@leeds.ac.uk, Tel: +44(0) 0113 343 9699).

Yours sincerely

Shuhan Dong

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet (to be translated into Chinese)

Study title: The long-term effects on young Chinese adults of being 'left-behind' in childhood

Invitation

Hi! I, Shuhan Dong, am a PhD researcher at the University of Leeds (School of Psychology) in the UK. My research is exploring how young Chinese adults experiences being left-behind with relatives instead of their parents or on their own for at least six months as a child.

You are invited to take part in this research. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the project?

Over the last 30 years, the sweeping trend of globalisation and the 1978 'Reform and Opening Up' policy in China have brought great economic development which is led to the migration of labour from rural areas to big cities. However, due to the restrictive urban household policy and higher living costs in cities, their migration parents leave nearly 61 million children and adolescents behind for at least 6 months. Little is known about the legacy of this occurrence on those children as they enter adulthood.

The aim of the research is to enhance understanding of this complex experience of 'living with relatives or on your own for at least six months due to parents' migration'), and how it shapes life for Chinese young adults.

What does involved?

We will have time for any questions you may have, before asking you to sign a consent form to take part

1. You will be asked to prepare for the interview by creating a personal (historical) timeline of key events that you can bring to the interview. This can be quite simple, or with lots of details – whatever helps you to share your experiences in the interview. We can talk about how you might do this, and you can ask questions to make sure you feel okay about it.
2. You will be invited to come for an interview at a time that suits you. You can opt to do the interview online, or to meet in person. We can meet in person in Xicheng School where we will have a quiet office. The office space will be monitored by school security so you can be confident of safety. We will get to know each other, and you can check out any last questions you have, before we start to take a look at your timeline. You will be asked to start at any point that you want to, and to begin to tell you story. I will listen carefully, and may ask you a few questions to clarify things so I can make sure I have understood you. It is likely that we will talk for 1-2 hours. Please note that the interviews in school will be available during these periods of time (9AM-8pm) but we can do the online interview any time up until (31/12/2020). For the online interview, you will need stable access to Internet.
3. Please be aware that the interviews in the school will be audio recorded so I can listen back and make notes (see below for how I will protect your anonymity). Online interviews will also be recorded by a digital voice recorder on WeChat (a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app developed by Tencent). I will also ask to make a copy of your timeline but I will protect your identify and keep your information secure.

Do I have to take part?

No – it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw your data at any time within two weeks after your participation. There are no penalties for withdrawing from the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I myself lived with other relatives for several years as my parents migrated to the city to earn money and I took part in a similar interview to talk about my experiences. Therefore, I understand that it is possible that being interviewed and telling your story may be upsetting in some parts. We can take breaks and you can stop the interview at any time. You can also say you do not want to answer a particular question if you do not want to. You can also withdraw your interview data from the study up to two weeks after the interview.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

We think it is very important people who went through this experience as a child, have an opportunity to tell their story, and for this to be understood and used for good. We hope that by taking part in this study, you will feel valued and understood. Some participants may find the process therapeutic, and it may help them process challenging experiences. Many people enjoy knowing that taking part in research is a way for us to understand experiences better and to use evidence to bring about positive change where possible.

How private is it all?

Your privacy is very important in this study. The study has been approved by the University of Leeds (Faculty of Medicine and Health, School of Psychology) Research Ethics Committee (Reference xx-xxxx Date of Approval xx/xx/xx) and will follow the ethical guidelines set by the British Psychological Society.

The confidentiality of your personal information will be maintained at all times. Your name and any identifying details in the interview and timeline will be anonymized. You will be asked to generate a unique participant code known only to you and immediate research team. You can use this to withdraw you data if you wish to. All audio recordings and other data (notes, transcripts, etc.) will be stored on secure, password-protected devices approved by the University of Leeds. Only the researcher and the supervisors will have access to the data, and will delete it after 5 years. We would like to use the study data in future publications and conferences but will never reveal participants names nor use interview extracts that could mean anyone is identifiable (e.g. we will change place names, other's names, dates etc where needed).

