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Category construction and knowledge production in childhood studies: rethinking 'left-behind children' through the case of 'liushou children' in China

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ABSTRACT

Narratives about children whose parents have migrated exhibit a common global trend, with these children and their families being widely pathologised, creating a stereotyped image of this group. Hence, it is timely and necessary to interrogate the category construction of left-behind children and the politics surrounding the knowledge produced. This article explores the global construction and widespread stigmatisation of left-behind children through the lens of a postcolonial critique and criticises the hegemonic notion of childhood promoted primarily by the Global North. It then explores the indigenous category of 'liushou children' for left-behind children in China – revealing its cultural expectations and Indigenous construction. Although the pathologisation of such children occurs in both global and indigenous dimensions, the understanding and causation of such pathologisation differs since diverse actors often present different understandings of this phenomenon, which refract different expectations, moral and value judgements, or political motivations. Therefore, this article calls for research on the lives of these children in the context of global economic and social structural shifts and how these are reshaped in local and national dimensions. In so doing, it provides insights into ongoing debates on the politics and ethics of knowledge production in childhood studies.

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Introduction

Migration is not a new phenomenon, but its scale has expanded notably in recent decades due to the deepening of globalisation, particularly through the enhancement of communication networks and transport systems. Concurrently, an increasing number of children remain in their hometowns, experiencing family separation due to parental migration. The reasons for this separation vary. For instance, parents might avoid exposing their children to risks associated with irregular migration status (Crawley et al. 2023), or host countries might impose institutional barriers on migrant labour, such as visa requirements that make it challenging or impossible for children to accompany their migrating parents (Graham, Jordan, and Yeoh 2015). Even in cases where children can migrate with their parents, such as with internal migration in China, many parents opt to leave

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their children in their hometown due to difficulties in accessing local social welfare systems, a result of institutional inequality (Guo 2022a).

The increasing waves of migration have sparked academic interest in the burgeoning concept of transnational families. In the early 1990s, transnationalism emerged as a novel conceptual tool in migration studies, shifting the focus to migrants' families and their lives. This shift led to the development of concepts such as 'transnational family' and 'global householding', which reflect changes in family structures and lifestyles influenced by migration (Hoang and Yeoh 2012). By the turn of the century, some researchers began focusing on family members remaining in their hometowns. This shift in perspective gave rise to the term 'left-behind children', describing children whose parents have migrated to other regions or countries, leaving them to face prolonged separation (e.g. Olwig 1999).

Today, the term 'left-behind children' is globally recognised and widely used in English-language media reports, academic research, and policy publications. This label is widely used to describe children whose parents have migrated over the world such as Southeast Asia (Madianou and Miller 2012), Latin America and the Caribbean (Boccagni 2013), Eastern European countries (Vanore, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2015), and China (Murphy 2020). It is also employed by a range of international organisations, including UNICEF and the European Union (ROMACT 2021; UNICEF 2018). While global statistical data on the number of left-behind children is limited (Lam and Yeoh 2019), current estimates suggest that their number could be close to 100 million worldwide. This includes approximately 259,000 in Kyrgyzstan, 9 million in the Philippines, and 61 million in China (AWF 2013; UNICEF 2018).

However, the narratives surrounding these children exhibit a global trend in which the families and their children are often pathologized and stigmatised. These children are frequently likened to orphans, termed 'social orphans' or 'economic orphans' (e.g. Liu 2019), and in cases where their parents have migrated to Western European countries, they are referred to as 'Euro-orphans' or 'white orphans' (László et al. 2023). In mainstream narratives, they are commonly associated with negative outcomes such as suicide, depression, delinquency, alcoholism, school dropout, and vulnerability to abuse (see Asis 2006; Kufakurinani, Pasura, and McGregor 2014). Their 'miserable childhoods' are often attributed to neglectful grandparents, irresponsible parents, and non-normative family life (Gu 2021; Kufakurinani, Pasura, and McGregor 2014). In this context, the label 'left-behind children' has evolved into a stigmatising term, perpetuating a pathologized image of these children who are assumed to face similar social and emotional challenges worldwide (Pissin 2013).

