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**UNDERSTANDING “LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN” IN RURAL CHINA:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH**

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Understanding “Left-behind Children” in Rural China:

An Ethnographic Approach

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor

of Philosophy

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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In memory of Dr David Fu-Keung Ip, my dearest teacher, who dedicated his
entire life to education

Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced picture of how rural left-behind children (nong cun liu shou er tong) view their living experiences as well as themselves. The fieldwork is conducted in a rural middle school in China's central province Henan, with the ethnographic data being obtained from multiple methods with 14 child participants. The idea of "de-centred subject" is deployed to illuminate that child participants generally do not take the socially prescribed categories to read themselves but instead, they can sustain their own identities in ways that are diversified and fluid.

Post-structuralism concepts (e.g., "deconstruction" and "disciplinary power") are adopted to examine the multifaceted reality confronted by left-behind children, while the new sociology of childhood is used to explore children's agency in negotiation with powers in actual space and discursive contexts. In particular, this study examines how rural left-behind children interact with school, school adults, peers, migrant parents, and the communities they lived and live in from a child-centred perspective. It turns out to be that the children I met can break or blur the boundaries that adult societies need to be set to manage their lives and retreat from the norms and discursive practices that attempt to fix their identities.

The research findings challenge left-behind children's vulnerable and victim image

which often circulates in public discourse. Meanwhile, the narrative delivered by children themselves problematizes the term “rural left-behind children” per se. Living in an intensified changing society, factors like uncertainty, instability, and complexity have become very normal in these children’s growth and therefore cannot be swept away by the mainstream socialization projects that seek ordering and exclude inconsistency. Thus, this study appeals to adult society to acknowledge these factors and try to incorporate children’s voices in understanding their living situations. By presenting children’s agency in actual spaces and discursive contexts, this study also contributes to the current theoretical debates on childhood studies.

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Table of contents

Abstract.....	5
Acknowledgements:.....	7
Table of Figures, Tables, and Pictures.	V
Chapter 1 Introduction	6
1.1 Encountering a confrontation: An ethnographic vignette.	6
1.2 Entry point: identity, agency, child-centred perspective.....	13
1.3 The Research questions.....	17
1.4 Outline of the thesis	18
1.5 Children’s view on themselves	22
Chapter 2 Literature Review	25
2.1 Studies on childhood and children.....	25
2.1.1 The dominant framework of childhood	26
2.1.2 Childhood as a social construction	30
2.1.3 Current studies on children’s agency	34
2.1.4 The social construction of childhood in China	37
2.2 Studies on left-behind children in rural China.....	40
2.2.1 Quantitative studies on left-behind children in rural China.....	41
2.2.2 Qualitative or qualitative-led studies on left-behind children in rural China.....	44
2.3 Short Conclusion of literature review	48
Chapter 3 Taking the Post-structuralism Perspective to Understand identity.....	50

3.1 The post-structuralism perspective	50
3.2 Deconstructing the adult-centred socialization.....	55
3.3 From deconstruction to the de-centred subject.	58
Chapter 4 Methodology	65
4.1 Rationale for the qualitative approach and ethnography	65
4.2 Research site and context.....	70
4.3 Research design: methods, process, sampling and reflexivity.....	77
4.3.1 Data collection methods.....	77
4.3.2 The three stages of fieldwork.....	81
4.3.3 Sampling	83
4.3.4 Reflexivity.....	86
4.4 Ethical considerations	88
Chapter 5 The Living Environment of Left-behind Children	94
5.1 The adjustment of the geographical layout of schools in L town	95
5.2 Time, space, and power within the Dream School.....	100
5.3 Undisciplined time and space at the Dream School.....	106
5.5 The diversity of living status.....	113
5.6 Conclusion	118
Chapter 6 Children’s Interaction with School.....	120
6.1 The enclosed system and the “developing child”.	123
6.1.1 Children’s re-imaginings of the enclosed space.....	128
6.1.2 Agency in play and discursive context.....	136

6.1.3	Boarding as a condition for diluting the “developing child” identity.	143
6.2	The grading system and the “graded student”.	145
6.2.1	The uncaptured nature of “graded child” identity.	150
6.2.2	Children’s views on the “graded child”.	154
6.2.3	Deconstructing the “grading system”.	170
6.3	Short conclusion.	173
Chapter 7	Children’s Interaction with School Adults	175
7.1	The supervision and the “supervised child”.	177
7.1.1	Daily checks, e-monitoring, and governmental documentation	179
7.1.2	Counter-monitoring the school adults.	184
7.1.3	Falsifying documentation.	191
7.2	Adult authority and the “submissive child”.	195
7.2.1	The traditional notion and adult authority.	198
7.2.2	Children’s perception of adult authority.	202
7.2.3	The changeable child-adult relationship.	209
7.3	Short conclusion.	213
Chapter 8	Rethinking the Term “Rural Left-behind Children”	216
8.1	The playmate relationship and strategic identity.	217
8.1.1	Different early childhoods.	219
8.1.2	Diversified cultural capital.	223
8.2	Children’s subjective perceptions of parental absence.	230
8.2.1	Parental physical absence and residential patterns.	231

8.2.2 Parental visual presence and physical absence.	234
8.3 Beyond urban and rural.....	237
8.3.1 Living in urban-rural transitional zones in cities.	238
8.3.2 Living in urban-rural transitional zones in hometowns.	243
8.3.3 Informal economy and urban-rural dichotomy.	247
8.4 Short conclusion.....	250
Chapter 9: Conclusion and Discussion	253
9.1 Summary	253
9.2 Conversation with the new sociology of childhood.....	259
9.3 Rethinking children’s agency.	264
9.4 Why do children’s voices matter?	267
9.5. Reflection on identity and subjectivity.	271
Appendix 1.....	276
Appendix 2.....	278
Appendix 3.....	284
Bibliography	290

Table of Figures, Tables, and Pictures.

Picture 1. The L Town’s layout and the location of the Dream School.	75
Picture 2. Three teaching buildings of the Dream School.	75
Table 1. The Daily Schedule of Li Xiang Middle School Students.....	102
Table 2. Children’s bodies are governed by class rules in 7 categories.	105
Figure 1. The cross-section view of the CB1 and CB2.....	111
Table 3. Five modes of living on campus.	113
Picture 3. A room in the half-boarding students’ dormitory (Left).	116
Picture 4. Boys lining up to brush their teeth in the restroom (Right).....	116
Picture 5. Full-boarding students’ room (Left).	117
Picture 6. Full-boarding students’ restroom (Right).	117
Picture 7. The shadow (taken by Shuhao).	132
Picture 8. The window bars (taken by Bei Bei).....	134
Picture 9. The sky (taken by Ah Cheng).	142
Table 4. The after-school tutorial arrangement.	148
Picture 10. Xing falls asleep in class (taken by Sun).	158
Picture 11. Seeking fun by taking photos (taken by Xing)	159
Picture 12. The class situation of a “bad class”.	166

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Encountering a confrontation: An ethnographic vignette.

It was a sunny October Sunday morning in 2019. I was on the way from the school to the main street of the town to have breakfast. I felt relaxed; since I'd started my fieldwork at the Dream School one month ago, everything had gone smoothly.

Principal Zhong greeted me warmly, the teachers always gave me the green light for my research, and I developed a good rapport with many potential child participants. I felt it was time to invite several research partners to join me.

Just as I was thinking about the next step of my fieldwork, my phone suddenly started to buzz, and dozens of messages popped up in a student chat group on QQ (a Chinese messaging app). The messages expressed the students' dislike of Principal Zhong and even proposed reporting him to the local Education Bureau. A video and audio recording that had been shared in the chat caught my attention: I saw one student, Xing, confronting Principal Zhong near the front door outside the classroom. Xing was one of many rural left-behind children at the Dream School and he served as the class monitor for a class of high-achieving students in grade 9. Although I did not know the nature of the conflict shown in the video, I knew that something terrible must have happened. Such direct and collective student resistance in China's rural schools was rare, let alone the conflict happening between a class monitor and a principal. The former's power was endowed by the school authority while the latter represented the highest authority of the school.

Principal Zhong was about 5'9, a strong middle-aged man with a cropped haircut and a potbelly. He stared at Xing fiercely while standing approximately one meter away from him. At first, he spoke hoarsely but loudly, with a self-assured and authoritative tone. With his arms waving in the air, he sometimes faced Xing and sometimes turned to the students who were watching them from the classroom, making it appear as if he were delivering a public speech to all the students. However, when Xing tried to voice his opinions, Principal Zhong immediately turned his public speech into a personal reprimand directed against Xing and his voice took on a much harsher tone. He seemed to lose his patience and began to shout at Xing. His rant was punctuated by curse words in the local dialect. He looked so irritated and furious that I was afraid that he might hit Xing at any time, and I felt myself grow tense even though I was just watching the video on my phone.

To my surprise, Xing seemed emotionally impassive the entire time. No older than 16, Xing was thin but about the same height as Principal Zhong, so he could be mistaken for an adult from the back. Facing an angry man who was physically stronger than him, Xing stood at ease and with confidence, with one foot forward and both hands in the pockets of his hoodie. He took his time raising questions and sometimes repeated his words to clarify his thoughts in an earnest and poised tone. When Xing was rebuked by Principal Zhong, he listened patiently while looking directly into Principal Zhong's eyes as if he were not intimidated at all.

It occurred to me that, one week before, some of the half-boarding students, including Xing, had complained to me about the school bus fare. I guessed that this might have been the trigger for the conflict in the video. A large portion of the students at the Dream School was half-boarding students (*ban tuo sheng*) who boarded at school yet took the school bus home every weekend - in most cases, to the homes of their grandparents or other nearby relatives. Students told me that the half-boarding students had before paid 300 yuan for the school bus fare and now would have to pay much more, and they were also told that it would be a good idea for them to pay for the upcoming tutoring classes. The school's thought was that these tutoring classes would be organized for alternate weekends. The students found the school's plans unacceptable. One reason was that they would not be able to go back home if they took on the weekend tutoring classes. As put by one student, "This would mean that we would take the school bus half as often as before, so why would fewer rides mean higher fares?" Xing, the class monitor, had tried many times to elicit a response from Principal Zhong to such questions, but each time he had been ignored. Xing told me that Principal Zhong either refused to meet with him or else avoided mentioning the issue of the bus fare in his talks. "Every time I mentioned the fare issue, he (Principal Zhong) interrupted me and started to deliver the 'big truth' (*jiang da dao li*)

(The principal) said that my parents were doing very *xin ku* (hard and bitter) work in Beijing and that I should study hard to repay their *fu chu* (sacrifice)." Some students proposed that they should designate several top students as the class representatives to

talk to Principal Zhong again, but at the time I hadn't taken their words seriously.

In order to find out if my guess about the reason behind the confrontation in the video was right, I listened attentively to the audio. The audio recording provided more insights into the encounter, which are captured in the following excerpt from my transcription of the conversation. P represents Principal Zhong while X represents Xing.

P: What are you guys doing here? How many of you are there?

X: There are 7 or 8 of us (the student representatives).

P: 7 or 8? Do you want to talk? Who do you think you are?

X: I just speak for them (other students).

P: Get out! You are a student leader, and everyone else sitting here is a good student. You are not the leader of your own will. You are no leader in front of me whatsoever!

X: No, no, no. I am just speaking to you on behalf of them (the other students).

P: Shut up!

X: I will continue to talk. I have the right to speak.

P: You just want to take back your own money.

X: I have the right to speak (repeating and emphasizing the pronunciation of "right" to distinguish the similar pronunciations between "right" and "money" in the dialect).

P: Look at you. Talking about money every day at such a young age!

X: I have the right to speak (repeat).

P: Do not talk anymore!

X: I have the right... (he tried to repeat but was interrupted).

P: If you do not want to be the class monitor, then do not do it! You have no right to speak to me!

X: Why? Personal rights are my own. I have the right to speak.

P: You are such a small student (here “small” means young but also implies a power relation, which will be analyzed later). Even if you succeed... Why do some people fail on the way forward? Because of the selfishness (Principal Zhong’s incoherent language reflected the difficulty in responding to Xing’s argument)!

X: But he is honest.

I was surprised when I heard the content of their conversation. I was not only surprised by the severe dispute, but also by the fact that most of their conversation hinged on the issues of Xing’s identity, such as what kind of person Xing was, what “that kind of person” meant, and what “that kind of person” was supposed to do.

While Principal Zhong described Xing as an arrogant student cadre, a small child with no right to speak to him, and a selfish boy, Xing saw himself as a responsible class monitor, someone with the right to speech, and an honest person. In particular, when Principal Zhong demanded “Who do you think you are?”, Xing just took it in stride as

if he were clearer about his own identity than anyone else. At that point, I realized that it would be meaningful to take identity as an entry point to understand this conflict. Xing's identity had become the basis of their dialogue, which was fundamentally related to what kind of relationship theirs should be, what the boundaries of topics of conversation were, and how Xing's behaviours and attitudes should be judged. It could be said that the core of this conflict, then, was the gulf between how Principal Zhong saw Xing and how Xing saw himself. Without reaching a consensus on Xing's identity, their opinions would only lead to more misunderstandings rather than solve the issue of the bus fare.

I must admit that my description of this story seems to glorify Xing and other children, making them seem unequivocally heroic and powerful in their resistance. It is easy to see the problem with this narrative if we bring in the ideas of structure and agency. In the social sciences, structure and agency are two fundamental concepts used to understand human societies. Structure refers to a basic device that regards the social as a realm of being, exerting great influence on people's social lives and exceeding the sum of an individual's actions (Sewell, 1992). In contrast, agency refers to an individual's capacity, autonomy, and freedom to act within a given environment (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998) or the ability to transform the world around him or her through actions (Giddens, 2001). In this light, overemphasis on Xing and other children's agency in resistance might risk simplifying their complicated and dynamic life experiences through a static understanding of structure and agency.

