



“683 Kilometers Away”

Investigation of the Kids’ Harsh Reality in Rural China

Inspired by the visit to Tiantou Primary School, Mt. Tapieh

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What is Poverty? In rural China, it is more than sheer fiscal problems. It is about the people's perspective, knowledge, and most importantly, self-esteem.

1. Urban Migration in Rural China

Jiang Haoyuan was a fourth grader. The initial contact between us was the time when we shared a book. He raised his head up and stared at my face, and suddenly said, “I think you look like my Sifu.” His discourse made me curious, and I soon learnt from the other children that the “Sifu” in his words was a grade 11 student, my predecessor, who came to this school last year and taught them Kungfu. Meanwhile, I found that Haoyuan took out his pencil case and searched for a few seconds, then took out a piece of card. “My Sifu gave this to me.” He showed me the card with a shy smile on his face. On the card, there were some blessing words to Haoyuan written by that student. I was deeply touched. The card was given by the current grade 11 student, which means he has kept this card for a whole year. But it is still an almost brand-new card, with no fold in it. He has absolutely saved this card as a precious treasure.

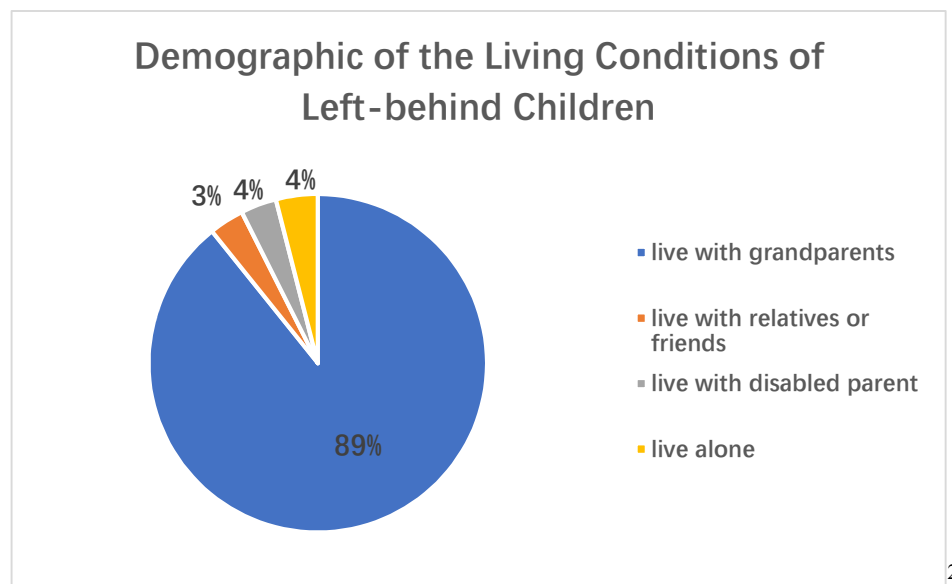


(Jiang Haoyuan, the fourth grader, excitedly poses upon seeing the camera.)

Photo/Zhihe Liu)

During my stay, almost every time I saw Haoyuan, he was also looking at me. We spent lots of time together, during which I gradually knew about Haoyuan and his family. Like most other children in Ta-pieh, Haoyuan's parents work in the county to make a living and he lives with his grandparents in a narrow house. One afternoon, when we are talking about school life, I asked him about his dream college. "MIT," he answered unexpectedly. Not until then did I realize that the little body harbored a big dream. I understood the significance of the postcard, the annual exchange program, the separation from parents and "MIT" for Haoyuan. He might not even know what the three letters stand for, but they indicate his strong feeling to seek a bigger world.

Haoyuan's situation is not unusual in China. People often call them "the left-behind kids", or children living in rural areas whose parents migrate to big cities seeking better-paid jobs. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, there are about 9 million left-behind kids in Chinese rural areas.¹ The cruel truth for Haoyuan, along with other such children, is that they might never enter a bigger world, which could be attributed to two factors – poor education quality and heavy family burden.



(The largest portion of the left-behind kids is those who live with their grandparents.)

¹ http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2016-11/09/c_1119882491.htm

² http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2016-11/09/c_1119882491.htm

In terms of education, lack of parents' companionship is the main reason hindering the left-behind kids from achieving academic excellence. Admittedly, the government has invested expansively in public education including funding for building new schools, salary for teachers and subsidies targeting poor families. Parental influence remains an important part of K-12 education, especially for fostering kids' strong academic interests. However, as the above chart illustrates, about 90% of the left-behind kids live with their grandparents. Not to mention the kids are receiving the values and ideologies of the last century, the Cultural Revolution almost erased all the learning opportunity of their grandparents, which means about 80% percent of the Chinese population was illiterate at the end of 1940s, according to Yan.³ As a result, the left-behind kids receive poor academic support at home.