While acknowledging the potential challenges these children face is undoubtedly important, it is critical to observe that the excessive focus on the negative impacts of parental migration on children in public media, seems to have cultivated similar negative stereotypes about this group on a global scale. As Cannella and Viruru (2004, 63) astutely note, 'the labels, forms of representation and positions imposed on those who are younger can be categorised as oppressive, controlling, and even colonising.' It is therefore timely and necessary to interrogate the category 'left-behind children' and the politics surrounding its production. This article first utilises a postcolonial lens to explore the global construction and widespread stigmatisation of left-behind children. It then explores the indigenous category of 'liushou children' for left-behind children in China – revealing its cultural expectations and Indigenous construction. In doing so, this article argues that although the pathologisation of such children occurs in both global and indigenous dimensions, the understanding and causation of such pathologisation differs. Specifically, diverse actors often present different understandings of this phenomenon, which refract different expectations, moral and value judgements, or political motivations. Consequently, this article calls for a focus to be placed on the lives of these children in the context of both local and global economic and social structural shifts. In so doing, it provides insights into ongoing debates on the politics and ethics of knowledge production in childhood studies.

Universal and indigenous category construction of 'left-behind children'

As Crawley and Skleparis (2018) point out, while categories are crucial for understanding the social world, their construction is not neutral, reflecting underlying ontological assumptions. Some scholars have noted that the 'left-behind children' label implies that children should be raised by their biological parents and that parental migration equates to 'abandonment' due to the absence of parental supervision and care (see Butt and Ball 2019; Crawley et al. 2023; Guo 2022b). Therefore, as noted in the introduction, these children are often compared to orphans, labelled in various contexts as 'social orphans' and 'European orphans' (e.g. Connolly 2015a; Council of Europe 2022), owing to the aforementioned ontological assumptions.

Some scholars have cautioned that this label might stigmatise these children and demonise their family life. They have advocated for alternative terms like 'stay-back children' (e.g. Crawley et al. 2023), 'stay-behind children' (e.g. Butt and Ball 2019), or 'stayer youth' (Osei 2023) to avoid connotations of neglect or abandonment by migrant parents. However, the underlying politics of knowledge production that contribute to the pathologization of left-behind children have not been sufficiently scrutinised. Therefore, this section aims to illustrate how the pathologization of 'left-behind children' has been globally promoted.

'Left-behind children' and the politics of childhood

Associating children whose parents migrated with concepts of orphanhood or abandonment reflects Western assumptions about attachments in nuclear families. According to this view, children need supportive family relationships and caring institutions, placing a significant responsibility on parents, particularly mothers, for all aspects of their lives (Burman 1994b). Notably, in the twentieth century, due to European imperialism, this dominant notion of childhood spread worldwide. Over time, the Western model of the nuclear family became a universal ideal, establishing the European conception of childhood as the 'normative' standard and often regarding childhood experiences from other cultures as 'non-normative' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Fiori 2020).

While many scholars now view childhood as a social construct and critique the portrayal of other childhoods as non-normative (e.g. Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi 2016), a significant number of public media outlets and international organisations still examine these children through the lens of nuclear family parenting ideals, reinforcing the hegemonic notion of childhood. For instance, The Guardian (2015) headlined a story on Polish children whose parents migrated as 'Euro orphans are left at home to suffer' (Connolly 2015a), and The Independent referred to them as 'The Euro orphans left behind by Poles' exodus' (Connolly 2015b). Other reports, like those in The Perspective (Henzel 2012) and Financial Times (Foy 2015), describe these children as 'abandoned Euro-orphans' and 'the abandoned children.'

Similarly, aligning with negative depictions like orphanhood and abandonment, trauma is often portrayed as an inevitable result of parental migration in public media. For example, Nejezchleba (2013) described the impacts of parental migration as 'an entire generation has grown up traumatized.' In this process, psychologists appear to have formed an implicit agreement with the media, often expressing concern that these children might suffer significant emotional trauma, leading to various psychological issues such as depression, alcohol or drug abuse, criminality, and sexual violence (see Foy 2015). This depiction of children as passive and tragic victims has been effective in generating moral panic, eliciting public sympathy for them while placing blame on the migrant parents for the children's hardships (Jerves et al. 2018).