Abu-Lughod came up with the idea of the romance of resistance to describe the dangers involved in writing like mine. The term romance of resistance suggests the danger of seeing all forms of resistance as “signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated” (Abu-Lughod, 1990). In other words, it suggests that we should be careful in seeing all forms of resistance as battles between good (the resisters) and evil (the resisted). Taking a cue from Foucault, Abu-Lughod’s approach to avoiding an overemphasis on either agency or structure is to take resistance as diagnostics of power. Through examining multiple forms of Awlad 'Ali Bedouin women's resistance, for example, Abu-Lughod detected the “historically changing relations of power in which they are enmeshed as they become increasingly incorporated into the Egyptian state and economy” (Abu-Lughod, 1990). In line with her, this study also draws on a Foucauldian approach to power to apprehend the effects of power on left-behind children. The difference, however, is that my study focuses more on children’s capability to engage with power games as well as the possibility that they can, at least temporally, keep their identity formation separate from the effects of disciplinary power in a multifaced reality. This is consistent with Armstrong’s understanding of Foucault’s idea of resistance, namely that “resistance is grounded in an agency that precedes disciplinarity and can never be fully colonized by it” (2008, p. 20).

1.2 Entry point: identity, agency, child-centred perspective

Admittedly, this short story involves a variety of issues that are worth further exploration. But the most fascinating part for me is that Xing, as a rural left-behind child, presents a “self” totally different from the image of left-behind children portrayed in public discourse. “Rural left-behind children” (*nong cun liu shou er tong*) are children who were left in rural areas to grow up while their parent(s) move to faraway cities to work (Wu, Lu, & Kang, 2015; Zhang, 2018). Rural left-behind children have received a huge amount of public concern. Firstly, the institutional and economic restraints put rural children at a disadvantage to enjoy the same educational resources and welfare services as their urban counterparts (Goodburn, 2009; Koo, Ming, & Tsang, 2014). Moreover, left-behind children’s lack of parental presence due to parental labour migration might be detrimental to their wellbeing and development (Chen, 2016; Liang, Wang, & Rui, 2017; Murphy, Zhou, & Tao, 2016; Ye & Pan, 2011;). Emphasis on these structural constraints leads to an image of rural left-behind children as vulnerable victims (Xiao, 2014). However, as the aforementioned short story showed, Xing and his classmates are not passive and vulnerable at all, but rather active negotiators with Principal Zhong. The agency and autonomy expressed by these children echo a new paradigm in childhood study or the new sociology of childhood that regarded active subjects with agency (James & Prout, 2005).

The new sociology of childhood advocates for a child-centred approach to understanding children and childhood (James, 2013). It firstly argues that childhood is

not a universal and immutable being, but rather a product of social construction (James & Prout, 2005). This means that our understanding of rural left-behind children or any other group of children can vary across time and space. More importantly, it maintains that children are “competent informants about and interpreters of their own lives and lives of others” (James, 2001, p. 250). This suggests that children’s understanding of themselves is at least as important as our understanding of them, and hence China’s rural left-behind children should be understood from their own perspective. Inspired by the new sociology of childhood, there has been a growing body of research seeking to challenge the passive and victim-oriented image of China’s rural left-behind children. For instance, Murphy (2014), Xiao (2014), and Zhang (2015) observed that left-behind children can actively harness their lives while living with parental migration. Their findings have demonstrated that the left-behind child is not always a victim and vulnerable one, but an active subject with agency.

These studies, however, have not explored how rural left-behind children negotiate with their identities. Even though existing research findings have contributed to the reconstruction of our view of left-behind children’s lives in rural China, the questions of how children themselves perceive their socially given identities as “rural children”, “left-behind children” and “school children” remains unexplored. Extant literature has shown that nowadays, many “left-behind children” are born and grow up in cities before they return to their rural hometowns (Koo, Ming, & Tsang, 2014). This means

some left-behind children may have new perceptions of their rural identity. In addition, the rapid development of communication technology has allowed rural children to contact their parents online at a whim, which may complicate their subjective feeling of parental absence. These cases have shown the problematization of the term “rural left-behind children”. The main concern of this study is therefore to explore whether or to what extent children take up the identities *into* themselves and how we can still understand them if they do not invest themselves into the given identities. By doing so, children can not only express their subjective views on their “left-behind” status but can also have further space to present other identities that they consider important and meaningful. In other words, taking identity as an entry point of research analysis might lead to a groundbreaking way of looking at these children, a way that understands their identity not through a dominating cultural discourse but children's views on themselves.

This study, therefore, takes a post-structuralism approach to the notion of identity. Traditionally, identity is viewed to be fixed and singular. Through identifying with and differentiating from others, we define a certain identity for ourselves (Woodword, 2012). However, from a post-structuralist perspective, people make sense of who they are by locating themselves in subject positions. Davies and Harre (1990, p46) define a subject position as follow:

A subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for

persons within the structure of rights for those that use that repertoire. Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned.

In other words, identities are addressed as subject positions constituted by discourse and power from which we gradually come to view ourselves as a subject. However, For Deleuze, Foucault's commitment to the idea that "there will always be a relation to oneself which resists codes and powers" (1988, p. 103) implies that the process of becoming a subject might be always incomplete, or in Armstrong (2008) 's words, "the subject can never be entirely reduced to an object which could be given in the mode of an essentialized social identity". Identity is thus not something intrinsic to us, but a temporal collection of subject positions. In view of this, I adopt the concept of a "de-centred subject" to help understand the children I met in the field (I will explain this term in more detail in chapter 4). In a broad definition, the "de-centred subject" refers to an individual possessing multiple selves or quasi-selves; the single homogeneous 'self' only exists moment by moment. Correspondingly, in this study, I call the identities that society attempts to install on the children I met as "centred identities". These "centred identities" exclude other possibilities of being and lead children to define themselves in line with the norms, values, and knowledge that the "centred identities" have endorsed. By "de-centred subject", however, I'd like to

emphasize the fact that the children I met in the field can tactically distance themselves from the power and discourse that generates these “centred identities” so as to maintain the nature of their identity as multiple, fluid, and even contradictory.

1.3 The Research questions

My research interest and research focus thus led me to three main research questions:

1) What power relationships are embodied in the environment in which children live?

- What are the natures and forms of the powers exercised on children?
- What are the mechanisms and means through which these powers produce and manipulate children’s identities?
- What are the “centred identities” produced by the powers in their environment?

2) How do children cope with these powers in their living environment?

- How do they perceive and interact with the school environment, school adults, and peers? In this process, how do they perceive themselves?
- How can children tactically evade, doubt, and challenge the “centred identities” produce by power and discourse?

3) How do their childhood experiences ground the making of the de-centred subject?

- What do they learn from their early moving experiences? How do these complicate their understandings of the rural-urban dichotomy and bring about

diversity in the peer culture?

- How does the application of mobile technologies complicate their sense of parental presence/absence, and how does this, in turn, blur their perception of their “left-behind” status?

1.4 Outline of the thesis

To address these research questions, this study employs an ethnographic approach, which generally requires researchers to immerse themselves in a particular community in order to capture children’s views on their own situations. The voices of 14 child participants were used as the basis for rethinking the identity of left-behind children in rural China. In order to detail how child participants perceive their living experiences and how the “de-centred subject” is in the making, this thesis will be organized into chapters as follows.

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature to examine how scholarship and the media have portrayed a universal yet stereotyped image of rural left-behind children. While highlighting the significant achievements of journalism and academia in exploring the disadvantaged and vulnerable living status of China’s rural left-behind children, I address the un-presentation of these children’s voices by introducing the notion of the new sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 2005). To put it simply, the new sociology of childhood regards childhood as a social construction and emphasizes children’s agency in interpreting the social world and responding to their lived

environment. In view of this, this thesis focuses on the unexplored question of how rural left-behind children view themselves, and thus this research aims to fill this important gap in scholarship.

Chapter 3 justifies the post-structuralist view, which tends to see the social world as the representation of diversified discourses, as the most fitting way to investigate children's identities. On top of that, this study concentrates on how identities or subject positions are engendered by discourses or power yet at the same time pays attention to how children would deal with these discourses based on their own understandings of their lived experiences. Specifically, the idea of deconstruction, a technical term prop, is proposed by Derrida to uncover "strains and contradictions within text and arguments" (Bruce, & Yearley, 2006, p. 63). The term will be employed to examine how labels and categories impose identities on children. The Foucauldian approach to power (1995) is applied to explore both the disciplinary power on children's bodies and how children come to view themselves as subjects through the workings of power relations. Finally, the concept of the "de-centred subject" is proposed to grasp the fluid, diversified, inconsistent, and contradictory nature of children's identities and to emphasize that children have agency to refuse the imposed identities produced by power and discourse. These conceptual tools help this study observe children's own situations in a profoundly changing rural society and a nationwide increase in the social mobility of the rural population.

Chapter 4 discusses methodology, the research site, my ethical considerations and reflexivity. The epistemological stance of interpretivism informs a qualitative approach to exploring children's everyday lives in a rural middle school and ethnography is chosen as the principal methodology to approach children's feelings, perceptions, and understandings of their own situations. In addition, the field site, the Dream School, a town-level rural boarding middle school, is introduced together with the economic situation and labour mobility of the township and county in which the school is located. The discussion focuses on the generality and particularity of the site in terms of the environment in which the rural left-behind children live. Finally, Chapter 4 addresses my reflexivity and an explanation of my strategies as an adult male researcher to deal with unforeseen troubles and ethical risks emerging from interacting with child participants.

Chapter 5, 6, 7, and 8 conduct empirical data analysis and present different aspects of the findings of this study. Chapter 5 focuses on how the boarding school arranges time and space, organizes school activities, disciplines children's bodies, and, more importantly, embodies modernized disciplinary power. On the other hand, however, it also reveals the "impurity" or "incompletion" of disciplinary power within the school due to the interference of traditional authority. It provides a situated knowledge to understand the children in this study, whom I met live in a multifaceted reality, and studies their capacity to evade or resist the power and discourse that produces "centred identities" for them.

Chapter 6 and 7 examine children's perspectives. Chapter 6 focuses on how children interact with school while chapter 7 weighs more on how children interact with school adults. In particular, chapter 6 elaborates on how the "boarding system" and "grading system" are respectively associated with the production of the identities of the "developing child" and "grading child", and how discourses delivered by child participants negate or doubt these identities. Likewise, chapter 7 describes how adult supervision of children and the traditional authority of adults over children attempts to produce the "supervised child" and "submissive child", and how children can tactically escape from supervision and challenge traditional authorities. The two chapters provide ample evidence that child participants don't invest much in definite and fixed "centred identities". Instead, they keep their identity multiple, inconsistent, and unstated.

In Chapter 8, I continue to inquire into how children's early life experiences lead them to problematize the term "rural left-behind children" per se and to ground the making of the de-centred subject. In specific, I disclose how child participants view their peer groups, perceive parental absence/ presence, and understand the places they lived in and live in. The narration of the childhood experiences of the children I met unveils the nonnegligible factors of uncertainty, instability, and what Derrida calls undecidability, which can become important elements for the making of the "de-centred subject". Chapter 9 sums up the main findings of this study, which response to

the research questions listed above, and further discusses the theoretical contributions and implications.

1.5 Children's view on themselves

From the perspective of identity, I am able to see the deeper side of the confrontation story narrated at the start of this chapter and offer meaningful analysis. For instance, Principal Zhong criticized Xing for spoiling his “good child” identity: “Talking about money every day at such a young age” and “(you) such a small student...”. Principal Zhong underscored the “smallness” of Xing’s identity as a child, which implies the traditional notion that the hierarchy between child and adult is natural and moral. The “small” Xing (although Xing was neither physically nor mentally small) was supposed to be subject to the authority of the adult principal, otherwise, he theoretically would not be a good child. However, Xing resorted to the discourse of human rights, and in this way, he endowed his student identity with democratic meaning by asking for a more equal relationship with adult educators. The discourse about rights aligns with the ethos of civilization, freedom, and equality that are favoured by the modern educational ideology. Xing made use of the rights discourse to defend himself and to render the principal unable to respond to him for a time.

Xing’s story is not unique. Children’s resistance to socially given identities that are incongruent with their subjective experiences is ubiquitous. I recalled one night several students who were regarded by their teachers as high-achieving, *ting hua*

(obedient), and *you chu xi* (having a bright future), who spoke ill of the adults in their school dormitory. Their behaviour was very different from their behaviour when among their teachers—some leaned against the wall, some lounged on the bed, and some crossed their legs casually. When I asked them why they did not tell their parents or other guardians about their complaints, they replied in unison that “It’s pointless to tell them; they won’t understand”. It seemed that these children kept not only teachers but also their families, at arm’s length from their school lives. In our conversation, the students voiced expressions of discontent and sometimes hostile words. But at the same time, I sensed a playful attitude as if they did not really care about the discourse. When the atmosphere began to heat up, they imitated and mocked the tones, behaviours, gestures, and looks of school adults. They clapped, laughed, and used indelicate nicknames to refer to the school adults they disliked, and at that moment it seemed that the adults’ authority was entirely swallowed by their laughter and jokes.

When I hurried back to the school to see Xing outside the classroom, Principal Zhong had already left. Xing looked at ease. He told me he was fine, but that the confrontation ten minutes earlier had actually not been about the school bus fare but rather about the fees that were being charged for the weekend tutoring class. Some half-boarding students did not want to receive the weekend tutoring class anymore, so he had gone to ask Principal Zhong on behalf those students to ask how and when to return the fees to those students. “Then I was taught a lesson”, he said. He smiled

brightly, neither angry nor low-spirited. I was curious about how he could be so calm,
and he left me a simple answer: “Because I am right”.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews childhood studies and studies on China's left-behind children. I identify 6 themes: the dominant framework of childhood, childhood as a social construction, children's agency, the social construction of childhood in China, the quantitative studies on left-behind children, and qualitative or qualitative-led studies on left-behind children. My review of the first four themes aims to examine the mainstream understanding of childhood and uncover how a new paradigm could replace this understanding, thus grounding the epistemological knowledge to re-understanding China's rural left-behind children. The last two themes hope to bring what we learn from the childhood studies to the studies on China's left-behind children, examine how the mainstream understanding of rural left-behind children is socially constructed, and examine how children's voices are largely ignored in this construction.

2.1 Studies on childhood and children

The standpoints provided by the children and studies on childhood are key to my own study. The main contribution of this scholarship is the new sociology of childhood, which challenges "accepted conceptions of childhood as a linear sequence of developmental stages or of social growth" (Cook, 2020, p. xxxv). The new sociology of childhood encourages a new perspective that considers childhood as socially, historically, and situationally constructed and takes children as active subjects with

the agency to create and interpret social life in their own ways (Cook, 2020, p. xxxv). The new sociology of childhood has inspired scholars to examine childhood in China. Historians (e.g., Lee, 2000) and sociologists (e.g., Naftali, 2016) have analysed the constructions of childhood in different periods in China, which to a large extent supports the viewpoint of the new childhood sociology.

