



Griffith Journal  
of Law & Human Dignity  
**GENDER, CULTURE  
& NARRATIVE**

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GRIFFITH JOURNAL OF  
LAW & HUMAN DIGNITY

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## THE STORY OF A 'LEFT-BEHIND' CHILD OF CHINA

JUNTAO LYU\*

*In China today, there are an estimated 61 million children that have been separated from their parents — the so-called “left-behind” children of China. As one of the “left-behind” generation, I have experienced the poverty, separation, and struggles that characterise these hard times. On reflection, the strong influence of rural Chinese gendered and cultural norms are paramount to understanding my experience and those who grew up alongside me. My story is by no means universal — the challenges faced by Chinese “left-behind” children are wide-ranging, and as diverse and complex as China itself. After all, my story is just one story of millions, and it is one of privilege when considering the experiences of others. While China’s rural-urban move has brought significant financial improvements and opportunities for many, this comes at a price for those left behind.*

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I INTRODUCTION

My parents are part of the *liudong renkou* — the “floating” migrant population of China. The migrant workers of China “float” because they leave their rural homes to find higher-paying temporary work in urban cities. For migrant workers, the move is an opportunity to change their fate and that of their families. The move can be uncertain and the working conditions harsh, but the alternative is farming for subsistence. If you visit any Chinese city today, almost every worker you see in restaurants, shopfronts, factories, and on the sidewalk are rural migrant workers.

My mother went to Shanghai when I was 11 years old, and my father followed six months later, leaving behind my older brother and I in our village home. Family separation among Chinese migrant workers is common due to China’s household registration system (the *hukou* system) that registers families as either rural or urban. The Chinese Government first implemented the *hukou* system to restrict population movement in the late 1950s. City residents were issued rations, given jobs, education, a residence and social welfare, while the rural residents were given land to farm and build their homes on. In the 1990s, the *hukou* controls were relaxed and people began to gravitate to where the jobs were. Today, your *hukou* provides you with social rights in the area where you are registered, including a living space, health insurance, and schooling.<sup>1</sup> When rural residents migrate for work in cities, as my parents did, they concede their *hukou* privileges. It is simply not feasible to bring children along due to the high living costs of urban cities, including rent, schooling, food, and hospital fees. There have been attempts to build private primary schools in cities for migrant workers’

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the *hukou* system and its reforms, see Lu Yilong, ‘Does hukou still matter? The household registration system and its impact on social stratification and mobility in China’ (2008) 29(2) *Social Sciences in China* 56, 57–58.

children, but these schools often close due to limited financial support and the strict regulations of local governments.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, many children throughout China have been separated from their parents — the number is estimated at over 61 million.<sup>3</sup> We are called the “left-behind”.

Other countries also experience forms of the same problem, especially informed by both internal and international migration.<sup>4</sup> My story is not a universal depiction of the challenges faced by Chinese left-behind children, but my story is one that will hopefully illuminate some of the social impacts of China’s rural-urban migration on my generation and future generations of rural children. While the move has brought significant financial improvements and opportunities for many, this comes at a price for those left behind. Studies have shown that left-behind children are more susceptible to depression, antisocial behaviours, and delinquent and destructive behaviours.<sup>5</sup> Their experiences are also gendered, with left-behind girls being particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and trafficking.<sup>6</sup> In my own home province, Henan province, a study revealed that 34 percent of the rapes that occurred in that province involved left-behind girls.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, I was one of the luckier ones.

## II MY STORY

My hometown is a small village in southern Henan Province, located beside the Huai River. Until I turned 11, I lived with my family in a rural cottage. At that time, the only

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Goodburn, ‘Learning from migrant education: a case study of the schooling of rural migrant children in Beijing’ (2009) 29 *International Journal of Educational Development* 496, 495–504.