The only time when we might need to tell someone else about your participation in the study is in the unlikely event that you tell me anything in the interview that makes me worried for your immediate safety, or the immediate safety of others. I will talk to you if this happens. It is likely that I will then talk with my supervisors about appropriate ways to support you.

Ethics Contact for further information

If you have any questions or concerns please contact the research team.

Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones, (Main supervisor) Email: s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk, Tel: +44(0) 113 343 5744

Dr Hayley Davies, (Supervisor), Email: h.m.davies@leeds.ac.uk, Tel: +44(0) 0113 343 9699

The Researcher, Shuhan Dong, Email: pssd@leeds.ac.uk, Tel: 44(0) 7895682228

What to do next?

Thanks for reading all of this. If you would like to take part, that is great. Please email me, Shuhan, at pssd@leeds.ac.uk and we can start to talk about the timeline preparation and fix a time for interview. Thank you so much.

<i>Project title</i>	<i>Document type</i>	<i>Version #</i>	<i>Date</i>
The long-term effects on young Chinese adults of being 'left-behind' in childhood: a qualitative study	Information sheet for _____		

Thank you for considering taking part in the research!

Free Sources of support to download free E-books from UC browser

书籍：自我关怀——克里斯廷内夫

乌合之众——法国 勒庞

心理学与生活——理查德 格里格

我们能做什么——胡适

改变自己——约瑟夫 J 卢斯亚尼

手册：改变心理学的 40 项研究 罗杰 霍克

谁来伴我成长——王玲宁

在一起 中国留守儿童报告 ——南方周末

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Consent to take part in “The long-term effects on young Chinese adults of being ‘left-behind’ in childhood”	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ letter dated [insert date] explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw the data up to two weeks after participation without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions that not related to the project, I am free to decline.</p> <p>The research team contacts Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones Email: s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk Tel: +44(0) 113 343 5744 Dr Hayley Davies, Email: h.m.davies@leeds.ac.uk, Tel: +44(0) 0113 343 9699 Researcher Shuhan Dong, Email: pssd@leeds.ac.uk, Tel: 44(0) 7895682228</p>	
I understand that members of the research team may have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. I understand that my personal details will be kept strictly confidential.	
I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research publications in an anonymised form.	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research.	
I agree to the interview being recorded (e.g. audio-recorded, Online record by WeChat)	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.	
Name of participant	
Participant’s signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	
Signature	

Appendix E: Example interview questions

Timeline focused questions

2. Let's start by you talking through the rough outline of your timeline. Based on your timeline, which part do you want to describe in more detail first?
 - a. What was important to you or difficult for you about this time? Why is it significant and on the timeline? (probes to get rich description, e.g. can you tell me more, could you give me an example)
 - b. (if not mentioned) Who were key people in your life at this time? Can you tell me about their role / influence for you in relation to this event?
 - c. What did you understand about what was going on (in terms of other people's actions) at this time?
 - d. What were your needs at this time? Your feelings?
 - e. How do you feel about this time in your life now, looking back? Has your perspective changed over time?

(apply to each event noted on the timelines)

Other questions

6. Have you talked about living without your parents to many people? How has that been for you?
7. How are things for you now, in your day-to-day life?
8. How are your relationships with family? And friends?
9. How do you feel now about the time you lived without your parents?
10. What is important to you now, looking forwards? What matters to you as you look to the future?

Appendix F: Recruitment leaflet.

Our Research Program

I am a Chinese PhD researcher, working from the School of Psychology at the University of Leeds, UK. I am seeking participants for my research.

You can participate if you:

1. Have Lived with other family members or on your own for at least 6 months when you were a child because of your parents migration;
2. Are not currently a student,
3. Are aged between 20 and 25 years old,
4. Are Willing to share with someone of a similar experience - YES, it's me - your early life experience.

1. Email Me, Shuhan Dong (tubroage@163.com) (see pic with not so bad smile!) to find out more or to let us know you'd like to get involved;
2. I will arrange to contact you through WeChat (Scan the code) or email and get things rolling. The research recruitment will be between April to December in 2020.