2.1.1 The dominant framework of childhood

It must be emphasized that, although the term childhood is loaded with various meanings and interpretations in different disciplines, there remains a dominant framework with which to understand childhood today. In general, the dominant framework conceives of childhood as “a natural and inevitable phase that we all go through before we reach adulthood” (Wyness, 2019, p. 7). This notion is entwined with the arguments from early developmental psychology and socialization theories in their focus on the outcomes of childhood, treating children as “adult-in-the-making” (Kehily, 2009, p. 5).

James and Prout (2005) revealed that the key concept that dominates Western thoughts on childhood and children is development. This involves three predominant themes: naturalness, rationality, and universality. Briefly speaking, naturalness is intricately linked with biological facts of immaturity and an evolutionary model. It posits that “the child developing into an adult represents a progression from simplicity to the complexity of thought, from irrational to rational behaviour”. Rationality is the

mark of adulthood and therefore childhood is viewed as a period aiming to pursue rationality and therefore progress to adulthood. Universality posits that the naturalness of the dominant view of childhood has been generally treated as unproblematic until the late 1970s. According to James and Prout (2005), naturalness, rationality, and universality become the scientific constructions of childhood through psychology and are further translated to sociological accounts of childhood in the form of socialization theory. It is, therefore, necessary to examine how psychology, in particular early developmental psychology and socialization theories, account for childhood.

In discussing the role of early developmental psychology in childhood studies, the works of Jean Piaget are noticeable. He (1972, p. 26) once defined developmental psychology as follows:

“Developmental psychology can be described as the study of the development of mental functions, in as much as this development can provide an explanation, or at least a complete description, of their mechanisms in the finished state. In other words, developmental psychology consists of making use of child psychology in order to find the solution to general psychological problems.”

Child growth is thus understood as a successive process of adaptation. But “adaptation” for Piaget does not only mean the practices children exercise to adapt to their external environments but to the internalization of reasoning with certain psychological structures. In this way, Piaget shifts the concern of children’s growth

from biological to psychological functions. He further identifies four stages by which children establish their mental structure: the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage (Moreno, 2010). To Piaget, each child needs to pass through these stages in sequence before he or she reaches mental maturity. Furthermore, children must complete each stage within an explicit scope of biological age and acquire different psychological functions in each stage.

According to Piaget, then, the path of child development is quite predictable, fixed, and logical, and this perspective is sometimes criticized for ignoring the diversity and mutability of childhood. Some of Piaget's followers later modified Piaget's doctrine to preserve the diversity and variability of childhood. However, they did not change the fundamental idea regarding developmental pathways as objective law. As Walkerdine (2005) comments, scientific developments in the seventeenth century set the ideal 'conditions of possibility' (Foucault, 2018) for an early version of developmental psychology, making it a more scientific, natural, and objective discipline that would come to be recognized as a dominant framework of childhood for the general public.

Apart from developmental psychology, early socialization theories that emerged in sociology and anthropology also play key roles in contributing to the dominant view on childhood (Denzin, 2010; Kehily, 2009; Mead & Wolfenstein, 1955). Ritcie and Kollar (1964, p. 117) stated the relationship between childhood and socialization as such:

“The central concept in the sociological approach to childhood is socialization. A synonym for this process may well be acculturation because this term implies that children acquire the culture of the human groupings in which they find themselves. Children are not to be viewed as individuals fully equipped to participate in a complex adult world, but rather as beings with the potential to be slowly brought into contact with human beings.”

Socialization is often used to describe how individuals learn social norms and orders to become qualified citizens in the society they live in. The emphasis is on how society shapes individuals rather than the other way round. James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) came up with the concepts of “soft socialization” and “hard socialization” to explain the core idea of socialization theory. The ‘hard socialization’ is related to Parsons’ theory of functionalism, which emphasizes the general function of socialization. From this perspective, children are socialized to meet the needs of social functions, so as to maintain a stable and sustainable social system as a whole. In contrast, “soft socialization” is much more linked to interactionism, which stresses the active role of the individual in socialization. From this perspective, the primary concern of the socialization process should be how children actively learn to become group/ social member members. Nonetheless, both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ socializations share similar standpoints on childhood with developmental psychology. Piaget’s theory, for instance, claims a predetermined path to full human status, and

accordingly, in the view of socialization theory, the ultimate purpose of childhood is adulthood, no matter how children are developed or socialized (Jenks, 1983).

The dominant framework that emerges from early socialization and developmental psychology is still the mainstream interpretive device through which we understand childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Indeed, it can provide reasonable and provoking explanations for childhood, but as James and Prout (2005, p. 10) pointed out, the constructed model of thinking has stretched “far beyond the disciplinary boundaries of psychology, influencing not only sociological approaches to child study but the socio-political context of childhood itself.” This implies the danger in laymen societies taking the developmental model as the objective truth about childhood. Hence, it is vital to examine childhood not as something of an objective nature, but rather in its varied forms in different histories and cultures. And this can be learnt by approaching childhood as a product of social construction.

2.1.2 Childhood as a social construction

The idea that childhood is a product of social construction is opposite to the dominant view that childhood is immutable and universal. Informed by the epistemology of social constructionism, the term social construction suggests that knowledge about the social world is not fixed and absolute, but rather jointly constructed understandings of the world (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2005). Childhood as social construction means that the interpretation of childhood is not unchangeable but varies over time and

space. In specific, childhood is seen as deeply affected by political, cultural, economic and social forces (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, 2005; Stearns, 2016).

Therefore, childhood is not only a term that explores the objective laws of child development, but that also helps understand how external forces, such as state control, schooling and parenting shape the way that children learn to live their lives (Jenks, 2005; Qvortrup, 2005; Zelizer, 2005).

Phillip Ariès (1962, p. 125), for instance, points out that the modern concept of childhood did not exist in medieval times. In the Middle Ages, children were generally described as "miniature adults", and it was not until the 15th century onwards that children appeared in historical records as children. Accordingly, children's relation to adults, their social needs, and their responsibilities to social norms were completely re-shaped within a new social context. Other scholars building off of Ariès' work verify the core idea that childhood can be interpreted in different ways in different social contexts. Moreover, they find that the driving force in the formation of childhood can be both social and material factors (Pilcher, 1995; Postman, 1985; Shorter, 1975). Despite the differences in attribution, these scholars share the same critique of the dominant framework of childhood (Wyness, 2019) and stress that childhood can be socially constructed.

Harry Hendrick (2015) surveyed the most authoritative social constructions of British childhood since the end of the 18th century and investigated how they struggled to

manage competing identities of childhood. Under different historical conditions, he finds, a child can be innately good or evil, innocent or delinquent, in school or working, the subject of scientific study or the being “of The Nation”, a psychological child or a citizen of democracy and of other identities. Likewise, Sorin and Galloway (2006) differentiate nine constructions of childhood which each comprise different needs of children and different child-adult relationships. No matter how childhood is socially constructed, its historical variability has indicated two facts: firstly, the intentions to define childhood in different historical periods are quite different and can be even fiercely contested with each other; and secondly, all intentions are derived from the perspective of adults rather than the child themselves. As the term “social construction” has suggested, children, while they have attracted wide attention and interests in sociology, are generally treated as passive recipients constrained by various social structures. Moreover, the study of childhood is often subsumed under other topics of research, such as family studies. Therefore, adopting the idea of childhood as a social construction does not mean that we can ignore the fact that the dominant model remains dominant in different disciplines and practices in contemporary societies (Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2008; Walkerdine, 2005; Winter, 2006).

In pursuit of alternative viewpoints on childhood, the recent wave of childhood studies strives to shift attention from social construction to children’s agency, emphasizing the locus of concern of childhood itself (Holland et al., 2008; Lee, 2001).

Placing emphasis on children's agency in childhood constructions means that children should not be viewed as passive subjects of their structure or environment, but rather as active social actors able to construct their own childhood (James, 2001). This also means that the relationship between children and academic researchers should be altered: researchers should not conduct research on children, but rather *with* children (Alderson, 1995).

By deconstructing the three predominant themes in the traditional paradigm of childhood studies (rationality, naturalness, and universality), James and Prout (2005) identify the key features of a *new* paradigm of childhood study (referred to also as a 'new sociology of childhood'). On the one hand, they stated that childhood should be understood in relation to external social forces such as class, gender, and ethnicity, so as to explore how childhood is socially constructed. On the other hand, they posited that childhood should be understood by incorporating children's voices because childhood is partly a creation of children themselves. On top of that, James regarded ethnography as the most appropriate methodology to keep with the new paradigm (James, 2001).

Thus, the core question about childhood studies has become how childhood is constructed by external environments as well as by children themselves. In other words, both children's own agency and the degree that those children are impacted by the outside world affect how children view themselves (Woodward, 2000). The

question of 'what childhood is' should be answered in a way that recognizes children's own negotiation and renegotiation of their identity, if we understand identity as shaped by both the individual and the society.

2.1.3 Current studies on children's agency

Since the new sociology of childhood allows room for children to build their own childhood, researchers have paid attention to children's agency and especially to what forms and ways children present that agency. Tisdall and Punch (2012, p. 256) remind us that children's agency is not necessarily "taken-for-granted, unproblematized or assumed to be inherently positive..." This means we should take methodological difficulties into consideration when advocating for the child-centred perspective, especially when children choose not to express that agency. To deal with these problems, childhood studies in recent years have pushed further to elaborate on the ways and forms that children's agency is likely to be performed (Morrison et al., 2019).

Klocker (2007), for example, divides agency into 'thick agency' and 'thin agency' to stress the scope in which agency can be expressed. Thick agency refers to agents "having the latitude to act within a broad range of options" while thin agency refers to "decisions and everyday actions that are carried out in highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives" (Klocker, 2007: 85). To Klocker, children's agency can be either thick or thin, and there is a continuum that allows different

factors to affect their agency. A recent application of this idea can be seen in Morrison et al.'s study (2019), which found that the observed children were powerful in front of social workers but powerless in their own lives. In light of this, they come up with “containment” as a concept to capture the variations in children’s agency.

Containment as a notion offers children a space to express their agency, and at the same time constrains their ability to achieve real change in their lives. Likewise, Bordonaro and Payne (2012) use ‘ambiguous agency’ to refer to the dilemma that children’s conduct is always measured based on what adult society defines as good or not good. They point out that children’s agency will be portrayed negatively when it poses a threat to existing social orders. In other words, children’s ability to deploy their agency is predicated on the assumption that their agency will not transgress social normality.

Although it is acknowledged that the expression of the agency is limited, quite a few scholars hold a relatively positive attitude towards this. De Certeau (1984) illustrates why in mass culture ordinary people cannot be completely controlled. By linking strategies with institutional controls and relating tactics to individual actors, he explains how individual actors can use “tactics” to possess what has been defined by the “strategies” of the system or structures of power. Drawing on this idea, Langevang and Gough (2009) come up with the notion of tactic agency, and Karlsson (2018) connects this to tactical awareness and tactical acts. In a study at an asylum centre, Karlsson details how children deploy “tactical awareness” and “tactical acts” to

navigate the boundaries and rules set by the institution. Karlsson then concludes that children's play should be understood as a kind of political act of resistance because through play children can fully express their tactic agency. Furthermore, Paul Willis's analysis of cultural reproduction in the working class is influential in child studies. In his work (Willis, 2017), learning how to labour—how working-class kids get working class jobs—he finds that young males from the working-class young males are not forced to become workers, but rather actively choose physical labour. In particular, young males voluntarily choose manual labour over mental labour because they understand the former as being associated with the social superiority of masculinity and the latter with the inferiority of femininity (Willis, 2017, p. 148). He (2017, p. 104) writes:

“Thus physical labouring comes to stand for and express, most importantly, a kind of masculinity and also an opposition to authority -at least as it is learned in school. It expresses aggressiveness; a degree of sharpness and wit; an irreverence that cannot be found in words~ an obvious kind of solidarity. It provides the wherewithal for adult tastes and demonstrates a potential mastery over, as well as an immediate attractiveness to, women: a kind of machismo.”

Willis thus demonstrated children (and young males' in particularly) autonomy and self-consciousness in resisting school culture and engaging with rebellious behaviour.

His work paved the way for later studies to examine children's agency in various

forms of anti-school culture.

2.1.4 The social construction of childhood in China

The notion of childhood as a social construction has been introduced to studies on Chinese children and youth. Inspired by the work of Ariès, some scholars have sought to discover the emergence of the concept of childhood during China's history. Lee (2000), for example, suggests that the notion of childhood emerged in the Song dynasty (960A.D.-1279A.D.), whereas Kinney (2004) argues that the date is closer to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-221 A.D.). Many scholars are also concerned with how childhood has been constructed in China's historical contexts (Hsiung, 2005, 2008; Saari, 1990; Wicks, 2002). Gu (2012), for instance, regards the May 4th movement as a turning point in childhood construction, because since then the notion of childhood has begun to be liberated from paternalism in both literature and educational documents, presenting new ideas of "childishness worship", "child-oriented", and "living for self".

Scholars have also shown that childhood can be subject to different social constructions in the same historical period. In his work *Children in China*, Naftali (2016) argues that the new ideas of childhood don't replace but rather co-exist with traditional ideas of childhood in today's China. In her analysis, three key social constructions impact contemporary Chinese childhood. The first construction is related to globalization. It is argued that China's re-integration with the world

economy is in keeping with the prevalence of neoliberal ideology, which encourages young Chinese to become qualified labourers and satisfy the needs of China's re-opened market (Ngai & Chan, 2012; Su, 2011; Zhang, Kleinman, & Tu, 2010). Thus, self-governance, diligence, independence, and self-development become important features of childhood in contemporary China. The second construction is rooted in traditional values from local power. Confucianism, authoritarianism, filial piety, hierarchy, and patriarchy are still significant in shaping Chinese peoples' moral life, which in turn influence people's attitudes on child education and rearing (Fong, 2004; Hansen, 2015; Kuan, 2015; Luo & Zhan, 2012; Shu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2013). The third construction derives from national power. This construction seems more complex and obscure because it aims to integrate diverse values so as to "subsume individual children to state projects of 'national rejuvenation'" (Naftali, 2016, p. 10). At the heart of this construction is the "imagined community" of China (Anderson, 2006), based on which children are expected to be cultivated to serve the future of the country. However, it is worth noting that the relationship between these different social constructions of childhood is often complicated (Fong, 2004; Gong & Dobinson, 2017; Naftali, 2016). Different kinds of construction can be mutually interconnected and reinforced but also can be incompatible or conflicting with each other.