Global organisations also play a significant role in spreading negative portrayals of left-behind children and their families. Although UNICEF (2018) recommends using the term 'left-behind children' cautiously to avoid pathologizing them and their families and acknowledges that not all such children are adversely affected by parental migration, many reports from various global organisations have long disseminated the label, primarily focusing on the negative impacts of migration. For

instance, a report on children in Bulgaria with migrated parents characterises them as ‘children at risk’ (ROMACT 2021). Despite recognising that local communities, migrant parents, and caregivers do not necessarily view these children as at risk, the report still emphasises the absence of parents as a significant issue, leading to potential risks for the children, such as school dropout, drug use, and social isolation. Consequently, it suggests that local governments should enhance their oversight and intervention in these families’ lives. Similarly, a UNICEF (2011) report on children in Tajikistan refers to their families as ‘abandoned households’ and the children as ‘abandoned children’, asserting that these children are vulnerable due to becoming withdrawn, depressed, aggressive, rebellious, or even delinquent, attributed to the lack of parental care.

Thus, public media and international organisations, such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations, often convey negative and pathological narratives about these children. They emphasise the adverse effects of parental absence on their physical, and mental development, and well-being (e.g. Cannella and Viruru 2004; Council of Europe 2022; ROMACT 2021). Consequently, these narratives justify the intervention of international organisations in these families’ lives, aiming to identify their needs and assess what is considered normal (Cannella and Viruru 2004).

However, as Monaghan (2012) points out, the supportive evidence for actions and policies concerning children’s welfare, care, and education from international organisations is primarily based on expert discourses and the dominance of developmental psychology from the Global North, which upholds universal assumptions about childhood. Yet, the findings on the psychological impact of parental migration on these children are inconsistent. Some studies have even found that left-behind children exhibit better well-being indicators than their non-left-behind counterparts (e.g. Viet Cebotari, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2017; Nguyen 2016; Zhou et al. 2015).

An increasing number of scholars recognise that the ideal of the nuclear family does not accurately reflect the dynamic and pluralistic nature of family structures. Researchers like Thomas-Hope (2002), Boccagni (2013), and Zentgraf and Chinchilla (2012) have challenged the hegemonic notion of childhood by exploring the roles of alternative caregivers and considering various traditional cultural values associated with parenting. Zentgraf and Chinchilla (2012) argue that researchers attributing trauma to parental migration often mistakenly presume a significant disruption in children’s lives following such migration, treating it as an entirely novel experience. However, in many cultures in the Global South, such as in Cape Verde, among the Aymara in Peru and Ecuador, and in the Caribbean (see Drotbohm 2009; Leinaweaver 2008; Schvaneveldt 2014), concepts of family structure and parenting extend beyond the nuclear family model and the ‘idealized parenting model’ based on parents’ physical presence (Jerves et al. 2018). In these communities, parental migration does not equate to child abandonment. Instead, strong family networks enable migrant parents to arrange for relatives, friends, or neighbours to care for their children, ensuring continuity in their upbringing – a practice that is widely accepted and supported within these societies (Thomas-Hope 2002).

In recent years, with advancements in digital communication technologies, some scholars have started to recognise that migrant parents creatively fulfil their roles and responsibilities during periods of family separation. They highlight that digital technologies facilitate more frequent and immediate communication between migrant parents and their children, enabling various forms of virtual co-presence (see Francisco 2013; Madianou and Miller 2012). Notably, the widespread use of video communication allows both children and migrant parents to participate actively in each other’s daily lives, sustaining relational bonds (Baldassar 2016). Madianou and Miller (2012), in their study of Filipino transnational families, observed that the transformation of ‘doing family’ through communication technologies leads many children to feel that their parents are still with them psychologically, despite being physically absent. Consequently, as Tymczuk (2011) argues, the potential negative impacts of migration on these families may not be as severe as public discourse often suggests. Many children have a more optimistic perception of the consequences of parental migration, including improvements in their family’s economic situation. Therefore, we should not simplistically equate parental migration with abandonment or assume

that parent–child separation is necessarily traumatic, particularly in cultures with a longstanding tradition of parental migration.

As Suarez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2002) remind us, the widely accepted notion that separations between migrant parents and their children are inherently traumatic and have long-lasting effects is rooted in some unchallenged cultural biases and assumptions from the Global North. These biases particularly pertain to the nature of attachment and parent–child relationships. However, such a view overlooks the inherent complexity of family relationships, parenting patterns, and migration (Vanore, Mazzucato, and Siegel 2015). Therefore, while suffering and challenges can indeed be part of the lives of migrant families, this is not the entirety of their experience (Boccagni 2013). Nonetheless, the continual association of these children with ‘orphans’ and ‘abandoned children’ and the repeated construction of negative stereotypes contribute to the pathologization of these families. This not only oversimplifies their experiences but also represents a colonisation of the concepts of childhood and parenting in the Global South (Monaghan 2012).