<sup>3</sup> ‘They are also parents: A Study on Migrant Workers with Left-behind Children in China’ (Report, Center for Child Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility, August 2013) 3  
<[http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/they\\_are\\_also\\_parents\\_-\\_a\\_study\\_on\\_migrant\\_workers\\_in\\_china\\_ccr\\_csr\\_english.pdf](http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/they_are_also_parents_-_a_study_on_migrant_workers_in_china_ccr_csr_english.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Castles, Hein De Haas and Mark Miller, *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See, eg, Zhang Wenjuan, ‘Focus on Children’s Rights in Rapid Economic Development: The Proposition China Endeavours to Solve’ (Report, UNICEF China, November 2014) 4  
<[https://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Zhang\\_Wenjuan\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Zhang_Wenjuan_EN.pdf)>; Jiayou Luo et al, ‘The Status of Care and Nutrition of 774 Left-behind Children in Rural Areas In China’ (2008) 123 *Public Health Reports* 382, 382.

<sup>6</sup> See 女童保护研究报告 [Girls’ Protection Research Report] [报告 [Report], 中国儿童少年基金会 北京师范大学社会发展与公共政策学院社会公益研究中心 [China Foundation for Children and Adolescent’s Social Welfare, School of Social Development and Public Policy, Beijing Normal University] (2013) 18 [author’s trans].

<sup>7</sup> Su Guojun and Wang Yuxin, ‘The alarming absence of guardians to protect left-behind girls in rural areas from sex predators’, *China’s Women News*, 18 December 2006, cited in Aris Chan, ‘Paying the Price for Economic Development: The Children of Migrant Workers in China’ (Special Report, China Labour Bulletin, November 2009) 12.

income of my family came from farming. We had six Chinese Mu (1 Mu = 666.7 m<sup>2</sup>) of fields to farm. When my father was younger, he also used to sell other agricultural products at the market, like peanuts that he collected from other farmers, and my mother used to tailor clothes for other villagers. But the profits from these kinds of small businesses could not meet the expenses of my family — my older brother, my parents, and myself. We had some unhappy spring festivals because my family's annual income was only around 100 *yuan*. My mother would cry when she saw the money she had left.

When I was younger, the main staple food my family ate were sweet potatoes. My mother would mix the sweet potatoes with flour and boil them. I remember I could eat five bowls of this meal at one time; it was my favourite food during my childhood. We also had our own small vegetable garden that was important for daily food supply. We separated our grain into two groups: one for our own family supply and another one for tax.<sup>8</sup> When I was young, I often went to visit my maternal grandparents, because every time I left their home, my grandmother would give me a big goose egg to take home to eat.

The primary education I received was in a small village school. Although it was small, the building — a two-floor concrete building with eight rooms — was still the best building in our village. I was seven years old when I was a first-year student. One time I was on classroom duty for the day, and I ordered a girl to do the cleaning, which was the job I had to finish. She was our village doctor's daughter, shorter than me, weaker than me. I ordered her to sweep the floor, relying on the authority of the duty team leader. She cried afterwards and went to tell her parents about this. A few days later, I became sick, and I went to see the doctor with my parents. Her mother spoke with my mother in front of me and she apologised to her. This taught me that people should not bully others who were weaker than them. I felt so ashamed at that time. Shortly after, I had a similar experience. Some taller boys in my class often bullied me at school. It was a cold winter day, and we were cleaning up garbage on the school grounds. The boys took away my hat and threw it to each other. Every time I took it back and put it on my head, they grabbed it again, so I clutched my hat tightly in my grip in case they stole it again. My neighbour's daughter saw this, and she came over and told me to put the hat on my head

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<sup>8</sup> Before 2005, Chinese farmers paid their tax by grain.

because the weather was too cold. She also told the boys not to steal my hat again. This memory stays with me as I always appreciate how brave and caring she was to stand up to the bullies.

In 2001, one of my uncles from my mother’s side, who had found a job in Shanghai, decided to take my mother there to try her luck. It was a hard time for my family when my mother decided to leave — we couldn’t sustain ourselves anymore in our hometown. My father stayed at home to look after me, but he often gambled, leaving me at home alone. I often cooked for myself, but since ingredients were limited and I didn’t have any money, my only options were flour and vegetables, so I mixed them and made them into a vegetable pancake. I remember there were many times that I tasted a kind of petrol flavour in my pancake, but I did not understand that it could be dangerous, and I had to eat them because I was so hungry. One day, I found that the flour was polluted due to a fallen diesel oil can. My father knew about the accident, but he didn’t tell me about it. The polluted flour didn’t poison me — probably because I didn’t eat much.