Children in rural areas bear heavy family burden at a young age due to both policies and traditions. The majority of the rural population, farmers, have different insurance policies from the ones who live in the city. Generally speaking, they get a much smaller pension and smaller insurance coverage. However, the farmers will often afford more risk because of long working hours and poor medical equipment. Thus, the farmers largely rely on their offspring to ensure a stable later life. The set of values and traditions also evolve revolving the problem. On average, the rural population get married earlier than the city population by about 5 years.⁴ They are encouraged to have as many as children as soon as possible.

Poor education limits the left-behind kids' career development, while heavy family burden creating a stronger bond between them and their home. As a result, though Haoyuan has a big dream, he has little chance to realize it.

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http://xueshu.baidu.com/usercenter/paper/show?paperid=a3a82590a631929439fb6326144d53c2&site=xueshu_se

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http://xueshu.baidu.com/usercenter/paper/show?paperid=3db2b558751b0b5552ccdf3c112e11e&site=xueshu_se

2. Gender Inequality in Rural China

During the family visit, a little girl called Liu Jiaxin left me with a deep impression. Roughly 13 years old, her home merely consisted of a shabby wooden hut with nothing but piles of firewood. Her parents work in the city, and she was brought up by her grandmother alone. She was a quiet girl and never actively involved in our conversation. This had kept me thinking and that scene of her sitting on the firewood silently has haunted me since then.



(Jiaxin's Grandma welcomes us at the doorway. Photo/Yiwei Xu)

As the conversation went on, I got to know that the grandma is in her late seventies and Jiaxin is the fifth grandchild she raised – she had raised four grandsons from her daughters and sons in the past. However, Jiaxin has been treated differently from the boys. The following paragraph is the translated version of a dialogue between the Jiaxin's family and our guide, the vice president of the school.

[Dialect]

“Do you (we students) understand her words? She [grandma] said when Jiaxin ran out of school supplies, she will call Jiaxin's parents, but they never replied. They replied for few times. They let the grandma take charge of everything. [pause] This is what she [grandma] said.”

[Dialect]

“The child is one kilogram after birth. ... The grandma held her at her chest all the time and calmed the little child down. ... Now she has finally grown up.”

...

[asking Jiaxin] “Will your parents leave you some money when they return to home?”

[nodding]

“How much?”

“Hundreds of Yuan”

“Do they return annually?”

[shaking head]

“Not even once?”

“Occasionally”

[grandma] “They only return when they have to.”

[asking Jiaxin] “How’s your grades?”

[silence]

“Not good”

“Oh. No worry. You have to work hard for your future. Study hard and you will be better.”

[grandma] “I don’t expect her to excel at anything. Just having the ability to live alone will be enough.”

[silence]

[guide to Jiaxin] “You know. Your parents still love you. They left home because of life.

[pause] They also met lots of difficulties outside. You have to be tough yourself. Study hard. It will be good for you.”⁵

In terms of gender inequality, some of the most deeply rooted traditional biases have been relieved since the Reforming and Opening Up of China in 1978. According to the 2010 census, the whole population consists of 48.73% female and 51.27% male⁶. The ratio ranked 91 out of 187 countries in the world. However, the female subordination

⁵ See supplement

⁶ http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/201104/t20110428_30327.html

under Confucian ideology still persists particularly in rural China, which can be shown by workplace stereotype and parental indifference.

In traditional Chinese values, women are expected to be fully responsible for the issues at home, such as cleaning, monitoring money flow and rearing children while men focus on work.⁷ Therefore, after both genders are endowed the opportunity to work, women are still inclined to sacrifice their salary and career development to apply for a more stable job. Recalling what Jiaxin's grandma said, her moderate expectation of Jiaxin's grades is in line with this ideology. She would be much more aggressive with Jiaxin if she was a boy.

Other problems arise after female liberation as well. For example, the hyper-masculinity in workplace has led to a devaluation of female labor – illustrated by the lower average incomes of female-dominated enterprises compared to male-dominated ones. During the early 1990s, an increase in the number of female employees in the sales and service industries was accompanied by a reduction in the average income of these sectors.⁸ Migrant women are the primary subject of exploitation as well.⁹

The devaluation of female labor leads to significantly less parental investment in girls both monetarily and emotionally in rural China due to the limited resources. Most of the rural girls will only be educated to the necessary degree and get married as soon as possible because marriage is their only way to secure their future and benefit the family. Jiaxin's parents' indifference to their daughter is an example of harsh realism in rural China. Jiaxin's life has been decided after she was given birth. Haoyuan might still get the chance to struggle for his dream, while Jiaxin's social status can hardly be changed.

⁷ Feng, X. (2013), Women's Work, Men's Work: Gender and Tourism among the Miao in Rural China. *Anthropology Work Review*, 34: 2–14.

⁸ Parish, W.L.; Busse, S. (2000). *Gender and Work in Chinese Urban Life Under Reform: The Changing Social Contract*. New York: Cambridge University Press

⁹ <https://clb.org.hk/en/content/dagongmei-female-migrant-labourers>