Benefits of taking part

1. A chance to share your story;
2. Time to reflect on you experience and what it means for you now;
3. Your story will be valued in the research;
4. Generate better understanding within the research community in the UK and China.

Our Research Team:

1. Key contact is Me, Shuhan Dong. I am supervised by Dr Siobhan Hugh-Jones (s.hugh-jones@leeds.ac.uk), and Dr Hayley Davies (h.m.davies@leeds.ac.uk).



School of Psychology

leeds.ac.uk



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Have you ever experienced living without parents like me?

Are you between 20-25 years of age?

Are you able to share your experience with us in an informal interview?

Then we want YOU!

What's this all about?

In 2018, There were almost 9 million children living without their parents as they migrated in cities to earn money in China, 96% of them lived with their grandparents, others either lived with relatives or on their own.

We want to understand the nature of these experiences for them, and how they feel and think about themselves as they become young

Why do we need you?

Young Chinese adults are at the heart of this project. We will not be able to do our research well without you!

We would like you to tell us about your early life experience when you were living without parents and to tell us what these experiences mean for you now. What good could come of this and for this to be understood and used for good.

We hope that by taking part in this study, you will feel valued and understood.

What will you have to do?



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

1. You will be asked to prepare for an interview by creating a personal (historical) timeline of key events that you can bring to the interview. This can be quite simple, or with lots of details – whatever helps you to share your experiences in the interview (great!).
2. You will be invited to come for an interview at a time that suits you. You can opt to do the interview online, or to meet in person. We can meet in Xicheng school where we will have a quiet office, and it's safe. You can ask me any questions you have, before we start to take a look at your timeline. Also, you can start your timeline or story at any point that you want to.

I will listen carefully, and may ask you questions to clarify things so I can make sure I have understood you. It is likely that we will talk for 1-2 hours. Please note that the interviews in school will be available between 9AM to 8pm but we can do the online interview any time up until 31/12/2020, and you will need stable access to Internet.

3. Please be aware that the interview in the school will be audio recorded so I can listen back and make notes. Online interviews will also be recorded by a digital voice-recorder on WeChat. I will also ask to make a copy of your timeline but I will protect your identify and keep your information secure. Except me, no one will hear your story

Where will all this happen?



Our research mainly based at Huaiyang town. I will meet you at the entrance of Xicheng school, or a quiet place if you need.

How will you be protected?

Your privacy is very important in this study. The study has been approved by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee (Reference xx-xxxx Date of Approval xx/xx/xx) and will follow the ethical guidelines set by the British Psychological Society.

Your personal details will be confidential. You will be asked to generate a unique participant code known only to you and immediate research team. Your data will be accessed in anonymous way. You can use this to withdraw your data if you wish to. All audio recordings and other data (notes, transcripts, etc.) will be stored on secure, password-protected devices approved by the University of Leeds. Only the researcher and the supervisors will have access to the data, and will delete it after 5 years



EXPLORING HOW YOUNG CHINESE ADULTS UNDERSTAND THEIR EARLY EXPERIENCE OF LIVING WITH RELATIVES FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS DUE TO PARENTS' MIGRATION, AND HOW IT SHAPE THEIR LIVES AS THEY ENTER ADULTHOOD.

A CHINESE PHD RESEARCHER, SHUHAN DONG, WORKING FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS, UK. WITH THE HELP OF TWO SUPERVISORS TO DO THE RESEARCH PROJECT IN CHINA.

Why we conduct this research project?

In 2018, there were almost 9 million children living without their parents as they migrated in cities to earn money in China, 96% of them have lived with their grandparents, others either have lived with relatives or on their own.

We want to understand the nature of these experiences for them, and how they feel and think about themselves as they become young adults.

How to take part in?

First --- If you:

- 1) have lived with other family members or on your own for at least 6 months when you were a child due to your parents' migration;
- 2) are not currently a students;
- 3) are aged between 20 –25ys;
- 4) are willing to share with me of your early life experience.