Six months later, my older brother dropped out of middle school and followed our mother to find employment in Shanghai. As he was too young, there were no factories that accepted him. So he came back home and took over my father’s job of looking after me. I remember that this was a difficult time. Although my older brother cooked for me more often, he thought that my father had always preferred me and had beaten him heavier than me every time. So when we were both at home, he beat me a lot and said nobody would protect me anymore. I was so helpless and the only option for me was to be beaten. We had to wait another six months until my brother turned 16 and was old enough to get a job. He began working at a supermarket in Ningbo — another city next to Shanghai. A little while after he left I received a long letter from him, apologising to me and telling me he wouldn’t beat me at home anymore and he now had the same hopeless feelings himself in a faraway city. I forgave him after I received that letter. However, I do not believe his sincerity anymore as he often beats his own son.

In 2002, I entered middle school. It was a boarding school, and I only needed to go home on the weekends. During middle school, I did not know how to look after myself. When I was 13 years old, I weighed only 36 kg. I was short, thin, and often got sick. My parents and my older brother were in Shanghai, and my puppy dog and I were left at my paternal grandparents’ home. I got my puppy when I was eight years old. I liked him

very much, and he always stayed with me rather than other families. I remember every time I came back home and saw him; he was so happy to put his head in my arms. Every time I went to school, he would follow me for a long way until I told him to go back. He was my closest friend during my childhood. Unfortunately, he died in 2013. My grandmother told me he ran away and died alone, so nobody could find him.

In China, we have nine years of compulsory education, which includes six years of primary school and three years of middle school. However, many children could not finish their education, especially girls. Dropouts were very common at my school. Everyone believes that if a child's performance is not good enough, then they should drop out from school. This was especially the case for girls, as they would get married soon after they graduated. So, if a girl could not get high marks at school, her parents would let her drop out from school to earn more money for the family.

At that time, many children did not perform well. My classmates easily got bored with learning. I had two good friends, who were also left-behind children at my middle school. We often rode bikes and played together, but in the second year of middle school they told me that they didn't like learning all day and preferred to find employment in a big city. This really impacted me because I was unable to make friends like them again. Fortunately, I soon found an alternative friend: books.

One time after school, I saw a book stall next to the school entrance. I was attracted by a British novel called *Robinson Crusoe* and a Russian novel called *Childhood*.<sup>9</sup> I spent seven *yuan* to buy these two books, which was three lunch meals worth of money. I took the books back and read them on my bed instead of having food. From these two books, I learned that people could survive alone even in difficult circumstances. It encouraged me to face my life and created an escape from my lonely reality. From that time, I gradually began reading more. I preferred long novels, such as the *Tale of Two Cities*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *World of Plainness*. I visited this particular bookstore very frequently, and the shopkeeper became my good friend. The shopkeeper was a kind woman. She said she used to like reading, especially novels, but life forced her to give up her education and make money for her family.

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<sup>9</sup> These books were translated into Chinese.

I remember the year that my mother left I fell to the bottom of my class and I was never able to achieve high marks in school again. I failed my first College Entrance Examination — the compulsory *gaokao*. Fortunately, my parents did not force me to leave school, and I had a chance to retake the *gaokao* the following year, and passed. I then began studying at a public university in Henan Province. This university was not as prestigious as other universities around China, but for me, it was good enough since I was just the second student from my village to ever attend university.