The above research proves that childhood in China's context is not invariable and objective. These studies pave the way for us to reflect on how the phenomenon of "rural left-behind children" emerged as a social construct. We can see this by simply

looking at history. Since the 1980s, when China began to open itself to global capital, the marketing economy demanded labour forces from rural areas to support the establishment of the urban areas. Millions of rural residents flocked to cities and continue to do so (Cortes, 2008). However, due to economic constraints and institutional barriers, few can migrate together with their families. As a result, many non-labouring demographics, usually the elderly, women, and children, are left in rural areas of China (Chen, 2016; Duan, Lv, Guo, & Wang, 2013; Lu & Zhou, 2012).

Although China's internal labour migration and left-behind populations appeared at the same historical time, the latter didn't receive immediate attention from the general public and the government. In fact, it was not until around 2000 that the "Three Rural Issues" (*san nong wen ti*) of agriculture, farmers, and rural land, entered into the policy agenda at the national level. The people who have been left in rural areas started to be reported on and widely discussed in media scholarship (Xiang, 2007). It was in this context that the children who were left behind in rural areas by their migrant parents were labelled as rural left-behind children. Since then, the academic community has taken this group of children as the object of further study and has begun to investigate related issues over the past 20 years. Next, I will elaborate on the research findings of these quantitative studies and qualitative or qualitative-oriented studies on rural left-behind children.

2.2 Studies on left-behind children in rural China

Due to parental labour migration, a large number of rural children are looked after by single parent, grandparents or relatives. According to an official survey, over 9 million left-behind children live without parents or with one parent who is incapable of caring for the child (Ministry of Civil of PRC, 2016). Because of this, they are often seen as a disadvantaged group lacking parental love and care and receiving inadequate discipline (the All-China Women's Federation, 2013).

A large body of literature has paid attention to the problems and challenges these children face in their lives. However, as I will show below, existing studies have not reached consistent conclusions. Gu (2021) reviewed public discourse based on 21st-century mainstream newspapers and policy articles and discovered contradictory constructions in public discourse regarding left-behind children in rural China. Given this, it is important to figure out not only what the previous studies conclude but what kinds of perspectives and methodologies these studies have used to understand rural left-behind children. By reviewing both quantitative studies and qualitative studies, it is found that the majority of extant studies still place emphasis on the effects of external plights and difficulties in lives on left-behind children. There has been a small yet increasing volume of qualitative studies starting to interpret left-behind status from children's perspective, but seldom do we know how left-behind children would like to view themselves.

2.2.1 Quantitative studies on left-behind children in rural China

There have been a large number of studies on left-behind children in rural China.

Wang, Wei, Ma, and Wang (2016) used a co-cited analytical approach to review 327 studies on rural left-behind children and summarized the top 4 topics, including intervention, deviant behaviour, mental health and strategy of family childrearing.

Within all these research studies there is a problem with perspective when studying left-behind children. Studies often align with the assumptions of early developmental psychology and socialization that regard children as passive recipients of the external environment. However, when following these research guidelines researchers haven't achieved consistent and clear findings.

In ascertaining the impact of parental migration on rural left-behind children, plenty of research reports that left-behind children are worse off than non-left behind children in many ways. For example, rural left-behind children are reported to have poorer health (Huang et al., 2015; Lei, Liu, & Hill, 2018; Li, Liu, & Zang, 2015), receive poorer nutritive intake (Ning & Chang, 2013), have worse mental well-being (Chan, 2009; Liang, Wang, & Rui, 2017; Su, Li, Lin, & Zhu, 2017; Wang, Hesketh, & Zhou, 2015; Zhao, Liu, & Wang, 2015; Zhao et al., 2014), achieve lower academic grades (Fu, Bo, Xue, & Yuan, 2017; Ye & Pan, 2011), have less self-esteem and a more insecure self-concept (Wang et al., 2015; Zhan, Li, Liu, & Zhang, 2014), enjoy less familial social capital (Wu, Lu, & Kang, 2015), be at a higher risk of danger (Chen & Chan, 2016; Chen, Sun, Chen, & Chan, 20020; Chen, Liang, & Ostertag,

2017) and be more anti-social (Chen, 2012; Chen et al., 2017; Wang, Hesketh, & Zhou, 2015) compared to non-left-behind children or migrant children.

In contrast, there is a rising body of literature based on larger samples that report few or no differences between left-behind children and their counterparts, particularly regarding their physical health, mental well-being, educational aspirations, and behaviours (Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2009; Guo, 2012; Ren & Treiman, 2016; Wen, Su, Li, & Lin, 2015; Xu & Xie, 2015). Zhou et al. (2015) investigated 141,000 children from 10 provinces of China and found that children who live without one parent or both parents performed the same as or even better than children who live with their parents in terms of health and nutrition education. In view of these inconsistent findings, Xiao (2014) identifies four deficiencies in the extant research on China's left-behind children: the overemphasis on the problems of perspective, the use of non-randomised sampling and the lack of valid measurements, the ignorance of the specific social and cultural contexts, and too little attention paid to children's agency.

Apart from criticism of research, people also doubt the stability of the definition of left-behind children (Lu, 2011; Naftali, 2016). There are studies, for example, in which children are simply distinguished as either left-behind children or non-left behind children (Huang et al., 2015; Jia et al., 2010), but in other studies, left-behind children are further divided into groups of children with one parent migrated and those with both parents migrated (Ren & Treiman, 2016; Su et al., 2017; Wen & Lin,

2012). Also, the length of “left-behind” history is obscure. In Wu et al.’s study (2015), for example, they take children’s historical experience of separation from parents into consideration, but in Ren and Treiman (2016)’s study, they consider the caring status of children at the time of their study to classify whether someone is a left-behind child. In her doctoral research, Chen (2016) tried to depict a comprehensive picture of left-behind children’s well-being by using meta-analysis to integrate uncategorized findings rather than addressing who left-behind children are from the beginning. These cases show that the quantitative researchers do not only explore the objective truth in left-behind children’s world but also actively define who left-behind children are. However, in their construction of meanings of left-behind children, little is heard from the children themselves.

Furthermore, quantitative studies tend to simplify the complexity of the world of left-behind children. For instance, many (Huang et al., 2015; Jia et al., 2010; Su, Li, Lin, Xu, & Zhu, 2013; Wu et al., 2015; Ye and Pan, 2011) compare left-behind children to non-left-behind children without controlling other possible confounding factors, risking the possibility that the different outcomes were spurious. Interestingly, some studies which controlled the likely confounders still reached mixed results (Lee & Park, 2010; Su et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2015; Zhan et al., 2014). A typical example can be found in Fan et al.’s study (2009), in which the impacts of parental migration on children’s mental well-being and pro-social behaviours are completely removed once adjusting for social-economic status and other confounding factors. This indicates that

the issue of left-behind children is complicated and involves interacting factors. Thus, studying parts of left-behind children's life will make it difficult to achieve a dynamic and comprehensive understanding of their living experiences.

2.2.2 Qualitative or qualitative-led studies on left-behind children in rural China

Compared to quantitative studies that highlight the developmental outcomes of rural left-behind children, qualitative studies often set out to understand children's living situations. Among the small but increasing number of qualitative studies, some stress the local contexts and environmental forces in shaping left-behind children's lives while some pay more attention to children's subjective experiences. By appreciating the quality of left-behind children's life, qualitative studies make up for the deficiencies of quantitative studies to some extent.

Regarding concerns about social and economic contexts that left-behind children are facing, Jiang (2007) conducted an ethnography to observe children's life in a village in China's Hunan province. He claims that the discussion about helping rural left-behind children should focus on the local network resources rather than factors like parental care because in terms of rural-urban migration it is unpractical to force migrant parents to back home to look after their children. Taking advantage of local resources, especially community social capital, can be an effective way to enhance the quality of life of rural left-behind children. This echoes with Xiang (2007)'s argument that when it comes to the term 'left behind', it is the rural communities that are left

behind as a whole both economically and socially. Likewise, Hu et al. (2016) re-assess the structural constraints on rural left-behind children's life. They ascribe the difficulties and challenges the children face to social exclusion and advocate for social inclusion as a realistic strategy for social workers to meet the needs of left-behind children and their family members. In line with this argument, Zhao, Zhou, Wang, Jiang, and Hesketh (2017) find that enhancing the community environment can be beneficial to the emotional and behavioural well-being of left-behind children. Zhang (2018) also emphasizes the importance of protecting left-behind children at the community level. These studies show that left-behind children do not merely suffer from parental migration, but also from deterioration of their social broader environment due to labour migration. Improving the community environment may offset the negative impacts of parental absence due to labour migration on left-behind children.

Scholars also take these children's dynamic living context into consideration. Based on in-depth interviews with returned migrant children from Hubei province, Koo, Ming, and Tsang (2014) point out that the "new" left-behind children often suffer from "double disadvantages". The "new" left-behind children or returned migrant children refer to those children who grow up in cities but have returned to their place of origin to prepare for higher education due to the constraints of the hukou system. "Double disadvantage" thus means that their access to higher education is blocked in cities while at the same time there are a variety of difficulties with their re-integrating

to their hometown environment. Likewise, Ling's research (2017) revealed that the Hu Kou system did not make homes anywhere for children of migrant workers, and indicated that they 'suffer discomfort, disorientation and even despair' (p. 737). However, the mainstream discourse depicts these children's journeys to return to their registered hometown as unproblematic and taken-for-granted. These studies imply that the difficulties that left-behind children encounter in life are often caused by social institutions and national policies. Intervention and protection measures for left-behind children should not only focus on the local community environment but also consider the institutional environment at the national level.

Worth mentioning is that there have emerged qualitative studies concerning left-behind children's subjective experiences and agency. Huang (2010), for example, explores how rural left-behind children interpret the city images in mass media. He finds that left-behind children's interpretations of city images show either recognition or a denial of city culture, which suggests the multi-layered cultural identity of left-behind children. Zhang (2015) employs an ethnographic approach to ascertain the everyday life of children of migrant workers. She reveals how children, during different family moves, constantly negotiate a sense of belonging and form their own strategies to interact with the new living environment. Likewise, Murphy (2014) examines left-behind children's lives on a day-to-day basis and argues that children and their parents could overcome the separation-induced challenges by placing children's educational futures as a point of daily communication and the main purpose

of life. In her recent book *The Children of China's Great Migration* (2020), Murphy considers left-behind children as “participants in multilocal parent-child striving teams” (p. 219). She points out that the left-behind children cannot only recognize parental migration as a sacrifice but also would like to strive with their families on the route to securing a better future through diligence in study and helpfulness at home.

Notably, two doctoral works draw attention to children’s agency and challenge the stability of the notion of “left-behind children”. Lu (2011) comes up with two inspiring thoughts in his work. First, the negative effects of parental migration can cumulatively constitute a negative ‘trajectory’, through which momentum for change would develop too. Second, left-behind children and their parents are not always vulnerable to adverse environments. Instead, they are able to develop strategies to cope with plights and difficulties in life. Xiao (2014) offers a more comprehensive description of the second point. By examining left-behind children’s living experiences from the children’s own perspective, she argues that left-behind children can exercise agency and negotiate ambivalent experiences while living with parental migration.

These qualitative studies have made some up for the deficiency of quantitative studies in depicting the comprehensive life picture of left-behind children. However, they do not take a further step to explore how children view themselves. In their research, we often find that left-behind children give new meanings and interpretations to the world

around them. Understandably, we can speculate that children's views of themselves may also not be limited to what the concept of rural left-behind children signifies in academic and media languages. It necessitates new research to answer the unknown question of how rural left-behind children re-imagine, redefine, and re-identify 'self'.

2.3 Short Conclusion of literature review

The reviewed literature on children and childhood studies shows how paradigms have developed and redeveloped to study the sociology of childhood and for childhood research. Its standpoints inform that the claim of left-behind children can be a product of social construction. In other words, left-behind children as a group should be addressed as a diverse demographic rather than fixed and immutable. Although left-behind children in public discourse have been often portrayed as victims and as passive, with a social construction approach we can assume that left-behind children might experience completely different childhoods in different contexts and historical periods. Additionally, the new sociology of childhood also encourages us to attend to children's agency to act on their own social lives, because children can be active social actors with the agency to create and interpret the world in their own ways.

This analysis of Chinese studies on rural left-behind children suggests that the majority of research on China's rural left-behind children aligns with the dominant framework of thinking of childhood. The quantitative studies, whether they take this problematic perspective or not, often involve the presupposed normality of childhood and a healthy

mode of child development. These studies often suggest that left-behind children are experiencing a deviant path or a dysfunctional development and thus should be helped to adapt to the norms and orders of adult society. In other words, the academic construction of rural left-behind children has not fully attended to children's own voices. Although there have been several studies starting to pay attention to children's subjective experiences and their exercise of agency, little do we know how rural left-behind children perceive themselves. On top of that, if the label of rural left-behind children is a product of social construction, and is something external to children, then how we understand them becomes a crucial issue. Given this, this study aims to remove the constraints of social construction on China's rural left-behind children and further explore their identity through their own perspectives.

Chapter 3 Taking the Post-structuralism Perspective to Understand Identity

To explore how “rural left-behind children” view themselves, this study turns to post-structuralism as a theoretical toolkit. Post-structuralism refers to a series of perspectives concerned with “the operation of language, the production of meaning, and the ways in which knowledge and power combine to create accepted or taken-for-granted forms of knowledge and social practices” (Given 2008, p667). It is crucial to deploy post-structuralism ideas to examine the ways we speak and write about “rural left-behind children”, as this framework reminds us that when we, as adults (e.g., researchers, journalists, policymakers, teachers, and parents) refer to “rural left-behind children” we use words and concepts largely produced by an adult-centred reality that undermines, devalues, or distorts children’s perspectives. This study begins by using post-structuralist ideas to ask how children's perspectives are sidelined by the language we use. Then, it will explore how children find ways to express their feelings, perceptions, and expectations in everyday life.