Second --- If you are interested in the research:

- 1) Contact Me, Shuhan Dong (tubroage@163.com) to find out more or to let me know you'd like to get involved;
- 2) The research recruitment will be between **April to December in 2020**. via email or WeChat (code below);

What we can provide to you? And Benefits of taking part.

- 1) completely respect your rights , such as: taking breaks at any time during the interview; refusing the questions if you do not want to,
- 2) withdraw your data your data from the study up to two weeks after the participation;

Benefits of taking part

I myself lived with other relatives for several years as my parents migrated to the city to earn money. I also took part in a similar interview to talk about my experiences. So, you can have the following benefits ---

- 1. **A chance to share your story;**
- 2. **Time to reflect on you experience and what it means for you now;**
- 3. **Your story will be valued in the research;**
- 4. **Generate better understanding within the research community in the UK and? China.**

What will you have to do?

- 1) accept the interview invitaion and sign the consent forms;
- 2) prepare the interview by creating your personal(historical) timeline of key events that you want to share;
- 3) travel to the Xicheng School office or to a quiet place to do a face-to-face interview, the interview will be audio recorded, it will take 1-2 hours.

You Confidential Will Be Protected

- 1) The study has been approved by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee (Reference xx-xxxx Date of Approval xx/xx/xx) and will follow the ethical guidelines set by the British Psychological Society;
- 2) You will be asked to generate a unique participant code known only to you and immediate research team.
- 3) Your data will be accessed in anonymous way.
- 4) All audio recordings and other data (notes, transcripts, etc.) will be stored on secure, password-protected devices approved by the University of Leeds. Only the researcher and the supervisors will have access to the data, and will delete it after 5 years.

Come and Join us!