After entering university, my parents' income had improved a little. I also earned money to reduce the burden for my parents. I worked in restaurants, the local supermarket, taught primary school students as a private tutor, and taught rural civil servants computer skills. During the first year of college, I found it very difficult to make friends, so in my second year, I set up a new club for students who cared about rural development. I posted a lot of recruitment advertisements around my campus, and soon after I had recruited around 30 members. We organised a reading club, public lecture events, and printed publications; we also climbed mountains and hiked together. Sometimes we joined the rural surveys with other universities and taught primary students as volunteers in some remote rural areas. The rural development club became a place where like-minded students with shared values could come together. My university's Communist Party Youth League also offered volunteer opportunities in rural areas, but this was mostly just for taking pictures.

After starting the Rural Development Club, I became less lonely, and I was able to see that education has a transformative power for rural children, particularly left-behind children. The remittances sent back home by migrant workers has barely contributed to much development in Chinese rural areas, so many young Chinese see their futures in the cities — whether as a low-paid migrant worker or by studying at an urban university.<sup>10</sup> When I was in my third year, I decided to apply to a postgraduate school for a Masters degree. For seven months, I prepared for the Graduate Admission Examination and passed it in my fourth year. In 2013, I entered the graduate school of a famous university in Beijing as a postgraduate student. I saw that the only way in China

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the effects of migrant worker remittances, see, eg, Yilin Chiang, Emily C Hannum and Grace Kao, 'It's Not Just About the Money: Motivations for Youth Migration in Rural China' (Working Paper, Asia-Pacific Education, Language Minorities and Migration Network Working Paper Series, 18 February 2014).

to change your fate and improve the lives of others was through education. However, when I looked back on my whole educational career, I have to say, despite my rural upbringing, I am still one of the privileged — a boy.

### III GENDER INEQUALITY IN RURAL CHINA

It is obvious that many rural families suffer from poverty in China. The left-behind children are seen as a serious social issue today, but women and girls especially are suffering. Gender-specific issues have never been brought to public attention. I would like to introduce some true stories from my life to show these gender-based inequalities and their impacts on people in rural China.

When I was in my middle school, I lived in a rental house, which was next to my middle school. The hostess of that house was my cousin's aunt, who was also from my village. My cousin Nan also lived in that house, and we often went to school together. Nan's parents treated her very strictly. I remember one time Nan and I went to a faraway place with some girls and boys, just riding bikes and looking at new places. Her mother got angry with her and criticised her severely in front of me. She said that girls should not hang out and play with boys — she even asked me if I agreed with her, but I did not answer her. The owner of the house — aunt's husband — often drank alcohol. Every time he got drunk, he would casually lie on someone's bed, particularly girls' beds as they were at school during the daytime. Nan was angry with that and complained a lot to her aunt, but nothing changed.

I used to have a friend in the second year of middle school. One time I had a dispute with him about opening the window. I insisted on opening the window because the air was dirty in the classroom, but he insisted on closing the window because outside was too cold. I opened the window three times. It made him angry with me, so he hit me hard. A fat boy encouraged him to hit me again, and he did. It obviously destroyed our friendship. I kept him as my friend, but apparently, he did not think the same way.

The following events made me realise that people treat girls and boys differently. The boy who hit me did not get any warning or punishment from our class tutor, despite this happening in our classroom. However, the outcome was totally different if the same thing happened but girls were involved instead. I also had another friend — a pretty girl

who liked dressing up nicely. She could not achieve good academic marks, and our female class tutor didn't like her very much. One time, a boy who was getting high marks swore at her. She was very angry, and afterwards she called some friends to hit this boy after school. The boy complained to our class tutor. The class tutor became angry and she took this opportunity to expel her from the middle school. I still remember how the class tutor swore before expelling my friend. She said she was just a gangster's daughter! I understand why she said that about my friend. At that time, middle school girls were not expected to be dressing prettily as it might be a distraction to other students. People considered violence to be something only boys would engage in, otherwise people would call you a gangster girl or the girl from a gangster's family.