Recognising that categories and their usage are ‘embedded within linguistic, historical, and philosophical processes and world views’ (McCarthy et al. 2020, 23), interrogating local categories and constructions about children whose parents have migrated may open up dialogue, as local categories often imply local cultural understandings and value judgments about children that are embedded in indigenous political-economic contexts. For instance, China, home to the world’s largest population of ‘left-behind children’ (approximately 61 million), has developed its own distinct terminology and constructs about these children. In Chinese, these children are referred to as ‘liushou children’, meaning ‘stay and hold the fort’ (Xiang 2007, 4), indicating a different ontological perspective compared to the concept of ‘left-behind children’.

The following discussion will use the indigenous category ‘liushou children’ as a starting point to explore how left-behind children are perceived and understood from an indigenous viewpoint. This approach aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the diverse social constructions, childhoods, and parenting styles among children whose parents have migrated. By doing so, we can move beyond the dominant framework of hegemonic childhood notions to understand the varied experiences of these children, as well as the social, historical, and global processes shaping their lives.

Indigenous category construction: the case of liushou children

In China, the government, public media and scholars widely adopt the expression ‘liushou children’ to describe children who stayed in their hometowns while their parents migrated. Although, upon first glance, the usage of categories such as ‘left-behind children’ and ‘liushou children’ seem similar, the cultural connotations and ontological view of family members and migration implied in these expressions differ substantially. As Xiang (2007, 4) comments, ‘the English phrase “left-behind” is oriented towards those who move (migrants), with the connotation that the left-behind could have been brought along during migration.’ The ontological stance this assumes is that the identity of non-migrants in families exists because of migrants; therefore, non-migrants are passive, having been ‘left behind’ in the migration process (Jacka 2014; Mondain and Diagne 2013). By contrast, the literal meaning of the Chinese expression ‘liushou’ is to ‘stay and hold the fort’, implying that children are waiting for migrant parents to return (Xiang 2007, 4). This conveys a cultural expectation about the vital role of liushou members in maintaining a sense of home and family. The above difference refracts the variation in ontological views as to who is the subject of narratives about family migration. The former treats non-migrants as subordinate to migrants, while the latter views liushou members as the protagonists of narratives about migration.

Such an ontological gap reflects the fact that left-behind and liushou children are socially constructed in different ways. Thus, drawing on a political and economic analysis of migration in China, this article further conceptualises Xiang’s (2007) view that it comprises two intertwined dimensions: staying at home and holding the fort. Analysis of the reasons for ‘staying at home’

and the necessity of ‘holding the fort’ promote a more nuanced understanding of the unique characteristics of Chinese liushou children that are hidden beneath the universal category of left-behind children.

Chinese liushou children’s experiences exist about the invisible wall in Chinese society – the hukou system (household registration system). The central government introduced this system in 1958, institutionally dividing the Chinese population into two distinct categories – citizens and peasants – who are afforded different social statuses, social welfare, rights, and obligations (Wu and Ye 2014). In the long term, this system deprives Chinese citizens of one of their fundamental rights, the freedom of internal migration. Nevertheless, because coastal cities experienced rapid industrialisation and integrated into the global market after economic reforms – creating a growing demand for cheap labour – the Chinese Government relaxed restrictions on geographical mobility and internal migration in the 1980s to support the emerging labour market. This enabled rural people to migrate to urban regions (Chan 2015). However, they still held agricultural hukou and were named ‘peasant workers’ to emphasise their legal identity as temporary migrants (You 2019).

Nevertheless, the hukou system remains discriminatory, denying migrant children access to the social benefits to which city dwellers are entitled, particularly the right to public education. Although, at the end of the last century, the Ministry of Education gradually relaxed some restrictions on migrant children accessing elementary schools and junior high schools in urban areas, these public schools created various barriers to the enrolment of migrant children such as certain documentation requirements and high non-resident fees, as they are considered an additional burden on local finance (Zhang and Sargent 2020). Moreover, even if children migrate with their parents and finish their studies in private schools, they must still return to their hometown to take the high school and college entrance examinations, as this is the locality in which they were awarded hukou registration (Xu et al. 2018).

