

Home Alone: The Rapid Urbanization in Shanghai and Its Effects on Guizhou's Left Behind Children



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T01: Social Responsibility
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“I really hope that my parents can care about me more. Is it okay if you encourage me a little? Is it okay if you don’t scold me?”

—*Fuwen Yao, a 17 years old 11th grader at PinHua High School’s reply to being asked if he has anything he wanted to say to his parents or the school.*

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2015 alone, there are over 61 million left-behind children in China. Over the past 4 years, this number has increased at an unprecedented rate, with millions facing the same fate.

To experience first-hand what these children are facing and to find the root of the problem, surveys and face to face interviews were conducted with the students at the small but lively PinHua High School in Guiyang, Guizhou, as well as their parents in Shanghai. The investigation at PinHua High School revealed the factors that pushed parents to leave and showed that being left behind by their parents, made these children become disadvantaged in the educational system, forced to cope with potential psychological difficulties alone.

The Dualistic Nature of Urbanization

Though, urbanization has brought countless economic benefits to citizens all over China, whether urbanization is entirely beneficial to the vast majority of people still remains ambiguous. The negative impacts of urbanization in the rural areas of China is the beginning of left-behind children.

The main cause of the "left-behind children issue" is the ongoing urban development happening due to globalization in cities such as Shanghai. Seeking for better job opportunities, over 200 million migrant workers move from rural areas to bigger urban cities, leaving their children behind in their hometown.

Fiona Wang, a migrant masseuse in her mid-20s from Jiangxi had two children herself. Both attend elementary school but only get to meet their mother once or twice every year during Spring Festivals.

"The bigger one is Wenqiang, he's going to be 10 next year. The smaller one is only 5. His name is Jiayong," Fiona said with a warm smile on her face, "but their dad and I can't always be there. It is my parents who are taking care of them."

After dropping out of school in 8th grade, Fiona worked in the cloth industry for 4 years before coming to Shanghai and finding her way into massaging. Just like the 5 other interview participants, Fiona admitted that working in Shanghai does earn her a higher salary.

"Back in Jiangxi, I used to earn about 100 yuan every day. Now I get 5000 every month, which is about 2000 yuan more than before," Fiona said.

However, everything comes with a cost.

"My children do not want me to come. They always ask me to go back during phone calls," Fiona said remorsefully. "But I have to work hard in order to make up for the lack of hard work in education."

Now, her children, like millions of others, are paying the price too.

Educational Struggles

Living away from their parents and being able to keep up at school is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges Left-Behind children struggle to overcome. With the help of the principle, 92 students at PinHua High School completed a survey over a five-day service-learning trip to Guizhou. Many described being unable to meet their parents and teachers' academic expectations, and how this puts enormous pressure on them both mentally and physically.

"There are many times when nobody is looking, I would hold myself and weep," described Jinyang Yuan, a 16-year-old sophomore. "I am a very positive person, so are most of my friends. But, there are times when you just can't help it... When you know that you're in trouble but there's no way to get out of it, you feel uncertain about the future."

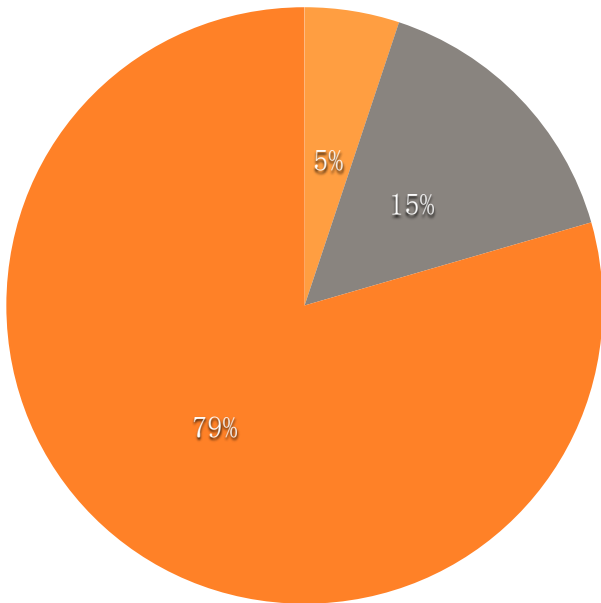
Jinyang said that such uncertainty makes her easily distracted during classes.

“It’s already difficult for me to understand what the teacher is saying. Now I’m confused even more.” She added.

Her classmates are facing similar problems as well. 36% of the 92 students we surveyed wish to get more help from their teachers and parents, while 79% of them think that having their parents by their side would not make a difference in their academic studies.