3.1 The post-structuralism perspective

Although post-structuralism is a broad and not easily defined concept, at its core it should be understood as a subversion of or an objection to structuralism (Fawcett, 2008). In structuralism’s heyday, thinkers tended to see the social world as a linguistic phenomenon. In structuralist thought, language is not a reflection of the world but something independent of and shapes our social world. Saussure, considered one of

the founders of structuralism, posits that language should be studied as a separate entity, meaning that the internal structures of language, rather than its links to an external reality, should be the object of intellectual inquiry. In his view, even though people use different words (signifiers) to denote a concept (the signified), there always exists a 'principle' that restricts the arbitrariness of a sign (Saussure, 2011). Lévi-Strauss expands upon this idea by pointing out that a certain structure also underlies the human mind and social arrangement (Lévi-Strauss, 1955). This fixed structure can be observed and demonstrated by reducing complex human cultures into concise iterations and formulas.

While structuralists concentrate on the fixed structure of language and human society, post-structuralists move away from this focus in various ways. Post-structuralists realize that structuralism's concentration on linguistic structure engenders a gesture toward the universalist and meta narratives, suggesting the possibility of accommodating all ways of accounting for the truths of the world. Although this is not necessarily the intention of structuralists, post-structuralist thinkers are keenly aware of this trend and thus turn to the unresolvable fluidity and variability of language and meaning. Though neither may personally regard themselves as post-structuralists, the ideas of Foucault and Derrida are influential and extremely relevant to post-structuralist ideas.

Contrary to Saussure, whose work devalues the link between the signified and the

signifier, Derrida appreciates the arbitrariness of the signifier and the signified and stresses that one concept (the signifier) can never be identical to another (the signified) (Derrida, 1978). For Derrida, the popularity of structuralism brings about various binary oppositions that are influential to all concepts and frameworks. These binary oppositions are not just structural but essentially hierarchical, positioning one extreme of the opposition as superior to the other. Thus, meaning comes to be fixed and static. Derrida, however, maintains that meaning is always changeable and fluid, because “the signified will be altered by the various chains of signifiers in which it is entangled” (Sarup, p 34). With this, he introduces the idea of deconstruction.

Deconstruction is in essence “a theory and method of reading and analytic inquiry that aims to undermine the logic of opposition within texts” (Gough, 2008). To deconstruct is not to demolish or destroy, but rather to make the dual opposition within a concept to constantly re-establish itself, by which process new meanings are generated. Doing so is possible because, as Derrida insists, the context that allows the interpretation of text is endless in the social world. If a text is constantly contextualized and re-contextualized, then its binary opposition, along with the belief system and values based on the opposition, can be doubted and deconstructed. Eventually, a fresh look at an old concept is obtained.

Language analysis, in this way, shifts from seeking fixed structure to exploring the interactions between the reader and the text in endless contexts. Derrida’s idea of

deconstruction also draws my attention to what Johnson calls “noise”— namely what our taken-for-granted cultural and cognitive schemas disregard or exclude (Salusinsky, 1987, p. 81). To deconstruct is therefore to notice the “noise”, because “noise” contains alternative meanings that destabilize the meanings endowed by the “dominant voice”. In this study, I will treat children's voices as this “noise”, which constantly buzzes in the corners where adult discourse and power cannot reach.

Foucault’s emphasis on language primarily lies in his discussion of discourse. In the linguistic sense, discourse is the study of written and spoken communications, and discourse analysis refers to the analysis of the meaning of talk or text. What Foucault calls discourse, however, is very different. Instead of focusing on the meaning of language, Foucauldian discourse analysis often concentrates on “the power inherent in language and seeks to understand how historically and socially instituted sources of power construct the wider social world through language” (Given, 2008, p. 217). In Hall’s words, Foucault’s interest is not in language but in “the production of knowledge through language” (Hall, 1997, p. 44) and “the discourse as a system of representation” (Hall, 1997, p. 44). Discourse in this way refers to the frameworks in which the ways people think of an issue and conduct social practice.

This leads to Foucault’s discussion of power and knowledge. Foucault points out that knowledge is never related to objective truth but rather is historically constructed when the conditions of knowledge generation allow. This means that what we take for

grant is actually made “true” through “progressive exclusion, institutionalization and subjection to expert knowledge of a group of people” (Power, 2011, p. 37), and behind this historical process is the workings of power. To Foucault, power and knowledge can directly inform one another (1995). Thus, what we think of as truth is just a ‘regime of truth’, in which power determines the subject, object, and relationship between the two.

To do discourse analysis is, therefore, to identify how “a discourse ‘rules in’ certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself” (Hall, 1997, p. 44) and how it simultaneously “rules out”, “limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it” (Hall, 1997, p. 44). Thus, we may explore how the language used by experts and institutions subordinates and marginalizes the views of disadvantaged groups and thus govern their thoughts and conduct. We may also be interested in how vulnerable groups initiate resistance within discourse, as discourse, according to Foucault, is not only “an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault 1990b, p. 101). This interest in language as a form of resistance by children in Chinese contexts is demonstrated in other studies (e.g., Hadley, 2003). In the present study, the mainstream discourse used to explain left-behind children’s lives is key to understanding how power operates and who is authorized to produce knowledge for childhood and child development.

Derrida and Foucault thus provide insightful approaches to deconstructing the binary oppositions inside concepts and the power behind the language. Both the idea of deconstruction and the Foucauldian discourse and power are instructive tools to examine the language that we are using to depict, interpret, and account for the situations of “rural left-behind children”. In what follows, I will discuss how I will apply these theoretical tools in this study.

3.2 Deconstructing the adult-centred socialization

Inspired by the idea of deconstruction, this study will problematize the categorizations that adult society imposes on children, as well as the values and meanings attached to those categories. Categories can be a vital means for socializing children since they reflect mainstream social norms and the values of a certain worldview. As the short story in the introduction shows, Principal Zhong sustains the traditional hierarchical relationship between adults and children by categorizing students as “good” and “bad” depending on their obedience to adults. The concept “left-behind children” also involves the logic of binary opposition, which is inherently hierarchical. It presents oppositions, for instance, between “rural” and “urban”, “left-behind” and “non-left-behind”, and “child” and “adult”.

However, insisting on the categorization of children by adults or adult society may lead to the risk of oversimplifying children’s living experiences and subjective

perceptions. For instance, Xing disagrees not only with Principal Zhong's classification of him as a "bad child", but also with the grounds of this classification. As for the term rural left-behind children, many researchers have noticed that children may have very different childhood experiences of being left behind or migrant, being with or without a parent(s), or dwelling in urban or rural areas at different stages of life. Likewise, Xiang (2007) points out that the word "left" in the English context is quite passive, denoting that children's living status results from parents' choices. In contrast, "*liu shou*" in Chinese contexts delivers a positive meaning since it means "stay and hold the fort" (Xiang, 2007).

Moreover, to say children are "rural" is to impose a dual-city framework (Bridge and Watson, 2011) on their identity, which ignores the fact that the boundary between the urban and the rural is increasingly blurred with the urbanization and mobility of the rural population. The children who hold a rural household registration do not mean they lived in rural areas in real life. Many of today's "rural left-behind children" are in fact born and grow up in cities. These children exemplify Derrida's deconstructionist idea that the specific complicated contexts of life render categorizations insufficient to capture real situations. Therefore, to deconstruct is to stop thinking through binary frameworks and to liberate the varied meanings that the children perceive in and draw from their own experiences.

Applying a Foucauldian approach, this study focuses on how adult-centred

socialization governs the minds and bodies of children in a way that seems to be “obvious, necessary and self-evident” (Lawler, 2015, p. 70). Particularly, this study examines how devices of disciplinary power work on children’s bodies on the ground of discourse on child development. In Foucault’s influential work “*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*” (1995, p123), he uncovers discipline as a new technological power concerned with the smallest and the most specific aspects of an individual’s body, making individuals obey without bearing physical abuse. When people are trained by the mechanism of disciplinary power and take the consequent discourse as “truth”, they internalize disciplinary subjectivities and thus becomes “docile bodies”, serving the new economics, politics and warfare of the modern age (Foucault, 1995, p.121). This new form of power, according to Foucault, can be found in places such as hospitals, military barracks, and of course, schools (Foucault, 1995, p.123).

It is the location of the school that this study will focus on as it examines the powers imposed on “rural left-behind children”. This study will pay particular attention to how schools regulate time and space, classify children, surveil children’s bodies and behaviors, and impose rules to deprive children of the right to expression. This study also concerns the discourses embedded in the conversations between children and adults by exploring how adult discourse renders techniques of discipline acceptable and reinforces its power over children. Based on empirical data gathered from the field, the study summarizes how adult-centred socialization through institutional

discipline suppresses children's perspective.

However, this study is also concerned with the competing discourse: that although the term "adult-centred" appears opposite to "child-centred", in fact adult-centred discourse itself may not be coherent. Prout (2011) points out that, socialization can bear competing expectations and divergent values, rendering inconsistent and incompatible the micro-practices of socialization. Thus, it is important to understand how children try to find coherence and make sense of these micro-practices of socialization (Christensen & Prout, 2004). This study utilizes Foucault's thoughts on discourse, knowledge, and power. It should be noted that deconstructing power is not to deny the impacts of objective reality on children but to ensure that children's perspectives of the material world are acknowledged, respected, and heard.

3.3 From deconstruction to the de-centred subject.

By deconstructing the concepts and powers that function in adult-centred society we can better understand children's identities. Despite substantial definitional confusion in the literature, identity is most usually understood as the ways we see ourselves and are viewed by others (Wu, 2011) or as "our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are" (Danielewics, 2011, p. 10). These definitions suggest that the composition of identity is twofold: the identity of the "self", which stays fundamentally the same of individual over one's lifetime, and the identity of society, which over time can be reconstructed, renegotiated, and changed. Identity can also be

understood as an integration of the two parts, through which we may know “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000, p. 5).

However, this understanding of identity is not tenable from a post-structuralist perspective. Hall goes into more detail on the two facets of identity by proposing the concepts of the enlightenment subject and the sociology subject. For the enlightenment subject, identity is the essential centre of the self. It assumes that this centre “consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born and unfolded with it while remaining essentially the same - continuous or “identical” with itself - throughout the individual’s existence”. Identity’s definition of who you are remains stable, and the “centre of self” determines an individual’s full humanity. In contrast, the sociology subject involves the social part of identity. Influenced by symbolic interactionists, including G.H. Mead (2015) and C.H. Cooley (2017), here identity shifts its focus from the centre, or the “inner core”, to the social interactions that produce meaning for one’s identity. In this sense, Hall argues that the sociology subject “still has an inner core or essence that is ‘the real me,’ but this is formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds ‘outside’ and the identities which they offer” (1992, p.276).

Hall (1992, p. 275) further explains a third approach, the post-structuralist approach,

to understanding the notion of identity. This approach shifts focus from identity to subjectivity, the latter of which is more expansive, multifaceted and dynamic than the former (Cockain 2012, p. 10). It asks how subjects are 'made' by taking up subject positions. For example, Barker (2004, p.194) addresses the notion of the subject as thus: "subjects emerge because of the prior existence of discursive positions which individuals then occupy and position themselves within." Likewise, for Guilfoyle (2016), the term "subject position" suggests that "people make sense of who they are by locating themselves within culturally circulating discourses and narratives." In other words, one's sense of self is not achieved by distinguish oneself from others but rather realized through learned categories and the discursive practices that attach meaning to those categories. The self is thus "positioned" in line with the "truth" produced by power/ knowledge.

However, there can be multiple selves since there could be different subject positions. Weedon (1987) points out the poststructuralist subjectivity possesses "precarious, contradictory and in-process" (p. 33). This reveals how the concept identity has evolved from having an inner core to being multi-dimensional and fluid. Hall (1992, p. 275) proposed the notion of the "postmodern subject" to grasp this characteristic. In his view, the post-modern subject is very much "fragmented, composed, not of a single, but several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities" (p. 276). The shift toward this sort of subject should be attributed to our post-modern era in which the structures of human society have been fundamentally changed. Many theorists

have put forward different views on the differences between post-modern society and traditional society. Their discussions often start by acknowledging the process of change known as “globalization”. Giddens (1990, p.4), for example, regards social transformation as the discontinuities between traditional societies and modern societies. David Harvey (1989, p.12) sees it instead as ruptures and fragmentations *within* modernity. As for Laclau (1990, p.40), social transformation constitutes the shift from seeing society as producing itself through evolutionary change from within itself to the one that is de-centred or dislocated by forces outside itself. No matter how the theorists conceive of social transformation, one thing is certain: the traditional concept of identity is no longer tenable.

Hall elaborates that the subject who once inhabited a relatively stable social environment is now experiencing a fundamental break between “the subjective conformity” and “objective needs” of culture because of structural and institutional changes. As a result, the post-modern subject emerges with the basic post-modern feature of decentralization. The post-modern subject bears a range of different identities; more importantly, these identities are “detached—dis-embedded from a specific time, space, histories and traditions and appear ‘free-floating’”. This means that, in a globalized world, no matter how a particular culture tries to impose a centre on one’s identity, temporally assembling it into a unified form, people always possess a collection of different “subject positions” that are open to reassembly. Given this, identity is a process of becoming rather than a stable and fixed structure with a

defined centre. Hall (1992, p. 277) elaborates this as follows:

“If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or "narrative of the self" about ourselves (see Hall, 1990). The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy; Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily”.

Applying this idea to the present study, adult-centred socialization constitutes an imposed path for children growing up and pre-assumes a “centre” for children that can be trained, educated, disciplined, and developed to meet social needs. Such a centre is constituted by a series of adult-centred discourses, including the term with which we are currently concerned: “rural left-behind children”. this “centre” is bound to exclude other identities, even the identities that are very important to children themselves.

However, as the idea of the post-modern subject implies, in the post-modern era any attempt to impose a “centre” on others is futile. This also applies to “rural left-behind children”. Yun Xiang Yan (2008, p. 9; 2010, p. 510) maintains that China “simultaneously demonstrates pre-modern, modern, and late modern conditions and Chinese individual must deal with all of these conditions simultaneously”. Some

empirical studies (e.g., Peng, 2017; Han, 2021) on returning migrant women also note that traditional values and modern values coexist in today's Chinese rural society. It may be too early to state that rural China has entered a post-modern era. Still, the post-structuralist discussion on the diversity, fluidity, fragmentation, and even identity contradiction inspires us to understand left-behind children as living in a time of globalization, industrialization, and profound social change. Thus, this study considers the “de-centred subject” rather than the “post-modern subject” to emphasize that “rural left-behind children” may possess multiple selves and fluid identities and to avoid identifying rural China as a post-modern society.