The Chinese Central Government has enacted a range of policies in recent years to encourage migrant children to enrol in public high schools in cities, such as the revision of the Compulsory Education Law which allows migrant children to take the college entrance examination without holding local hukou. Nevertheless, due to local protectionism resulting from the long-standing urban-rural dualism associated with the hukou system, similar to the situation regarding access to public elementary and junior high schools for most migrant children in eastern coastal cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, numerous restrictions still impede their access to urban public high schools (Yanning 2016). Thus, the inequalities created by the hukou system have not been fundamentally altered.

In addition, urban-rural dualism means that urban residents tend to view rural migrants as outsiders; hence, migrant children are often the target of discrimination and prejudice (Zhang and Sargent 2020). Thus, in contrast to their parents, the inequality caused by the hukou system means that many are compelled to stay in their hometown, as their parents decide this is better for their life and education.

The reason for Chinese liushou children ‘staying at home’ is similar to that of left-behind children in other countries who stay in their hometown due to institutional barriers such as visas. Nevertheless, the hukou system cannot be directly equated to the visa system. Duan and Fulin (2006) state that although the hukou system impedes these children from accessing urban public education, internal migration also brings multiple advantages in terms of mobility, including closer distance, lower travelling fees, and no need for a visa. Hence, an increasing number of migrant children visit cities for family reunions in the summer holiday, leading public media to compare them to ‘little migratory birds’ (Guo 2022a). Similarly, migrant parents return to their hometowns for reunions during the Spring Festival, forming the world’s largest cyclical population flow which has also been compared to migratory birds (Ye 2018). Hence, Chinese liushou children ‘staying at home’ is not the same as being ‘left behind’; instead, both liushou children and migrant parents

present different levels of mobility as migrant parents positively create various strategies to achieve family reunions during their separation, which tend to be cyclical.

Moreover, 'staying at home' is not the whole story for Chinese liushou children. Cultural expectations of liushou members 'holding the fort' hint at the answer to the ontological issue and explain why they lie at the heart of the narrative of Chinese internal migration rather than the migrants implied by the universal category 'left-behind children'. As Fei (2007) claims, Chinese peasants present an enduring attachment to the land, symbolising a binding tie and sense of family. Influenced by this understanding, numerous romantic narratives assert that Chinese internal migrants continue to have a solid attachment to their hometowns and farmlands. Consequently, they identify themselves as peasants from rural areas rather than workers in cities, which eventually drives them to return to their hometowns (Chen 2015; You 2019). In this context, liushou children are viewed as assisting other family members to maintain houses, farmlands, and social networks in rural areas, which are significant for them as they will return to their hometown when they are old. As such, 'holding the fort' is rooted in traditional rural culture. Nevertheless, such romantic narratives hide the structural violence underpinning economic development in contemporary China, where the combination of the hukou system and the rural-urban dual system compels liushou families to 'hold the fort'.

Until now, apart from converting the rural hukou registered in their hometowns to the urban hukou in cities where migrant workers formally apply to work through a local police station at the place of relocation, the place of hukou registration is the official and only permanent residence for Chinese people (Chan 2015); hence, migration does not automatically change their hukou status.

Consequently, unlike most international migrants who may obtain local welfare and service rights after a long settlement period in receiving areas, these migrants can be permanently barred from receiving benefits and services in cities, which constitutes segregation of settlement and citizenship (Chan 2015). Hence, although migrants are important in urban development and construction, they remain outsiders to urban society. Furthermore, due to the vast differences in benefits and working conditions, migrants are often the underclass of urban society. This leads them to face not only institutional discrimination, but also social exclusion and discrimination from urban residents, further depriving them of their dignity (Ma and Qie 2022).

In such cases, for the migrant parents of liushou children, their families, lands, and networks in the local communities in their hometowns are seen as lifelong safety measures. On the one hand, due to the rural-urban dual system and the collective land ownership system, rural-hukou holders have access to rural land. Although they cannot purchase and sell farmlands freely, they can maintain a basic and secure livelihood through agriculture (Yanning 2016). Therefore, although they gain economic benefits from working in the city, the protection and care of farmlands remain a significant priority for most migrants. Thus, an essential role of liushou members is to protect the boundaries of the farmlands so that they are not occupied by other villagers and to manage the farmlands to prevent the growth of wild plants (Fan 2007). On the other hand, leaving some family members in their hometowns also means that migrants can maintain connections with their original social relations such as friends, classmates, and other extended family members (Hugo 2003). Hence, numerous migrant workers, faced with the prospect of growing too old for manual work in the cities or becoming unemployed, choose to return to their homeland, temporarily or permanently to continue their agricultural activities as the hometown can provide necessities such as housing, social networks, and land for farming, thus ensuring a low but stable income (Yanning 2016).