Appendix G: Timeline samples

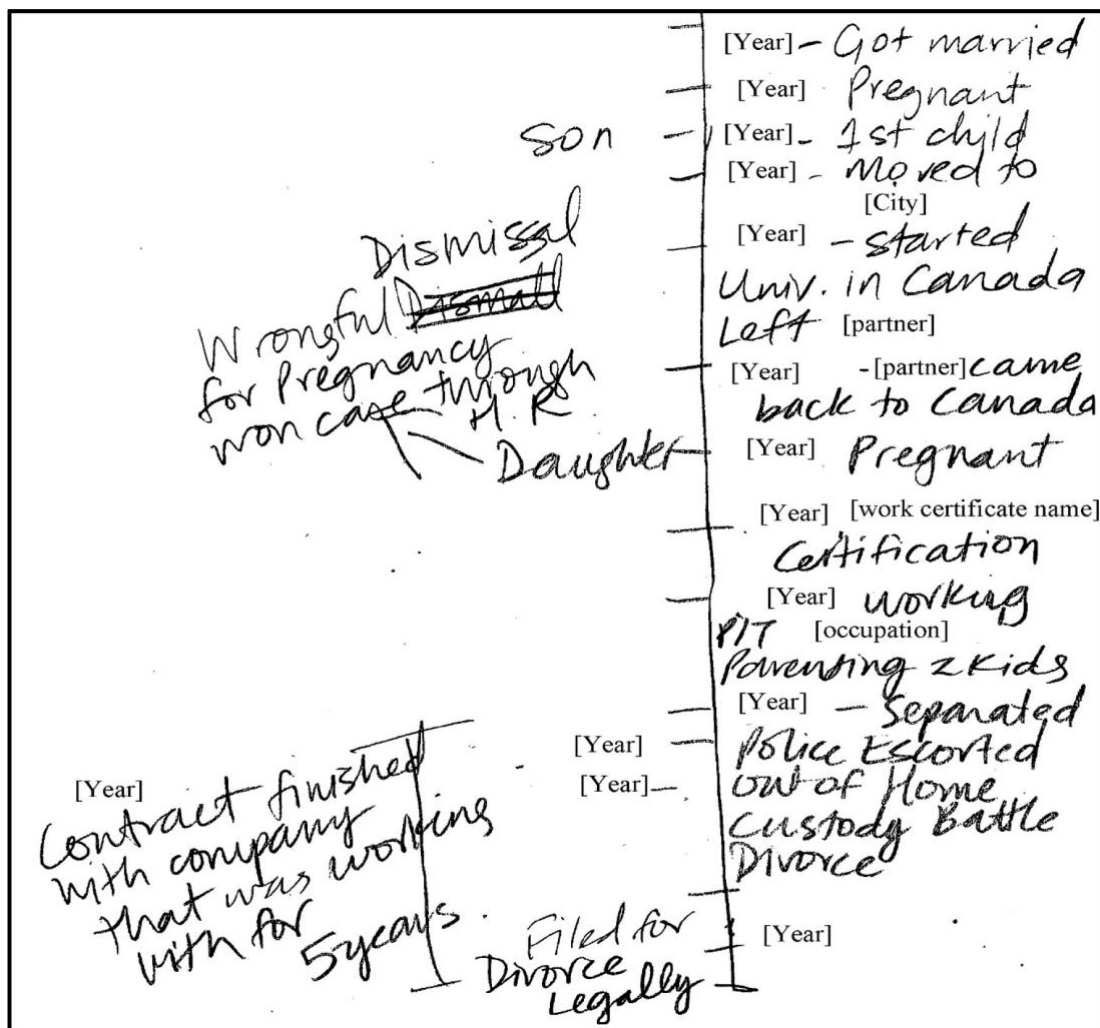


Figure 10 List-like Timeline. © 2015 by International Institute for Qualitative Methodology at the University of Alberta, Canada