The closer I came to finishing high school, the more frequent dropouts became, especially girls. Even girls with very high grades dropped out before graduation when they became old enough to enter the factories. I remember a girl who liked a writer (Yu Qiuyu) very much, and we often discussed Yu's articles together. But she dropped out in the second year. There was also another girl, who was often rewarded a book of short stories due to her high marks, who dropped out in her third year of high school. At that time, I used to be very jealous of her because I liked short stories very much. She told me that her parents persuaded her to give up her education and to find a job in a big city. She said she agreed with her parents because she could not see how education could give her any opportunities in the future.

These experiences showed me how the fates of girls and boys in rural areas were not merely chance, but were pre-determined by tradition and circumstance. In the area I lived, I observed how married men often drank, played cards, gambled with others, and hung out with friends on the streets. Women were left with all the housework and also the care of children. The wives had to work hard day and night, and never had an opportunity to rest. When the families treated guests to meals, it was the wife's duty to prepare the meal, however, they would not be allowed to sit with the men to share the food — they had to eat their food in the kitchen with their children. This is just accepted as the way things are.

## IV OUR FUTURE

Throughout the three years of my Masters degree, the quality of education and training I received from my professors was excellent. I also came to realise that my childhood and rural background had made me more “radical” than my classmates in terms of my thinking. I often contemplated how to reduce the social and gendered inequalities between rural and urban areas, between men and women — social systems created and reinforced by the *hukou* system, which is responsible for creating the phenomena of left-behind children. I realised that for most migrant workers and rural Chinese families, their only chance to improve their lives was to break the rules that reinforced most of the privileges the upper classes have. For example, the *gaokao* (College Entrance Examination) in big cities is not available for migrant children from other provinces, which is to protect the local students’ higher educational opportunities and has directly aggravated the family situations of migrant workers. Many migrant workers have to send their children back to their hometown to join the *gaokao*, even though they have kept their children by their side before. Clearly, these rules not only created inequalities, but also maintained the order and hierarchies that governed our lives. Supposedly “kind” intentions with the public interest in mind have been justified, but they are just as dangerous when acted upon in heedless ways. I used to think that the elite students in famous universities were more intelligent, more rational, and especially more responsible. But the reality is, most of them are very smart in a kind of ego-driven way. Many elite students know how to maximise their personal interests without any moral burdens in doing so. When they face their leaders, they use a very soft and kind face, smiling, but when they face those “beneath” them, the kindness is not always there. I realised they are actually bullying the powerless, just like I bullied my female classmate, like the taller boys did to me, and just like males in rural areas do to females. My experiences have given me a clear view, enabling me to identify people who have grown up with an authoritarian predisposition and the same impulses that flicker upon myself. I constantly look at myself and the people around me to find real friends.

However, wherever you go, you are able to find different people. I have met students and teachers who focus on improving the lives of Chinese migrant workers and have petitioned the Government and public for their rights and equal treatment. I also focused my academic research on migrant workers. My Masters thesis related to medical

practices among migrant workers and the emergence of underground migrant doctors in Shanghai. I graduated with a Masters degree in 2016, and, afterwards, I came to England to study for my PhD and continue this research.

I think the lives of left-behind children can be very lonely and they lose hope early in their lives. They are left-behind twice — once by their parents, and then by China as a whole. We should draw lessons from the past and take them into the future. The *hukou* registration system still perpetuates and strengthens China’s urban-rural divide. Rural migrants still “float” — they can never really belong in another place, but they drive the development of our cities. The demand for low-cost workers in urban cities has not been matched by social services to support migrant workers in their temporary homes. We also need to address how different education policies must target the reasons why left-behind children feel education is not designed for them, and understand how these reasons are gendered among China’s rural villages.

In 2015, I heard that four children were found dead in a rural village home in Guizhou province. They died of pesticide poisoning and had left a suicide note — three girls and one boy, all siblings under the age of 14 whose parents had left to find work.<sup>11</sup> If anything comes from this tragedy, I hope people take notice. We need to work towards better solutions. They were too young to have lost all hope.

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Phillips, ‘Chinese police ‘find suicide note’ in case of ‘left behind’ children deaths’, *The Guardian* (online), 14 June 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/14/chinese-police-investigating-deaths-of-left-behind-children-find-suicide-note>>.

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