A new understanding of left-behind children demands that we consider how children define their own identities, albeit temporarily. In other words, adopting the idea of the de-centred subjects does not mean dismissing children’s agency. Instead, decentralization relies on children’s ability to perceive, interpret, and understand what the world means to them. When children exert agency to understand what a “bad student” or “good student” means to them, the adult-centred discourse’s attempts to impose a “centre” are rendered fruitless. In essence, it is not the children’s perspective or the adults’ perspective that is deconstructed, but rather the power that attempts to comprise a false “centre” for children.

Thus, a positive attitude toward the new era is maintained by applying the post-structuralist perspective to examine children's own perspectives. As Hall (1992)

uncovers, the post-modern subject not only “unhinges the stable identities of the past, but it also opens up the possibility of new articulations – the forging of new identities, the production of new subjects” (p. 279). This is consistent with the new sociology of childhood that advocates for attending to children’s voices. In sum, by using the theoretical toolkit of post-structuralism to understand children’s identities, we can analyze how adult societies or institutions (such as schools) use power and discourse to produce subject positions, or what this study calls “centred identities”, for so-called “left-behind children”. Not only that, but we can also distinguish these subject positions or “centred identities” from the children’s views of themselves, instead taking children as “de-centred subjects” that can evade imposed “centred identities”.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter has three purposes. First, it explains why this study adopts ethnography to explore left-behind children's subjective understandings of their lives and of themselves. This is followed by a detailed introduction of the selected research methods, data collection and sampling, wherein the feasibility of the research plan and its multiple methods (participant observation, photo-elicitation and in-depth interviews) are detailed. Then comes a reflection on ethical issues. In this section, the common ethical issues of conducting social research and the special ethical difficulty of conducting research with children are carefully considered. The solutions to these challenges include employing informed consent, confidentiality and contextual flexibility.

4.1 Rationale for the qualitative approach and ethnography

The research focus on children's subjective understanding entails employing interpretivism as a theoretical stance and ethnography as a methodological one. A qualitative approach allows us to maintain consistency with interpretivism. As a theoretical stance, interpretivism provides sets of beliefs and principles about ontology—the nature of knowledge—and epistemology—the way to obtain that knowledge—which in turn informs the choice of methodology and research methods (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Rooted in the works of Max Weber, interpretivism contends that social science should focus on the meanings and interpretations that

social actors give to the world rather than focusing on human behaviors as causes and effects (O'Reilly, 2009). For Weber, central to social sciences is to *verstehen* or interpretively understand the actions of human beings. Therefore, the interpretive process stresses that the outside observer of a culture should interpret the culture from the point of view of its insiders rather than from the observers' own cultural vantage point (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe., 2010, p.964). In this light, interpretivism implies an opposing standpoint to positivism. While most proponents of positivism tend to use a quantitative approach to generate universal laws and objective knowledge of the social world (Hammersley, 2013; Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006), the supporters of interpretivism usually apply a qualitative approach to obtain knowledge of the social world by understanding the interpretations and meanings given to it by people (Bryman, 2012; Seale, 2004). As discussed before, since the focus of this study is left-behind children's subjective interpretations of their worlds, and it is firmly believed that children should be treated similarly to adult subjects as able to "appreciate the structural circumstances in which they find themselves, take account of their goals and thereby understand their actions" (Jones, 1993, p. 67-68). The desired knowledge is interpretive, therefore cannot be objectively measured or determined by certain causal relationships. Rather, it should recognise left-behind children's subjective experiences, agency and competency, reflecting the complexity of social relationships and helping articulate children's voices. Drawing on interpretivism, this research pursues a holistic understanding of the social world from the eyes of left-behind children and therefore truly respects their subjectivities.

There is also inherent consistency between interpretivism, the qualitative approach, and the choice of ethnography. As O'Reilly (2009) noted, "ethnography is often described as interpretivist, or at least as anti-positivist" (p. 119). Van Maanen (2011) further points out that the interpretivist stance is relevant both during the researcher's data collection and during their discussion and presentation of their work. According to Van Maanen, ethnographic research pertains not only to how researchers record the interpretations of "insiders" in the field but also to how they "adequately display the culture (or, more commonly, parts of the culture) in a way that is meaningful to readers without great distortion" (Van Maanen 2011, p.13). Since my research responsibility is not just to describe children's inner worlds but also to render it comprehensible to individuals outside the given society, ethnography is the most appropriate methodology for this study.

Besides, ethnography also informs research methods that align with features of interpretivism and qualitative research (Crotty, 1998). Henn et al. (2006p. 14) write, "interpretive paradigm is associated with unstructured qualitative methods, including participant observation and depth interviews". Participant observation is the key ingredient of ethnography, which often requires researchers to engage with "everyday activities related to an area of social life to study an aspect of that life through the observation of events in their natural contexts" (Given, 2008, p. 599). In the definition of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), ethnographic research is an interpretive

act of detailed or ‘thick’ descriptions, through which the ‘structures of signification’ that inform people’s actions can be analyzed. Though nowadays ethnography has been differently and broadly applied in social sciences (James, 2001), according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), several basic features of ethnography can be identified:

1. the research process is developed in everyday contexts; the researcher works with participants for an extended period of time to understand how they conduct their everyday lives.

2. data are mainly gathered through participant observation, unstructured interviews, and other sources; the focus is often small-scale, and the fieldwork is quite intensive and detail based.

3. data analysis is expected to provide a comprehensive and in-depth view of the participants and the settings through which the meanings, motivations, functions and consequences of human behavior can be understood; more importantly, this understanding must somehow bear implications in wider contexts.

To be sure, choosing ethnography as this research’s methodology is informed by the philosophical stance, my research questions, and the nature of doing and reporting research. Based on the aforementioned features, ethnography has at least four

advantages for achieving my research objectives. First, ethnography contributes to the argument that childhood is a social construction (James, 2001). By emphasizing children's accounts within specific contexts, ethnographic work can reveal the varied constructions of childhood across time and space, which may break through the mainstream idea that children share a universal, rational and natural childhood (James and Prout, 2005). Second, ethnography requires researchers to conduct research 'with' rather than 'on' participants. This ensures the central role of children in the research and respects them as "competent interpreters of the social world" (James, 2001). Ethically, regarding children as full research participants offers them agency in their own characterization. Third, ethnography can encompass a range of qualitative methods, and each method can yield a different facet of social reality. This study recognizes that left-behind children's perspectives on and interpretations of the social world can be mutable and inconsistent, and their identities fluid and multifaceted. Containing the merits and strengths of different research methods, ethnography enables this study to reveal different views of the left-behind children's inner worlds and present the heterogeneity of childhood. Finally, ethnography allows the study to bridge the 'emic' and 'etic' understandings of left-behind children. The 'emic' refers to the insider's view of reality in social sciences and humanities, while the 'etic' is the external social or scientific perspective on reality (Fetterman, 2008). Since ethnography focuses on everyday life rather than on the uncommon or unusual (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), it makes it possible to learn left-behind children's language, behaviors and interactions from the 'emic', or the perspective of children.

However, when the knowledge of the ‘emic’ generates new concepts that are rendered accessible to adults and children *outside* the studied field, the ‘etic’ is achieved too (Boyle, 1994). In this way, the ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ are well bridged in ethnographic research, which can help this study produce a deeper understanding of how left-behind children in given contexts experience their own cultures and themselves.

It is noteworthy that though ethnography has its roots in the discipline of anthropology, the method has been adopted more broadly across a number of contingent disciplines, which has resulted in it losing much of its original meaning (Ingold, 2014). Taking time into consideration, this study will not be conducted in strict accordance with the tradition of ethnography, which often requires researchers to immerse themselves in faraway and radically different cultural environments for a year or longer (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Instead, this study conducts ethnography in a flexible way. It divides the fieldwork into several short phases, each aimed at dealing with specific problems and involving different levels of immersion. This study maximizes the strengths of ethnography within the available timeframe.

4.2 Research site and context

The selection of the research site and population for research depends upon the research questions (Fetterman, 1998) and the possibility of accessing and building rapport with the potential participants. The fieldwork in this study is conducted at a rural boarding school, called the Dream School, in G county of Henan province.

There are several reasons for choosing the Dream School as the research site.

- Henan province is one of the major sending provinces of migrant workers (Wu, Yang, Li, & Zhao, 2018), so it hosts large numbers of children left behind by these migrant workers. In 2013, Henan Province registered the largest population of left-behind children in China (All-China Women's Federation, 2013). Statistics from 2016 also reported that one in five middle school students in Henan province is identified as a rural left-behind child (Henan Statistics Bureau & Henan General Team of Investigation under the NBS, 2017).
- G county has the largest population of rural migrant workers living outside the Henan Province (Qiang, 2016; Wu and Zhou, 2013).. Although there are no detailed statistics on left-behind children, the County Civil Affairs Bureau estimate that there are at least 160,000 left-behind children in the county. G county has also been long identified as a poverty-plagued county. Its rural districts have a large population of migrant workers and left-behind children.
- School is an ideal access point to meet a wide range of rural left-behind children. Connections established with the middle school would make it easier to not only contact with left-behind children within the school, but also expand contacts for interviews and observations outside of school. In addition, since most rural children are sent to rural boarding schools (I will explain this later), choosing a boarding school as a research site is most fitting for observing children's daily

lives for an extended period of time. It is thus convenient for observing how students handle the tension between the school's expectations of them and their perceptions of themselves.

- Because my previous research work was carried out in this same vicinity over the last three years, I have developed good skills in and knowledge of data collection in L Town. The personal network I have built there and the understandings I have gained about their culture and dialect facilitated my entry into a local middle school. These experiences have also allowed me to be familiar with how to get along with school children.
- Finally, the Dream School is a privately run school (*sili xuexiao*). This gave its administrators more autonomy and freedom than those in the public schools (*gongli xuexiao*) such as the First Middle School of L town. Because of this, I could directly reach out to the students through the approval of the school principals and administrators. I had two local friends from my previous research work; one was a relative of Principal Zhong, and the other was a good friend of Principal Zhong's youngest son. With their endorsements of my research, it was much easier for me to enter the Dream School than the First Middle School.

L town is situated in northern G county in Henan Province, 19 kilometers from the county seat and 448 kilometers from the capital city of Henan province, Zheng Zhou. Since Henan is located in central China, migrant workers can easily move north (to Beijing), east (to Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang) or south (to Guangdong). Henan

therefore has become widely recognized as the most important source of rural-urban labor migration in China. In 2016, 85% of migrant workers from Henan province sought jobs in the above cities or provinces (Henan General Team of Investigation under the NBS, 2021).

L Town is 73.4 square kilometers large and consists of 15 administrative villages and a community centre. Its economy is agriculturally based, with only a few small factories manufacturing woodworks and bricks. Four main streets—Wen Hua (Culture) Street, Jiao Yu (Education) Street, Min Ren (Celebrity) Street and Village Street 009—along with several side streets comprise its central community. One can find small grocery stores, shops, supermarkets, family-run restaurants, two wangba (Internet bars), and public institutions. The state-run primary school and the state-run middle schools are located at the community centre. In terms of transportation, the main Provincial Road 204 runs across the township, while the railway station is over 50 kilometers away. In general, L town provides very few non-agricultural jobs, and its public transportation is inconvenient. Understandably, most local residents have to seek better jobs elsewhere to support their families. In 2016, L town had a population of 50,974. The annual net income per capita of rural residents was 9,978 Yuan (Gushi Chorography Research Office, 2019), which was less than its provincial average of 11,696.74 Yuan (Henan Statistics Bureau & Henan General Team of Investigation under the NBS, 2017) and less than the national average of 12,363.40 Yuan (National Bureau of Statistics, PRC, 2017). Migrant workers from L town were mainly

employed in manufacturing, construction, waste-recycling and unskilled service sectors. Similar employment patterns are found across the whole province, with 27% of rural migrants working in manufacturing, 26.7% in construction and 10.3% in domestic service, repair and other services (Henan General Team of Investigation under the NBS, 2021).

As shown in Picture 1, the privately run school, the Dream School, is around 2 kilometers away from town centre and next to the major Provincial Road 204. It was established in 2001 and now consists of primary and secondary divisions. The secondary division, or the middle school, includes grades 7, 8 and 9; grade 9 consists of 3 classes while grades 7 and 8 consist of 2 classes. In each class, a head teacher (ban zhuren) is tasked with disciplining, caring for, and supervising the students. As Picture 2 shows, a four-story-high teaching building (Building B) and a five-story-high teaching building (Building C), respectively, are used for middle school teaching and primary school teaching. The old teaching building (Building A) lies idle for the time. The primary school students and the secondary school students share a large playground. The students in grade 7 often use the small basketball court next to the old teaching building. According to teachers, over 90% of secondary school students board at the campus, with 10% registered as ‘full boarding’, meaning they stay at the campus for the whole semester. The remaining 90% are ‘half boarding’ students who normally return to their grandparents’ home or other relative’s home once a week.

Picture 1. The L Town's layout and the location of the Dream School.



Picture 2. Three teaching buildings of the Dream School.



It should be noted that when I went to the Dream School in 2018, Building C, as well

as the playground in front of Building C, were still under construction. Building B was used as the teaching building for the primary school students. This meant that the middle school students had to be taught in crowded and stark classrooms in Building A, and there was no standard playground for the students to exercise and play. This also indicates that the rural schools were under rapid development, exposing their inner spaces to different features and conditions, which will be described in greater detail later.

The Dream School is widely considered by the local residents as a privately run school (*sili xuexiao*) as opposed to a public or state-run school (*gongli xuexiao*), which is known as the First Middle School. A senior school administrator at the Dream School told me that the Dream School was initially established on a small piece of land owned by Principal Zhong's family. Later, Principal Zhong began to purchase surrounding farmlands from other villagers to expand his school grounds. Thus, the local residents, teachers and even many children I met tended to see the Dream School land as the private asset of Principal Zhong and his family.