Appendix H: Example of participants' timeline

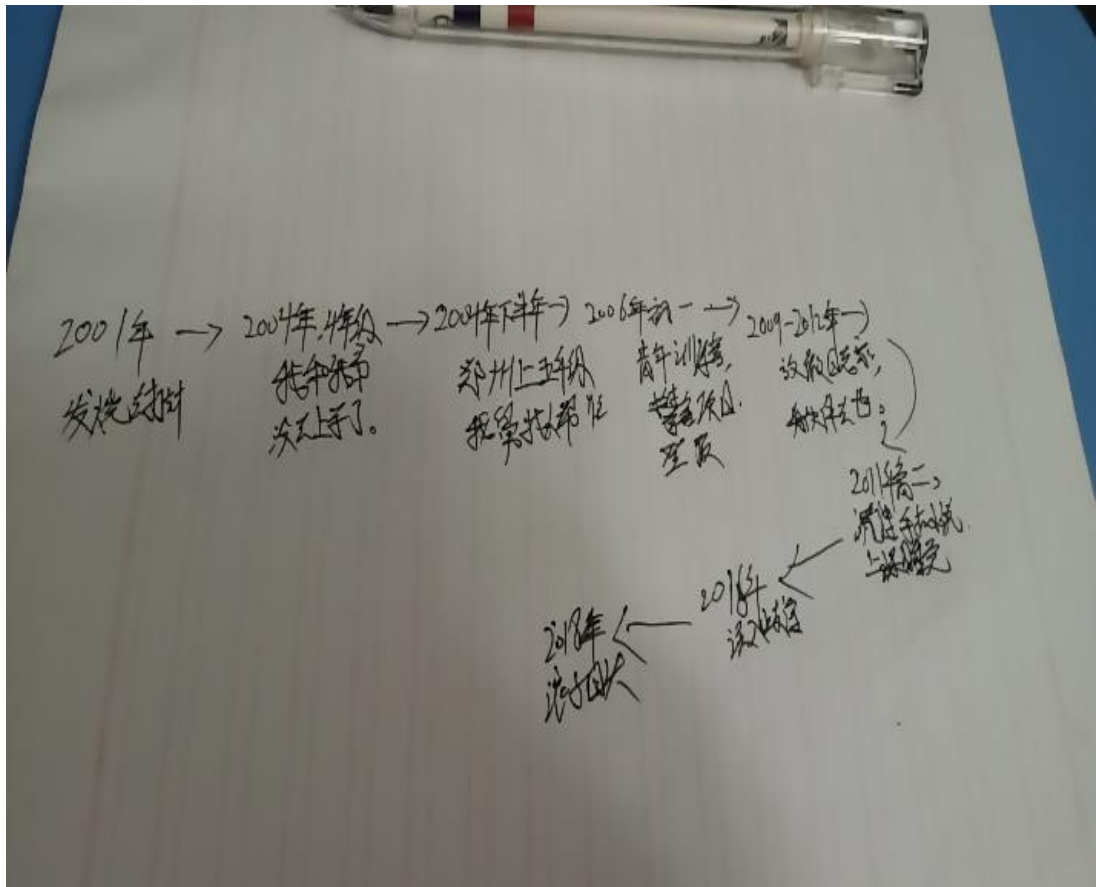


Figure 12 Delin's timeline

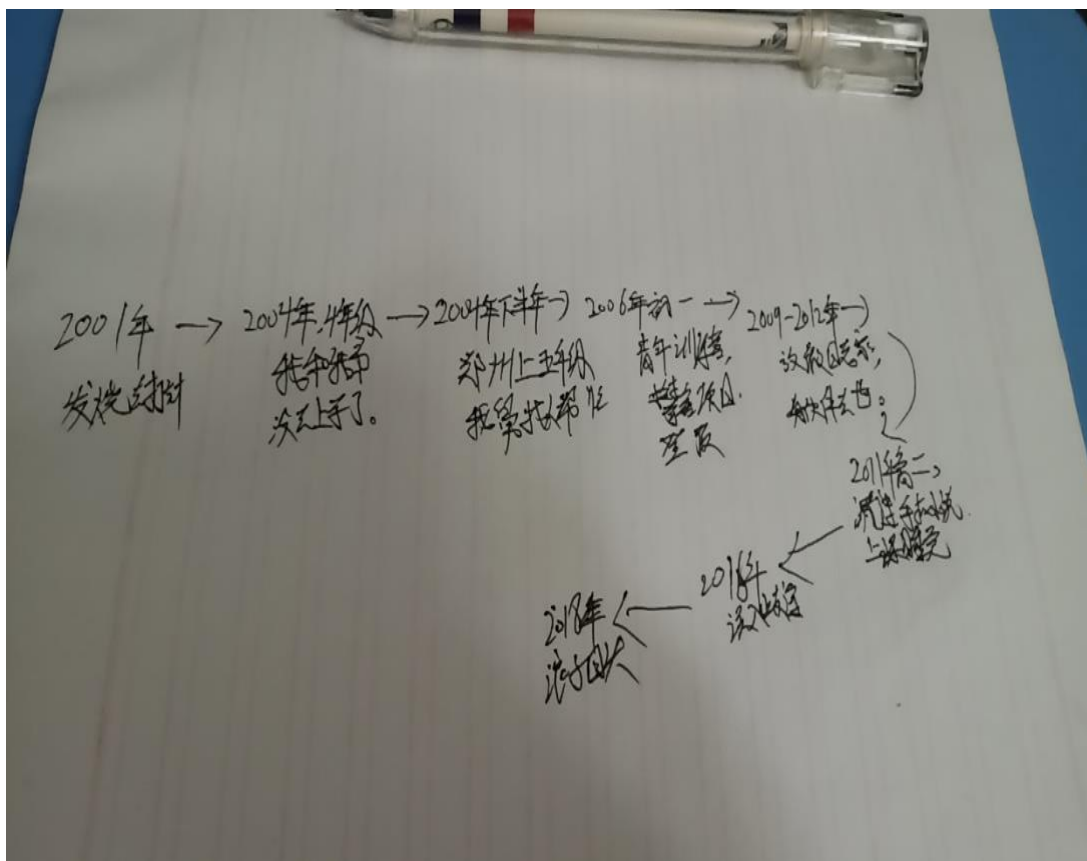


Figure 13 Bing's timeline

10岁前：和爸妈一起生活。

- ① 记得有一年收麦子期间，老是有阵雨，还打雷，倒不是怕，就是羞，竟然天真地祈求上天不要下雨，果然过了一会，不雨了，还挺高兴。
- ② 在麦地里搭^棚篷子，还挺好玩。地头种的有时有蔬菜，缺水，不好。
- ③ 和弟弟妹妹们一起掐麦子，挺开心。
- ④ 2003年非典，小学一年级，总觉得没放假。

