

Governing Left-behind Children through Family in China's Great Migration

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ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship on the lives and wellbeing of China's left-behind children often frames the problems as a function of their parents' migration, which leaves a big gap in discussing the role of the state in shaping the institutional framework that these families operate within, cope or struggle with. Through critically interrogating public discourses supported articles from a mainstream newspaper and policy documents since the first 2000s, this text situates a sociological inquiry into the discursive and institutional framework addressing 'the left-behind children problem' in China within the problematic of the connection between children, family, and therefore the state. The analysis reveals seemingly 'disingenuous' articulations of left-behind children's value within the mainstream media and official policies. On the one hand, there seems to be a prevailing concern over the welfare of left-behind children which has grave implications for the country's future development. On the opposite hand, the dominant discourse attributes left-behind children's 'miserable' plight to their 'pathological' family life, which translates into policy efforts to discipline rural migrant families consistent with a family ideology rooted in urban middle-class experiences. I argue that such inconsistencies should be contextualized within the state's neoliberal-authoritarian governance of the migrant population within the post-reform era, which perpetuates a stereotype of 'the pathological family' to account for left-behind children's disadvantages while evading, hence up until recent years avoiding to redress, the political-economic factors underlying their plight. I conclude the article by ruminating on the theoretical, social and policy implications of this study.

Keywords: China; Left-behind children; Neoliberal-authoritarianism; Media discourse; Policy; Value of children

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the century, after two decades of reform, China witnessed rapid economic development, but was also riddled with growing social tensions due to widening income inequality and various other social problems. The 'three rural issues' (sannongwenti), i.e. issues concerning agriculture development, village development, and peasants' livelihood, emerged as a serious concern among local bureaucrats, scholars, and other intellectuals alike (e.g. Wen, 2000). Especially, a singular group – children left behind in rural villages whose parents have migrated to urban areas for work – has gained considerable attention, given the implications of their wellbeing for China's long-term development. In 2006, issues associated with left-behind children became a priority on policymakers' agenda, anticipated by a seminar held by the Ministry of Education in May 2005. An outsized volume of literature, produced by scholars in and beyond China, has documented how parental migration might affect left-behind children's educational achievement, cognitive development,

socio-emotional functioning, health, and leave them hospitable risks of being victimized. This literature has yielded valuable and comprehensive knowledge about migration and child wellbeing. However, the prevailing analytical frame treating issues associated with left-behind children as a function of family structure renders the role of the state in shaping these children's lives invisible or within the background, which may be a significant gap given the prominent role of state policies in driving the interior migration within the post-reform era. Through critically interrogating public discourses supported articles from China Youth Daily (hereafter CYD) and policy documents and initiatives, this text situates a sociological inquiry into the discursive and institutional framework addressing 'the left-behind children problem' in China within the problematic of the connection between children, family, and therefore the state. My analysis reveals seemingly 'disingenuous' articulations of left behind children's value within the mainstream media and official policies. On the one hand, there seems to be a prevailing concern over the welfare of left-behind children which has grave implications for the country's future development. On

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the opposite hand, the dominant discourse attributes left-behind children's 'miserable' plight to their 'pathological' family life, which translates into policy efforts to police and discipline rural migrant families consistent with a family ideology supported urban middle-class experiences. I argue that such inconsistencies and disingenuity should be contextualized within the state's neoliberal-authoritarian governance of the migrant population, which perpetuates a stereotype of 'the pathological family' to account for left-behind children's disadvantages while avoiding, hence avoiding to redress, the political-economic factors underlying their plight. This study makes two theoretical contributions. First, by unraveling paradoxical articulations of children's value within the nationalist discourse and 'pro-family' public policies, it transcends existing literature which has privileged an individualized perspective towards valuation of youngsters by examining exclusively parents' calculation of perceived benefits and costs of childrearing. within the Chinese case, I show that on the one hand, at the discursive level, the articulation of children's value in line with nationalism publicly discourse generates a way of national crisis, which legitimizes an interventionist approach in policies to manage, discipline, and police rural migrant families. On the opposite hand, policies promulgated by the state reflect an individualized logic that attributes challenges faced by left-behind children to their 'pathological migrant families,' instead of the

underlying structural constraints, like hukou-based discrimination and poverty issues. Such a 'pro-family' stance, in turn, justifies the state's limited welfare spending in support of those vulnerable populations. Second, joining a growing literature on China's hybrid and multiple modes of governance, the study contributes to the theorization of the cultural logic of social governance in postreform China, which I term neoliberal-authoritarianism. I demonstrate that while the authoritarian citizenship structure underpinning the state development strategy shapes the materiality of rural migrants' family life, neoliberalism as an ideological framework provides discursive legitimacy to the state's low welfare expenditure without addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by left-behind children and their families. The article is organized as follows. I first introduce the group of left-behind children to line the background for the inquiry. I then contextualize the inquiry within two theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis. The subsequent section sketches the tactic and data employed during this analysis. Within the next section, I conduct a critical reading of media discourse and policy initiatives/documents targeted at left-behind children's issues to unveil the neoliberal-authoritarian mode of governance of the migrant population. I conclude with a discussion of the social and policy implications of the study and directions for future work.