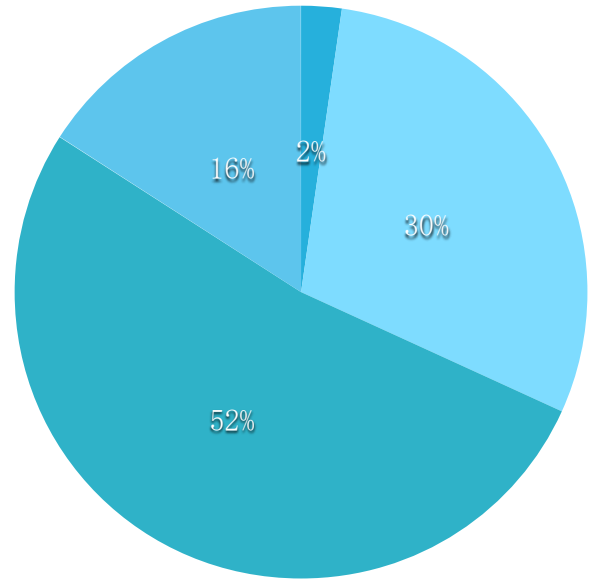
Q9 How do you think the absence of your parents at home has impacted your studies

Positive Impact Negative Impact Makes no difference



Q4: The level of education of the person who takes care of you is...

Didn't go to school Primary Education Only
Middle School Level High School and Above



"Source: Responses to "How do you think the absence of your parents at home has impacted your studies", from a survey of 92 students at PinHua High School in Guizhou, conducted Jan. 1 to Jan. 5, 2019"

"Source: Responses to "What is the level of education of the person who takes care of you", from a survey of 92 students at PinHua High School in Guizhou, conducted Jan. 1 to Jan. 5, 2019"

"What we learn is simply too difficult for them."



Students having classes in Pinhua High School; photo by Katelyn Kuo

While Jinyang admits that the main causes for their academic headaches is not getting enough guidance, she believes that even before entering Pinhua high school, they had already lost at the starting line.

"Our academic foundations are really poor. We didn't meet the benchmark of our middle school entrance examination," she embarrassedly said, "that's why we have to study at this private school; we just need to be able to pay for the tuition to get in."

She confessed that she wanted to study in a public school, where she could receive a higher quality education. However, that isn't a road she can take because of the score limitation. Over time, the learning gap between Jinyang and other peers her age attending public schools will only become greater.

"Isn't this system bothering you?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely."

Another student, a junior named Fuwen Yao, explained that although the local private and public schools in Guizhou use the same textbooks and curriculum, due to their poor academic foundations, the teachers are unable to teach by the textbook, as the concepts are too complex and require a strong understanding of basic knowledge.

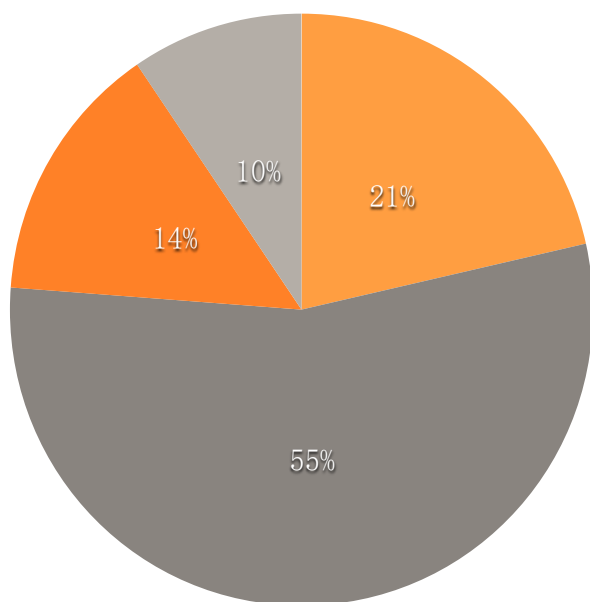
"They need to start from the very basic, but even that is hard for us to understand," Fuwen described. In Guizhou, regardless of the type of school, the final exams are all issued by the local government.

"That's why the test is often so hard for us. It's different from what we're learning in class."

When surveys were conducted about how confident the students feel about their studies, 14% choose "I think my studies are going badly and that I'm not as smart as others", and 55% choose "I'm a very average student with no definite advantage."

Q15 Do you feel accomplished, and confident about your studies?