10岁，是留守的第一年。

- ① 爸妈走的第一天挺伤心的，带着弟弟追车。
 - ② 后来~~并~~忘记怎么回事，我去姥姥家生活。^{（和我家挺近）}弟弟在奶奶家，之前弟弟黏人，后来不黏了。我连第一次打他挺狠，后来互相打架。
 - ③ 不知从什么时候开始，就不太愿意跟人讲话。^{（带点防备，不管）}别人讲话我听着，偶尔回一句：别人去玩，我在旁边看着，想跟着玩又向自己算。
 - ④ 在学校是经常跟前同桌说话，其他人基本没交流，换了座位后，跟之前的前同桌又没有了交流。
- 九年级（初三），是转变最大的。（与以前相比）讲话，交朋友等。

高中以前，期待~~爸爸~~过年，因为爸妈会回家，但不喜欢与他们通电话，会感到别扭。虽然他们了解我，但我不想说。

高中以后，既不期待他们回家，也不想与他们通电话，因为我长得大了，我能照顾好自己，不喜欢有肢体接触。越长越大越~~更~~忍不住发脾气。

2020年

爸爸在家2个月左右，妈妈在家3个月左右。和爸爸相处和谐，和妈妈经常拌嘴，不明原因。他们走了之后，觉得身心轻松。

高三

高三那年，有一个特别合得来的上铺，她是第一个给我生日礼物的人。那年我的生日离高考还剩两周，突然特别想要一个属于我自己的蛋糕，然后就去订了，但那天等上铺等陪我等到很晚都没有送来，第二天去问，店员说~~她~~忘记了，我当时气极了，就退了订单。毕业后，我和上铺就没再联系的。大概两年后，突然翻到她的QQ留言，^{我特别}愧疚。

Figure 14 Xiaocao's timeline

Appendix I: Participants' demographics

Table 4 Participants' demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Siblings	Guardians	Duration of separation & age of the participant when the separation occurred	Family changes (over left behind period)
PP1	M	25	1	Grandparents	5 (between 5-10yrs)	
PP2	F	22	1	Grandparents	6 (between 6-8yrs; 12-16yrs)	
PP3	M	25	2	Mother	4 (between 8-11yrs)	
PP4	F	24	1	Grandparents	16 (between 8-24yrs)	Parents separated
PP5	F	26	1	Mother, then on her own	26 (between 0-26yrs)	
PP6	F	26	2	Mother	2 (between 6-8yrs)	
PP7	F	19	1	Grandparents	15 (between 4-19yrs)	
PP8	M	22	2	Grandparents	22 (between 0-22yrs)	
PP9	F	25	1	Grandparents	10 (between 8-18yrs)	
PP10	F	26	1	Grandparents	22 (between 0-10yrs, between 13-25yrs)	
PP11	M	20	1	Grandparents	12 (between 8-20yrs)	
PP12	M	24	0	Mother	0.7 (between 6-7yrs)	
PP13	F	24	0	Grandparents	24 (between 0-24yrs)	Father died
PP14	M	26	1	Relatives	3 (between 10-13yrs)	Mother died, father remarry
PP15	F	22	1	Relatives	15 (between 6-21yrs)	Disabled mother
PP16	M	19	1	Relatives	14 (between 5-19yrs)	Disabled mother
PP17	F	22	1	Grandparents /Aunt	19 (between 0-19yrs)	
PP18	F	22	1	Grandparents	7 (between 1-8yrs)	Mother died
PP19	M	22	1	Relatives	2 (between 13-15yrs)	Father beats child when get drunk
PP20	M	24	3	Mother	19 (between 4-23yrs)	