Contrary to the reality that privately operated migrant schools in cities are generally worse than urban public schools (Koo, 2014), the Dream School is often seen by L Town's residents as more attractive than the First Middle School. This can be evidenced by the number of students at the Dream School and at the First Middle School. In 2019, the Dream School had more than 600 students, while the First

Middle School had fewer than 200 students, even though the latter had more teachers. There are two main reasons for this trend. First, as I will elaborate in Chapter 6, a local policy called “民办公助” (the private capital operates, the public finance supports) stimulated the thriving of private schools in G County, which resulted in teachers in private schools having almost equal qualifications as those in the public schools. Therefore, parents felt little difference between sending their children to the Dream School and the public school. In addition, the Dream School provides a school bus service, which made children’s transportation to and from their grandparents’ or other relatives’ homes on weekends convenient and safe. Due to financial constraints and safety considerations, however, the First Middle School was not able to provide such service during my time in the field. This prompted most migrant parents to send their children to the Dream School instead of the First Middle School.

4.3 Research design: methods, process, sampling and reflexivity

The main concern of research design is how my ethnographic work can be conducted soundly and practically. Design considerations include what methods will be used, how they will work together to achieve the research goal, and at what stage these methods will be conducted to achieve the coherence and integration of this study. The following section will enumerate the strategies used to work out these problems, and a description of sampling will be detailed.

4.3.1 Data collection methods

In this study, three qualitative research methods—participant observation, photo-

elicitation, and in-depth interviews—are used to collect data with the guidance of ethnography. These methods will follow an analytic-inductive approach or a ‘research-then-theory’ approach, which means that the research methods are designed to understand particular social issues with relatively broad research questions rather than to examine a predetermined hypothesis (Henn et al., 2006). This study then used multiple triangulation to combine the three methods. This suggests that data collection in this study can be derived from various sources and in different forms, which in turn can promote the evolution of a theory. Choosing multiple triangulation also fits my theoretical preference for post-structuralism or post-modernism, because multiple triangulation can bring about research accounts that reflect the diversity and complexity of the studied issue. This aligns with postmodernism's argument that ‘there should be multiple standards for understanding the social worlds’ (Denzin, 2015).

Participant observation

Participant observation is the primary tool for ethnographic research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The main idea is that the ethnographer immerses themselves in the daily life of the informants for an extended period, directly observing behaviors and learning language, listening to what is said, asking questions, and reflecting, after which the ethnographer can take rich fieldnotes to generate a detailed description of informants’ actions as well as their culture (Bryman, 2012). In the present study, I choose a rural boarding school as my study base. I lived with boarding students (most

of them left-behind children) for almost one year and gathered data from various aspects of their life. I attended class with them, participated in their after-class and dormitory activities, accompanied them when they back home, and visited their friends and relatives. During this time, I took every opportunity to sincerely introduce my personal background and research experiences and clarify my research, including the purpose of the study, the expected process, and the significance of the study, in language that children and residents could understand. By doing so, I built solid rapport with participants and familiarized myself with the social networks in the studied neighborhood. This method also allowed me to transform the three broad research questions into a variety of insightful and concrete questions and raise them in a culturally sensitive way. These factual questions are then applied to the photo-elicitation program and in-depth interviews. Moreover, through participating in interactions between left-behind children and their classmates, teachers, family members, and other people in the local community, I made sense of their actions and reactions under various specific contexts and thus critically grasped their agency in shaping personal identity.

Photo-elicitation

To understand the child-centred perspective and children's experiences in adult-dominated spaces, the researcher must adopt methods that facilitate free expression by children. Many scholars have found that photo-elicitation interviews (PEI), especially auto-driven PEIs, are suitable for this purpose (Mandleco, 2013). PEI is based on the

simple idea of integrating images into the interview process (Harper, 2002). In particular, participants are provided with cameras to document their environment and experiences. The captured images are used as stimuli or media for participants to convey their thoughts and perceptions in later interviews (Ali-khan & Siry 2014; Clark, 1999). PEIs can break through the ‘frame’ through which researchers interpret the world and empower children to decide what they want to share with researchers (Clark, 1999). PEIs also assist in building rapport and trust and are enjoyable (Capello, 2005; Fischman, 2001).

In this study, PEIs are primarily used to elicit left-behind children’s perceptions and opinions about their living spaces. I give 5 to 7 child participants cameras to take photos to record their daily life in school. Then I interview them, encouraging them to express their feelings and thoughts through their photographs. In this way, I identify the meanings and significance of the scenes from the children’s points of view and understand how children re-portray themselves in the imagined campus space.

Moreover, since some rural “left-behind children” will temporarily go to cities to live with their migrant parent during public holidays, I also encourage voluntary participants to use cameras to record the living environment in cities. This will give this study an excellent opportunity to compare these children’s lives in towns and villages. The participant child can then reflect on the relationship between place identity and the rural-urban dichotomy.

In-depth interview

The in-depth unstructured interview is an appropriate instrument for exploring “left-behind children’s” perceptions of their worlds and themselves. Minichiello (1990) notes that the in-depth interview's focus is “the informant’s perception of self, life, and experience, and expressed in his or her own words.” There are two intentions behind conducting in-depth interviews. The first intention is to explore how children perceive their current lives, particularly their feelings and understandings of the school’s classification, definition, management, supervision, and how they would like to view themselves. Since school is the location of the construction of students’ identities, the main concern is whether the power mechanisms of the school can rewrite the "rural left-behind child" identity into "student" identity so that children can be well positioned in the mainstream socialization channel of schooling. This study also intends to retrace children’s past life experiences and examine whether their childhood experiences can be covered by the definition of “rural left-behind children.” The perspective of the study will therefore broaden from just how children perceive *the school’s* construction of their identities to how they perceive broader *society’s* construction of their identities.

4.3.2 The three stages of fieldwork

The fieldwork conducted at a town-centred boarding school between 2019 and 2020 can be generally divided into three phases. First, a pilot study was carried out between December 15th and December 24th of 2018, during which I built a rapport with the

local people and gathered general information about L Town. With the help of two friends, I got permission to attend a class in a boarding middle school, the Dream School, where nearly 90 percent of students were “left-behind children.” Along with initial observations, I had some simple conversations with students. To my surprise, I found that being a “rural left-behind child” seems not a significant matter to them. Some students recognize themselves as “left-behind children” yet tell me they don’t miss their parents much. Some students do not identify with the left-behind children who are portrayed as miserable and disadvantaged in popular media because they feel generally satisfied with their life. Children’s attitudes towards their lives and parents’ migration prove the need to place their identity at the central loci of analysis. This pilot study enabled me to acquaint myself with gatekeepers such as Principal Zhong’s son, who is in charge of the school management. And because of this, I obtained permission to carry out my fieldwork at the Dream School.

In the second phase, from September 2019 to January 2020, I lived on campus with children and gave lessons to them as a substitute teacher from time to time. I invited 14 children from grade 9 to become my research partners while actively participating in their daily activities. After getting to know the school and general information about the 14 child participants, I invited them to complete the first-wave PEIs with me, during which they presented their opinions on the school space and their imagined self-images. Based on the knowledge gathered from participant observation and PEIs, I posed in-depth interview questions and encouraged each child participant

to share further opinions, subjective feelings, reflections on these questions, or additional essential issues they think were overlooked. Finally, since some children grew up in cities and also spent their 2019/2020 winter vacation in the cities, I encouraged them to use cameras to record their growth environments to better introduce their childhood experience to me when we meet in the new semester.

The third phase of fieldwork ran through the new semester between April 2020 and July 2020, during which I continued my life and research at the Dream School. Since I had established enough trust with the child participants, I began to explore their subjective views on peers, asking whether there had emerged a collective identity or group belongingness. To my surprise, the children did not fully identify with their peers and often even kept their distance from the group of left-behind children as a whole. Based on the accounts of the child participants, I realized that their complex and differing childhood experiences significantly influenced their understanding of their current situations. The childhood memories delivered by the 14 child participants provide insight into their attitudes towards peers, parental presence, and the urban and rural places.

4.3.3 Sampling

This study employs maximum variation sampling to select interviewees. Complete variation sampling is a kind of purposive sampling strategy (Coyne, 1997) that is often used to maximize the coverage of different aspects of the study's focus. In

parallel with this strategy, the sampling will follow the saturation principle to determine its size; that is, the recruitment of interviewees will end when the obtained information is sufficient to analyze the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2018). The maximum variation is employed to highlight the heterogeneity of information, which aligns with the research purposes.

There are four considerations that guide the application of maximum variation sampling. First, the sampling must follow the principle of voluntariness (Lavrakas, 2008, p.953). This means that children's participation must be determined without coercion and without any improper or immoral incentives. Child participants must also be informed of the potential risks (e.g., occupying learning time) or concessions (e.g., an opportunity to voice themselves out) of being involved in the project.

Second, since the term 'left-behind children' is socially constructed, the proposed study won't set any predetermined strict definition of "left-behind children" in its selection of participants. Rather, the sampling pool must reflect the complex and variable meanings of "left-behind children," which means that in recruitment, the children themselves can determine whether they belong to the group of left-behind children or not. Third, as the term "maximum variation" suggests, this study will recruit interviewees with different characteristics and backgrounds to enhance diversity of perspectives gathered from the research questions. In practice, five students (Xing, Sun, Shuhao, Xiao Pang and Bei Bei) were initially recommended by their teachers to participate in the present study. Age, gender, family economic status,

early left-behind/migration experiences, birthplace and personal characteristics were the primary criteria by which teachers recommended child participants. Teachers considered these factors to be related to and representative of the heterogeneity of the group of left-behind children. In addition, I asked students about other factors that they considered important to their identities and perspectives. Based on their opinions, I progressively recruited more children to underline the variation in participants' characteristics, relationships with peers and parents and living arrangements. It must be admitted that recruitment was a process involving continual sample analysis and my personal reflection. For instance, when I realized there was a lack of participants who were less independent, rebellious or outspoken in the sample, I purposively invited Xin Yi, a student who was often seen as introverted and short-spoken by her classmates and teachers, to join my research. I ended the sampling process when both the teachers and the students agreed that the selected participants generally represented all types of students at the school. In total, 14 students participated in this project. Their gender, class, parents' occupation, living arrangement, academic performance, birth place, previous moving experience from city to city and the age of returning hometown were displayed in Appendix 1.

Last but not least, the recruitment of participants also takes into account my access to children's time. The school's weekly schedule and daily timetables are highly structured. Even though I lives on campus, I had only brief interactions with children during sporadic breaks. However, the school expected me to help students in grade 9

prepare for the high school entrance examination, which gave me more chances to interact with grade 9 students. Not only did I often arrange to attend their morning study and evening study sessions, but I also tutored them during lunch breaks, after-evening study sessions, and weekends. Thus, the child participants in this study are all from grade 9. From time to time, I also had simple interviews with some students from grades 7 and 8 to verify the grade-nine students' accounts of their 3-year experiences of learning and living at the Dream School. It turns out that their accounts of the same issues were broadly consistent, with no difference in opinion caused by differences in school dates.

4.3.4 Reflexivity

Reflexivity, in a research context, refers to “the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research” (Davies, 1999, p.4). The effects exist in all aspects of research from the formulation of the project to the dissemination of the results. Realizing this, I consciously keep a reflexive attitude toward my relationships with child participants, my relationships with the adults in L town (if possible), my preset research questions and the specific context in which people's interactions take place.

In particular, when I introduced myself to potential participants, I always shared my early growth experience in rural areas, my migrant status in Hong Kong where I studied and my interests in playing online games and using social platforms. These

similarities provided me and child participants with numerous shared topics and thereby made later discussions easier. Meanwhile, I fully disclosed my curiosity about the differences between people so as to encourage the child participants to talk more about themselves, especially when we held different opinions, perceptions and subjective feelings towards the same issue or when it came to different life experiences. Instead of judging these differences, I always asked them with a humble and learning attitude, questions including: ‘Could I understand what you are saying in this way?’, ‘Could you tell me what that means?’ I also followed-up with statements like, ‘I am really delighted for your trust in me and letting me know this.’ If I found that I had imposed my academic intentions upon them, I sometimes eliminated the seemingly well-organized and structured preset questions and let the child participants speak about what they felt was important to their daily lives. For instance, while I attempted to understand the impact of family separation on these children’s lives, I found that the children I met seemed to hold little interest in their parental migration; however, they were very passionate to share with me how the boarding school made them unhappy and frustrated. Realizing this, I decided to let them say whatever they wanted to say to me, and gradually, I adapted my research questions to relate to their direct concerns of everyday life.

In addition, I informed every participant at the very beginning that I would play different roles (e.g., teacher, researcher or friend) in their daily lives, and they could tell me about their confusion or inability to adapt to my multiple roles at any time and

in any way. When writing field notes, I purposively recorded children's reactions to my different roles and my personal elements (e.g., my social position, gender, cultural perspectives and social background), making it possible to examine how these roles might influence the children's attitudes towards and interaction strategies with me. Insight into these influences helps reduce the possibility of inducing participants, imposing opinions on them or distorting their own voices. However, it should be admitted that complete elimination of the researcher's effect is unrealistic, especially in a long-term and intimate participant observation (Davies, 1999, p. 11). Bourdieu points out that researchers should view their personal knowledge and experiences as irreplaceable analysis resources and draw on reflexivity to transfer these resources into epistemic and existential benefits to research work (Bourdieu 2003:281; Bourdieu 1999:618). Hence, I consider these effects as important resources in facilitating my understanding of the cultural schemes, logic of people's actions and cognitive models that the participants held. For instance, when I found that the children showed little interest in my highly educated and urban background, I was inspired to explore how they interpreted learning and what they thought of the urban-rural dichotomy. In other words, as I began to pay more attention to the children's reactions and perceptions of my positionality, I found it easier for me to make sense of their personal narratives.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Researchers often face various ethical problems in generating knowledge and delivering knowledge (Seale, 2004). Although it is hard to define research ethics, the

values that may guide research are meant to protect everyone from harm caused by the study (Flick, 2018; Homan, 1991). For this research, the conventional practices of informed consent and confidentiality are highlighted to protect involved child participants. In particular, before implementing this project, the proposed plan was approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee (HSESC) of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HSESC Reference Number: HSEARS20200331002). During the implementation of this project, all child participants were treated according to the ethical guidelines of studying human subjects determined by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Considering this study's extended participatory nature and its young subjects, a more serious obligation to ensure research ethics is required. To be specific, close observation and highly personal involvement in ethnographic research might constitute invasions to what the child participants see as their private lives (Ali & Kelly, 2018). Furthermore, the participating children are in a subordinate position in their relationship with me, an adult male researcher, so their actions in front of me might be restrained and their interpretations of the social world may also be distorted (Ali & Kelly, 2018; Morrow and Richards, 1996).