Against this backdrop, the difficulty of converting a rural hukou to an urban hukou for most migrants means only a minority can become permanent residents. Therefore, the ultimate goal of migrating to work is not to live permanently in the city, but to return home to a better life after exiting the labour market (Fan 2007).

In summary, given the unstable and marginalised life in the cities and the hometowns' lifelong safety measures, liushou is not only a passive and powerless outcome for these families but a split-household strategy in the face of structural inequalities such as hukou restrictions. In this case, parents migrate to cities to earn money to support the growing cost of living and children's education in rural areas, while liushou members hold the fort and provide migrants with security for the future when they return to their hometown. Consequently, liushou can be viewed as a cooperation and division of collective goals between different family members aimed at ensuring the family's well-being, rather than the liushou member simply being passively 'left behind'. Thus, recognising the role of 'holding the fort' is crucial for understanding relations between migration and liushou, a point current research often ignores.

Echoing the migrant-centered ontological stance inherent in the category of 'left-behind children', current mainstream research predominantly focuses on the perspectives of migrants and their roles within the family. In contrast, this section utilises concepts like 'staying at home' and 'holding the fort' to understand how the category of left-behind children is constructed from a local viewpoint, emphasising the perspective of liushou members. This approach encourages a re-evaluation of ontological politics since the mainstream ontological stance tends to universalise these children and ignore its diverse experiences. We should examine the lives of these children within the intricate and layered local, political-economic, and historical contexts, drawing on indigenous insights rather than relying on a hegemonic childhood framework. This is crucial to avoid the pitfall of 'adding in missing children' (Kesby, Gwanzura-Ottmoller, and Chizororo 2006, 186), a trend evident in many public discourses in the Global North, which often result in a stereotyped portrayal of children with migrant parents.

The indigenous construction of the pathologisation of left-behind children

Previous sections emphasised the differences in ontology and social constructions between left-behind children and liushou children, but children whose parents have migrated present a globally homogeneous image which is widely pathologised and stigmatised. Therefore, it is essential to reflect on what caused such similarities and whether these reflect the same understanding of this group in local and global dimensions.

Although public media and researchers' perspective in China might be influenced by the hegemonic notion of childhood from the Global North (Kuan 2015), caution is necessary when drawing connections or identifying similarities between indigenous concepts of childhood and the hegemonic notion from the Global North. The construction and usage of categories in this global era present more complex dynamics, marked by the intertwining of global influences and local realities. These dynamics are often tied to local political agendas, as the construction and application of categories frequently serves political ends (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Such connections or similarities should not be viewed merely as a direct result of imposition by the Global North. Therefore, focusing on the indigenous understanding of the pathologization of left-behind children could deepen our insight into the intricate interaction between indigenous and universal categories related to children and childhood.

Along with the economic reforms of recent decades, China has transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy and has increasingly become part of the global capital market. Therefore, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Chinese Government claimed that raising the overall level of human capital and enabling citizens to meet the requirements of a global market economy is a significant factor in China's national development (Kuan 2015). In this context, family life is seen by the government, not only as a private affair, but also as an institution with political significance (Kuan 2015).

The one-child policy and the 'high-quality child' project and key bio-political projects in past decades have largely shaped the Chinese family structure and parenting norms. The former caused the fertility and size of Chinese families to decline rapidly, especially in cities where most children

are only children, leading the nuclear family structure to become the norm in urban areas (Naftali 2016). The latter is a significant force that promotes the popularity of intensive parenting. This requires families to care for their children intensively in order to cultivate competent citizens for an increasingly competitive society (Pissin 2013). By contrast, 'backward peasant thinking' and forms of child-rearing in rural areas are condemned as potential threats to national development (Lin 2011, 318). In this framework, the nuclear family and intensive parenting are construed as 'normative' and associated with high-quality children and the future of the nation. The different parenting patterns in liushou families are widely regarded by the urban middle class and authorities as 'non-normative' family structures and a social problem that threatens national development and urgently requires 'care' and 'intervention'.