- I think I'm great, I'm smart and I'm all set for my future
- I'm a very average students with no definite advantage
- I think my studies are going badly and that I'm not as smart as others



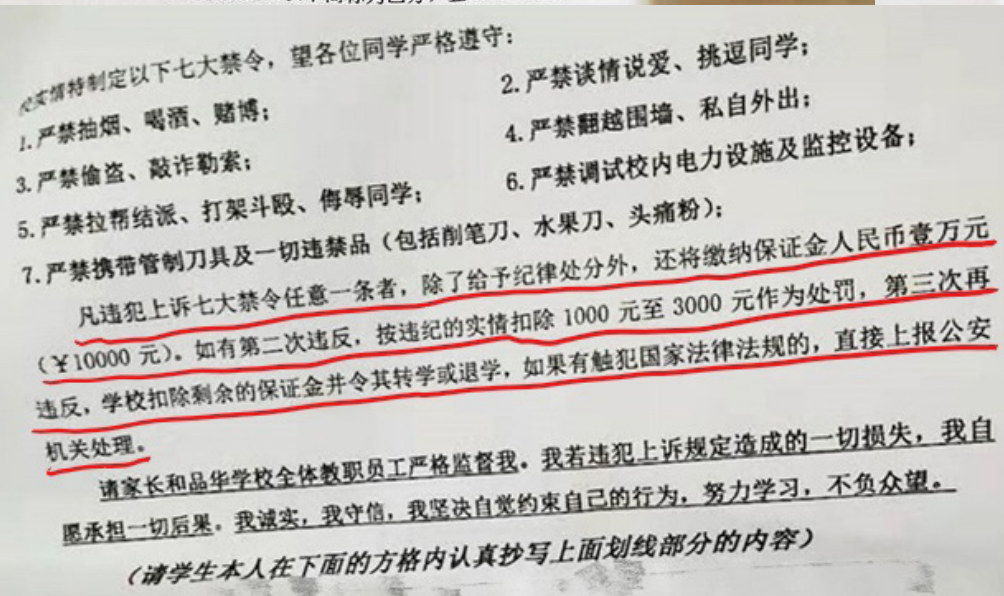
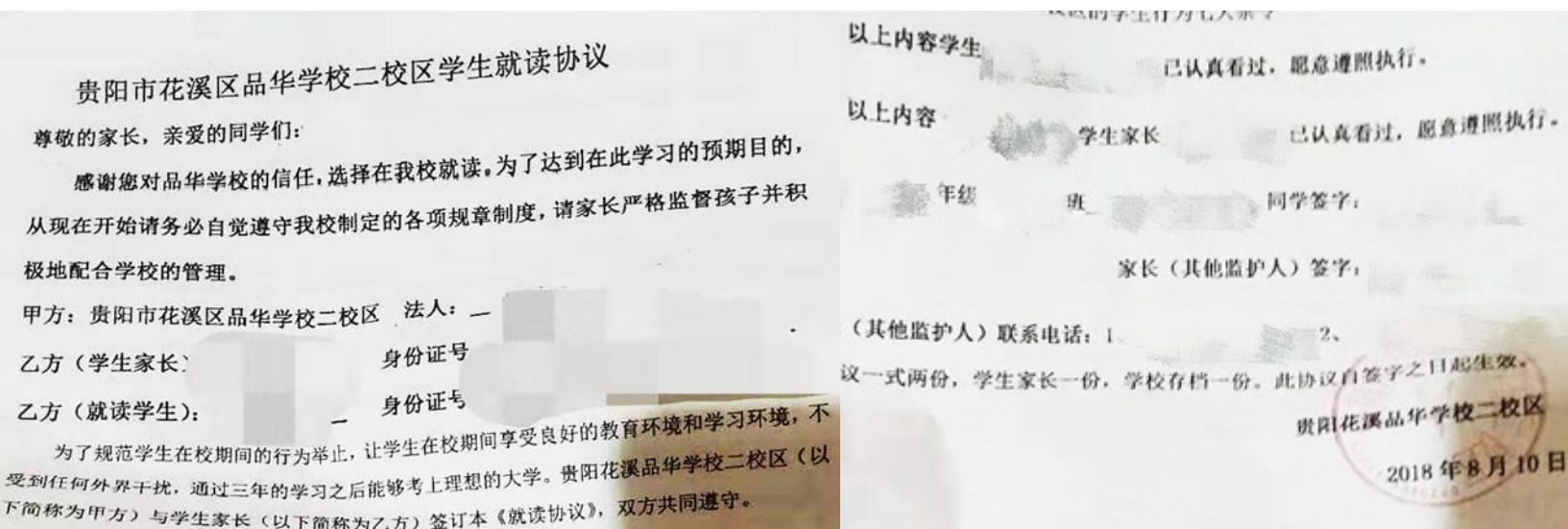
In fact, in Guizhou, there is a tremendous gap in the college admission rates between private and public schools. According to the Guizhou Provincial Department of Education, the transition rate of students in public schools in 2016 was 87.39%. However, in PinHua High School, since 2018, out of the 22 students who majored in science, only 2 got admitted to college, and only 6 out of 63 students majored in liberal arts met the college admission scores line.

"Source: Responses to "Do you feel accomplished, and confident about your studies", from a survey of 92 students at PinHua High School in Guizhou, conducted Jan. 1 to Jan. 5, 2019"

"You are from Shanghai and attend a good school, you won't be able to understand how we can earn such bad scores," Fuwen stated, "Just yesterday, our instructor Yang posted in our parents' group chat that all of the students in one of our Geography examination room got 0. About 80% of the students got around 30 for Physics... For English, it was slightly better. At least for my class, 3 scored about 80. The rest of us got around 60 and 70. Only a few failed."

"He really shouldn't have told our parents about our grades."

When asked who he thinks is responsible for his unsatisfactory academic outcome, Fuwen said nothing but showed us a 5 pages promise letter he signed before he entered the school. Then, he slowly pointed out the school's punishments for smoking.



"If any one of the seven major bans on illegal actions are violated, violators will have to pay a deposit of 10,000 yuan. If violated a second time, a deduction of 1,000 yuan to 3,000 yuan will take place as a penalty. If violated a third time, the school deducts the remaining margins and the student is branded as a transfer or drop out student. If there is a violation of the national legal rules, then punishments will be enacted accordingly to the law."

A five pages promise letter/contract Pinhua students are required to sign; photo by Fuwen Yao

"Many students in our school smoke, you know, whether it is boys or girls..." In the silence that followed, Fuwen scratched his head, and then frustratingly added, "I certainly do think studying is my main responsibility, but there are still many factors that can affect its outcome."

"I know you might think lowly of me because of this, but when almost everything in life is dejected for you, smoking makes you feel cool."

Mental Health: In Their Own Words

Abby Wu, a left-behind child in the rural areas of Guizhou, China, said that she was not as adversely affected compared to the psychological problems that a considerable amount of left-behind children have and still experience.

"My parents didn't have a huge impact on my behavior and personality," said Abby, a 16 years old Guizhou high school student. "Even if they do, I usually don't show it."

Yet, it is undeniable that millions of left-behind children are not as fortunate as Abby.

Almost 50% of these “left-behind” children suffer depression and anxiety, compared with 30% of their urban peers, according to a 2014 study funded by the Heilongjiang provincial government and led by Yang Yanjie of Harbin Medical University. However, the majority of left-behind children face lesser, but still, impactful psychological problems such as mood swings, stress, the inferiority complex (an unrealistic feeling of feeling subordinate caused by actual or supposed inferiority in one sphere, sometimes marked by aggressive behavior in compensation), lower self-esteem, and lower self-confidence. The feeling of insecurity is also a common symptom among the left-behind children.

"I feel slightly insecure when my parents are not with me, especially when my grandparents leave too," Abby said.


The question as to what causes these systemic psychological problems are conspicuous but abstract. The answer is deeply rooted within two words — "left-behind".

In literary terms, "left-behind" denotes abandonment. Inarguably, the state of not being noticed, cared for, and loved is, in brief, the ultimate culprit behind all the psychological issues.

Similarly, the lack of parental care also resulted in the development of self-injurious habits and behaviors. Just as what Fuwen previously mentioned, in Ping Hua high school, where the left-behind children number amounts to two-fifths of the entire student population, smoking is a commonly found habit among the students.

"Even though the school doesn't allow us to smoke," said Jiaxin Ren, a student of Ping Hua and a classmate of Abby, "some students will still find ways to smoke secretly."

On the other hand, one can argue that being left-behind can push the children to face and conquer the challenges of day to day life, and adopt an adult mindset at a relatively young age.



"I think the positive impact of being left behind is," said Abby, "being able to make myself more courageous and independent."

Regardless, little positive impacts can reverse the damages. Psychological issues remain one of the biggest problems of left-behind children, who are the result of the urbanization of cities.

Perhaps the easiest solution to the psychological problems is the return of their parents which, in the end, might be the hardest. Abby, maybe one of the luckiest out of the 61 million left-behind children, eventually saw the return of her parents after 8 long years; because of a job change, her parents now work in their hometown again.

"I recognized my parents immediately after I saw them, but I still had a feeling that I was seeing two strangers..." said Abby, "that sense of intimacy felt strange but familiar."

Even though the reunion brought countless tears for Abby and her family, the tears this time were the tears of joy that washed away Abby's loneliness and sadness. Through this process, Abby found herself becoming more optimistic. Although the hardships she faced will remain as hidden scars, the courage and independence she gained will act as her protective armor to accompany her throughout her lifetime.

"I don't have anything to say to my parents," said Abby, now living with her mother and father, "just the fact that they are here with me is already enough."