Consequently, similar to public discourses about left-behind children in the Global North, liushou children are also seen as a social issue by the Chinese Government, legitimising the actions and policies that regulate such 'deviant' children. In 2016, the State Council issued 'The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Liushou Children in Rural Areas' which stipulates strengthening the main responsibility of family guardianship, presents specific requirements for migrant parents to fulfil their parental responsibilities and recommends specific measures to strengthen the supervision and guidance of these families (see GOV 2016a). In news on the government website, the government invited an expert to interpret the document, who claimed that even if parents migrated, they could not escape their legal responsibility for parenting and that parents not only provide food, clothing, and shelter to ensure the survival of their children, but also accept responsibilities such as care, protection, and education (GOV 2016b).

Moreover, in 2012 and 2020, China amended its Law on the Protection of Minors, article 118 which stipulates that parents who do not perform their guardianship duties will be admonished by the residents' committee or the public security organisation and ordered to receive family education guidance, while article 108 further stipulates that parents who do not perform their guardianship duties may have their guardianship revoked by the People's Court. In just one year, between 2016–2017, local governments across China criticised and educated 90,822 'derelict parents', punished 282 migrant parents and forced several migrant parents to return to their hometowns to fulfil their guardianship responsibilities (China Youth Online 2017).

The above articles of Law and actions reveal the contradictory stance of the Chinese Government towards liushou children. On the one hand, the Chinese Government adopts a neoliberal stance in that the family bears the primary responsibility for their children, so the 'miserable and deviant childhood' they face is mainly attributed to 'irresponsible parents' and 'non-normative family life' (Gu 2021). On the other hand, the government often employs collectivist thinking that links liushou children with national interests and the future. Therefore, the government has assigned contradictory roles to migrant parents: economic reforms compel them to leave their hometowns for work, leading to family separation. Simultaneously, the government expects them to be 'responsible' parents, primarily responsible for childcare. This expectation is enforced through punitive measures aimed at regulating 'deviant' family practices (Gu 2021).

Policies and actions about liushou children closely align with the theme 'care for liushou children', including psychological lectures about their mental health organised by local schools and Liushou Children's Homes – public spaces for liushou children to study and play, built by local governments. The government, rural school teachers and NGOs are all addressed by policies predicated on a moral responsibility to 'save' and care for these children. As Burman (1994a) comments, notions of normality and abnormality are created and perpetuated through these social administration and regulation avenues. In the context of 'caring for children', the dominant notion of the nuclear family and the pathologization of liushou children are further reinforced under the guise of promoting the 'well-being of liushou families'. Moreover, the delivery of care actions on an individual basis leads both the public and these liushou families to perceive the solution for liushou children as individualistic and progressive. This perspective obscures the structural responsibilities inherent in the hukou system and the urban-rural dual education system.

Chinese public media, especially official media, have become complicit in this political process. An analysis of reports on Chinese liushou children in mainstream media from 1998 to 2010 indicated that close to 70% adopted a negative tone by associating such children with behavioural and psychological problems such as suicide, depression, and campus bullying (Qian and Qi 2011). Migrant parents are portrayed as irresponsible by failing to provide adequate care and supervision for their liushou children, while grandparents are depicted as unqualified caregivers who contribute significantly to children's emotional and behavioural problems due to a lack of education (Gu, 2021). As Murphy (2020) claims, describing liushou children as a vulnerable group forms a discourse that encourages this group to internalise a sense of fatalism which largely belies structural inequalities such as the hukou system, the dual rural-urban system in education, and the structural violence underpinning an individualised logic.

This analysis of the pathologisation of liushou children reveals that the interweaving of global processes and local realities has resulted in complex and layered dynamics in category construction and usage, dynamics characterised by both commonalities and differences between indigenous and Eurocentric childhood such as those between liushou and left-behind children. Hence, although the prevalence of the universal category 'left-behind children' is largely impacted by structural inequalities in knowledge production in childhood studies, which has influenced researchers' knowledge claims and promoted a pathological stereotype of this group, this does not mean the understanding and causation of the stigmatisation and pathologisation of these children, both globally and locally, is the same. On the contrary, different actors such as liushou families, researchers from the Global North and South, public media, and national governments often present different understandings of this phenomenon, which refract different expectations, moral and value judgements, or political motivations. Hence, although childhood sometimes appears in both local and global dimensions, more nuanced differences exist alongside vast internal divisions which may be rooted in local realities and influenced by the entanglement of local and global social environments. These issues merit a more complex analysis rather than simply opposing or equating 'indigenous' with 'global' or 'Global South' with 'Global North'. However, when scholars rely on hegemonic notions of childhood, this complexity and the subtle relations between different understandings may be threatened by the universal categories and knowledge perspectives rooted in unequal knowledge production.

Re-imagining research on left-behind children in the age of globalisation

In this concluding section of the article, we reflect on key problematics we identified throughout and outline three propositions for moving forward the critical agenda that seeks to rethink and reimagine research on left-behind children in today's highly globalised world.

Firstly, concerns from the Global North, such as those of UNICEF and the World Bank, about left-behind children, or concerns of the Chinese Government about liushou children map onto a common narrative whereby children are seen as a social issue. Within this narrative, children are seen as crucial future human capital, with a strong emphasis on the link between children's well-being and the progress of global or national development. Consequently, when children or their upbringing does not align with presumed universal child development standards, they are labelled as 'redundant' in global discourses. This perception originates from a globally shared social structure influenced by capital, labour, and markets under the socio-economic framework of capitalism as globalisation advances (Pissin 2013). Bauman (2004) contends that late capitalism deems individuals who fail to meet the efficiency requirements of the capitalist market as redundant, treating them as valueless and viewing them as problems or burdens to society.

Hence, whether it is 'left-behind children' from the Philippines and Vietnam, 'white orphans' from Romania and Bulgaria, or 'liushou children' from China, all are influenced by such global shifts. International organisations or national governments regard them as 'children at risk' and a 'social issue' because they do not fit into the global language's 'quality population' or 'human capital'. This shifts the focus from social relations based on kinship to those based on capital,

commodities, and labour (Pissin 2013). As Katz (2004) reminds us, we must be vigilant about the different means and mechanisms by which globalisation oppresses particular people in different environments and identify the core similarities in subtle differences, which call for a response to globalising capitalist production. Thus, we call for research on the lives of these children in the context of global economic and social structural shifts and how these are reshaped in local and national dimensions. In doing so, we may provide a more nuanced understanding of these children's lives and react to the conditions that threaten their well-being.

The second and related point concerns the need to focus on children's subjectivities, in accordance with the principles put forth by the new sociology of childhood. This approach includes paying greater attention to children's agency and recognising them as social actors. In other words, it emphasises their capacity to act, reproduce or resist the representations, discursive constructions and material conditions surrounding their lives (James and Prout 2015). For example, although studies on the stigmatisation of left-behind children recognise that current mainstream research and public discourse pathologise left-behind children (e.g. Bi and Oyserman 2015; Gu 2021), they tend to focus on media reports about these children. It is ironic that although left-behind children lie at the heart of the narrative, their voices on labelling and pathological discourses are often ignored. Murphy's (2022) research on liushou children and Heidbrink's (2020) research on Mexican migrant children provide many valuable lessons on how children understand the labelling and pathological discourses that surround them. They highlight the inconsistencies between public discourse and children's lives and construct their identities from a local perspective rather than one imposed by public discourse or policy. Children's perspectives bring different insights and challenge the dominant representations of a hegemonic childhood for left-behind children.

Finally, a critical scrutiny of extant categories and labels brings into sharp focus the need to reflect on the ethics and politics of knowledge production. The production of knowledge does not take place in a vacuum; as researchers we are part of intellectual communities that give shape and form to our ways of thinking, to our ways for framing and conceptualising issues as well as our assumptions and biases all of which contribute to what we produce as knowledge (Sloman and Fernbach 2017). Thus, while we acknowledge the significance of ongoing concerns about the problems and challenges arising from parental migration, we are also drawing attention to the fact that such a singular narrative also contributes to the stigmatisation and othering of left-behind children, perpetuating in this way a pervasive negative stereotype.

Though our capacity as researchers is quite limited in bringing about significant social change, we can nevertheless play a role in shifting existing framings and understandings about children and childhood as we have tried to do through a critical analysis of liushou children. Our knowledge productions carry ethical and political responsibility as they might impact in some form or way (e.g. through discourse, policy, or practice) real children's lives (Spyrou 2019). As researchers, we undertake this responsibility through our ontological, epistemological, and methodological choices but also in how we interpret and disseminate the knowledge we produce. Producing more nuanced narratives as we have attempted to do in this article in the context of research on left-behind children can challenge forms of epistemic injustice and offer more critical understandings of the significance of categories in real children's lives.

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