It is widely agreed upon that informed consent must be obtained before any attempts to collect information from the participants. Considering that the participants in this project are children under 16 years old, and their guardians are mostly grandparents

who have difficulties reading, 5 special arrangements are set out.

1. Two sets of informed consent letters were prepared, one for the children and another for their guardians (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). Usually, I tried to get the children's consent first. If the child is 16 or older at the time of the study, they will get the child version of an informed consent letter. If the child is under 16 years old at the study, their guardians will be given the adult version of the informed consent letter.

2. Before inviting children to become my partners, I will take approximately one week to familiarize them with this project and with me. When I invite child participants, I will detail the research project in a language that they can make sense of. Finally, I will give them the child version of the informed consent letter.

3. I usually introduce myself to children's guardians through the help of the headteacher (*ban zhuren*), who is responsible for the care, discipline, and supervision of one class of students beyond his/her regular teaching duties. If the guardians have difficulty reading a letter, I will help explain the content of the informed consent letter and answer their questions at any time.

4. If the children's parent(s) are working or unavailable, I would suggest that the guardians, head teacher, or the child themselves inform the parent(s) of the research

project. I welcome any questions or concerns parents may have and will be accessibly in various ways throughout the project.

5. I would also let the headteacher know who participated my research project after I got consent from children and their guardians. Informed consent is also stressed during the participant observation because participant observation often takes place in public areas where the researchers don't regard participants' activities and emotions as private. Furthermore, since this study insists on children's perspectives and agency, I take De George, Hoffman, and Frederick's argument (2008) on informed consent that child participants maintain the full right to decide what should be revealed and what should remain concealed. Therefore, I constantly seek child participants' opinions about whether and how to make an observation about the gathered data before and during the participant observation.

Confidentiality is carried out in a way that fits in with the specific context. In this study, I took every possible measure to guarantee the confidentiality of my participants' data to protect them from being punished or exploited on account of their participation during and after the research. This involves various strategies to make data anonymous, such as obscuring the names of participants, the school, and the research locations. However, according to the experience of my pilot study, I understand that the challenge that I may face when trying to ensure confidentiality for everyone, because some adults, such as teachers or guardians, may not take children's

privacy seriously and may want to learn the data of the participating children. In these cases, I am willing to empathize with their curiosity and tell them the overall condition of my current study but will frankly tell them my responsibility to ensure the confidentiality of each participant.

One typical case is that of a teacher who wanted to know specific information about one student. I told her frankly that I could not do anything about it (*mei ban fa*) because her inquiry may harm child participants and my research. And since we had already built mutual trust with each other, she is willing to understand my situation and thus she stopped making further inquiries. This experience reflects that the best way to obtain informed consent and confidentiality in the field is to keep my integrity and honesty, showing my complete respect to the participants. By doing so, I can get support and care from them, ensuring that things go smoothly.

Of course, research ethics can also be embodied in this study's epistemology and selected methodology. Morrow and Richards (1996) argue that research's value can be augmented mainly if methodology and ethics can effectively improve each other. This means that the research process should be designed to enable the participating children to influence the research direction consciously. In this sense, children must become my research partners, engaging in the joint effort to construct the research process. This can contribute to the disclosure of their genuine inner worlds. Hence, in-depth interviews are purposively arranged following participant observation and

photo-elicitation interviews to minimize the likelihood of my research questions overriding children's interests and concerns. Finally, the modes of communication should be determined by participant preference. The visual method is mainly used to address this, as the data for the research is collected and interpreted by children themselves. Therefore, the value of the study will be in it giving the child participants a chance to position themselves as individuals with full agency and competency.

Chapter 5 The Living Environment of Left-behind Children

This chapter introduces the environment that the children lived in, paying particular attention to how powers work through these spaces and times. First, I discuss the alterations in the time-space structure of rural schools caused by adjustments in the geographical layout of schools in the whole town. These alterations imply the increase of what Foucault calls a modern form of power that regulates children by subjecting them to disciplinary practices and norms. Then I detail an examination of the time and space within the Dream School. On the one hand, the arrangement of school time and space expresses an intention to strengthen discipline; on the other hand, the use of time and space diminishes the effects of disciplinary power yet says the traditional power possessed by individual adults. Foucault (1980, p. 52) suggests that power and knowledge can inform each other. The coexistence of different forms of power therefore means that children may face a multifaced reality constructed by different knowledge bases. Finally, the last section introduces five modes for left-behind children living at school. It discloses how left-behind children confront different living conditions and adult constraints even in the same school. The complexity of space in the children's micro-practices manifests the heterogeneity, rather than the homogeneity, of the "left-behind" status. It further suggests that individual left-behind children may not necessarily see themselves through the lens that stresses the uniformity of left-behind children group. The multiplicity of realities and the diversity of these children revealed in this chapter are essential backdrops to understanding

children's perspectives, which in turn can pave the way to exploring children's identities in the following chapters.

5.1 The adjustment of the geographical layout of schools in L town

Social space does not merely take “material visual form” as a backdrop to subjects' interactions, but also concerns meaning production, emotional attachment, and social construction (Cresswell, 2015: p9-10; McGregor, 2004). This suggests that space can be an essential entry point to analyzing how children's identities are endowed with meaning and how socially constructed. Moreover, in a Foucauldian sense, the control and division of space and time are entangled with the exercise of disciplinary power (Driver, 1985). In his influential work *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* (1995), for example, Foucault exemplifies how disciplinary power entails that human bodies are continuously supervised, partitioned, analyzed, used, and ranked in a modern structure of time and space, through which individuals come to know themselves as subjects. Considering that the geographical layout of rural schools in China has undergone profound changes in recent years, I first focus on the changed relationship between the school space and the external social space. Specifically, I discuss how rural schools in L town have become more and more detached from the local contexts and how they are politically promoted as features within modern time and space.

In 2019, the year this study was carried out, there were two middle schools and five

primary schools in L Town. Two schools were located in the villages while the other five schools were located around the town centre. However, teachers recalled that there used to be many more schools in L Town. Vice Principal Chen of the Dream School said, “20 years ago, almost every village in L town had its own primary school. In the 1990s, there were even high schools running in several villages. In 2017, there were still three other village-based primary schools operating, but all have now been demolished”. In fact, among the child participants, Xing, Ah Ye, Sun, and Xiao Pang had all experienced transferring from the village-based primary school to the Dream School's primary division and starting boarding life. They recalled that when the primary school in the village was discontinued, they and their schoolmates had to transfer to schools in the town or the county seat. The sharp decline of village-based schools is related to the widespread national movement of “School Closures and Mergers” (*che dian bing xiao*) in the past two decades.

In 2001, China's State Council issued the Decision on the Reform and Development of Basic Education, making it clear that counties should be responsible for managing funds and investment of infrastructure of rural education. To reduce the county's financial burden and improve the quality of rural education, small-sized and underqualified village schools were merged into centre schools in townships, many of which were boarding schools. Since then, the School Closures and Mergers movement has kicked off in China's rural lands. A study conducted by the 21st Century Education Research Institute showed that, between 2000 and 2010, the

number of rural primary schools fell by 229,400, or 52.1 percent, while the number of middle schools fell by 10,600, or more than a quarter (Jin, 2012). Another official statistic report revealed that approximately one-third of rural school students chose to board at school by the end of 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2017). The spread of the School Closures and Mergers Movement in L Town was even faster than other towns and townships of G county. Statistics from the Gushi Statistical Yearbook (Gushi Chorography Research Office, 2020) show that student enrollment in L Town in 2019 was 3,207, comparable to 3,233 and 3,200 in the other two towns of the same county, but that the latter two included double the number of schools of the former.

Tracing the change in the geographical distribution of rural schools in L town can help us understand the relationship between place and children's identities. Cai and Kong (2014) point out that schools are modern products of national arrangements. Rural schools are no longer dominated by regional activities and local cultures but embedded in the rural areas through current institutions' reorganization of time and space. They maintain that rural boarding schools have led to children's "double isolation" in the rural world. Firstly, rural children are isolated from seasonal time divisions. Nowadays, the time structure of the rural school has nothing to do with factors like sunrise/ sunset, farming/slack seasons, and weather. The prescribed timetable strictly regulates the rural school routine. Secondly, rural children are further isolated from situational space. With the School Closures and Mergers movement, rural schools are now separated from the rural communities by walls and

by the geographic distance between the town centre and the surrounding villages (Gao 2012). Even if not boarding at school, children can hardly return to village life every day after school as in the past (Cai & Kong, 2014). They are placed into closed spaces in which their bodies are constantly disciplined, separated, ranked, and surveilled to encourage adaptation to the norms and standards of modern education. Thus, Cai and Kong (2014) argued that rural children are losing their acceptance and understanding of agrarian society and have become the “strangers” in their own hometowns.

The existing literature (e.g., Gao, 2012; Shi, 2010) illuminates how rural schools introduce modernity into time and space, thereby detaching from traditional rural society. However, little is known about how rural children’s identities are transformed in this process, especially of how the time and space of rural school has led children to know themselves relating to modernity. Foucault’s interpretation of modernity, power, and subjecthood offers a theoretical toolkit to respond to these questions. Foucault’s approach to modernity is centred on developing the knowledge/power regime that makes people objects to this regime and as its subjects (Fraser, 1985, p. 169). Firstly, the new techniques of power, or the disciplinary power, act on peoples’ minds rather than the corporal body that separates the current regime from past historical times (Godfrey, 2012). Also, as I have explained in chapter 3, power is related to the production of the subject. Foucault (1982, p. 781) said disciplinary power which

“applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.”

In other words, disciplinary power does not only embody the advent of a modern era but is also key to exploring how the modern subjects come to be. This idea has been widely explored and applied within the field of education (Ball 2009). Marshall (2009, p. 16), for example, discusses how the school as a disciplinary institution ‘identifies to the individual the true “self” by rendering them as subjects of power. In an empirical study, Yu found that the school played a crucial role in acknowledging China’s ethnic minority students as subjects who recognize and honour the national identity. On the other hand, Ball (2009, p. 5)’s concern also goes to how educational sites represent students as ‘powerful subjects’ who are able to shake the grounds of disciplinarity. In line with this idea, Reed-Danahay (1996)’s research demonstrated how a French rural school became an important site for children and parents to resist power and socially imposed identities. Previous studies on the geographical adjustment of China’s rural schools, however, rarely analyze power within a specific rural school, and also rarely discuss how school affects left-behind children’s identity or subjectivity. Therefore, it might be a bit hasty to conclude that left-behind children’s identities should be read off from modernity. Given this, I will narrow my focus to the inside world of the Dream School, taking a closer look at the time, space,

and power within it. The key question is how the Dream School has become a place of discipline and has subjected children to the modern management of discipline.

5.2 Time, space, and power within the Dream School

This study's examination of the powers embedded in the Dream School mainly derives from Foucault's division of the modalities of power. Foucault distinguishes between two types of power: that wielded by dominant people over the dominated through coercion or violence, and that exercised to regulate the thoughts and behaviors of social actors through subtle means (Grant 1997). For Foucault, power is everywhere. It embodies and reinforces knowledge and constructs subjecthood through discipline. In explaining this new modality of power, Foucault (1995, p178) writes,

“We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.”

Based on the Foucauldian notion of power, ‘disciplinary power’ in the school context can be examined as the ongoing supervision and control of specific aspects of children’s bodies through time and space. Children are compelled via discipline into

relating their self-identities to the “truth” constituted by the knowledge and norms of modern education. In contrast, adult authority can be considered a more traditional modality of power, which often coercively or repressively acts on children. Such a distinction in the conception of power enables us to question whether the Dream School has become a place riddled with modernized disciplinary power. Furthermore, since power and knowledge are inextricably related, an examination of disciplinary power can also allow us to rethink how children are subject to the “truth” composed by and of modern educational knowledge and norms. We are thus opened up to the possibility of children seeing themselves through the lens of other, alternative “truths.”

Children’s daily routines and activities in the Dream School follow two timetables. One is the daily schedule (see table 1) that prescribes the class hours, the start time of each class, and daily non-instruction time. This program can be fine-tuned for different grades, but the basic structure remains the same. According to this schedule, school time is structured precisely to the minute. Life within the school therefore takes on a repetitive rhythm—rain or shine, busy farming season or slack farming season, teachers and children must go through the same time structure every day. In a Foucauldian sense, such stringent scheduling not only forces children to learn to manage days, hours, and minutes but also to manage “the self” within these days, hours, and minutes. The division of time thus endows school time with a disciplinary function.

The other timetable at the Dream School is the weekly class timetable. The weekly class timetable varies from class to class. Based on the teaching tasks of each semester stipulated by the education bureau, school administrators calculate the weekly required class hours for different subjects and allocate them throughout the daily instruction time. In particular, the classrooms of grade 9 are marked with countdown calendars that remind students of the number of days until high school entrance exams. In doing so, learning is conceived of as a linear, predictable progression. To keep up with this passage, children must learn the correct use of time and correct use of their bodies, which in turn produces themselves as docile subjects. As Kim (2014) maintains, the idea of school time, then, is to let the children “make these techniques of time management ‘their own’ in order to fit in the classroom” (p. 85) so as to earn the student identity acknowledged by the modern educational system.

Table 1. The Daily Schedule of Li Xiang Middle School Students

Getting up	05:50
Breakfast and Morning Exercise	05:50-07:20
Self-study Session	07:20-08:05
First Class	08:15-09:00
Second Class	09:10-09:55
Physical Exercise	09:55-10:15
Third Class	10:15-11:00
Fourth Class	11:10-11:55
Lunch	11:55-12:30
Self-study Session	12:30-13:30

Fifth Class		13:50-14:35
Sixth Class		14:45-15:30
Seventh Class		15:40-16:25
Self-study Session		16: 35-17:10
Dinner		17:10-17:50
Evening self-study session	First Session	17:50-18:30
	Second Session	18:40-19:20
	Third Session	19:30-20:10
Wash-up Time		20:10-21:25
Bedtime		21:30

Apart from being embodied in the daily schedule, the weekly timetable, and calendars, disciplinary power operates in the spatial distribution and functions of the Dream School. On the one hand, the campus space itself has increasingly become the object of the management, assessment, and inspection of the modern educational system. During the year I carried out my research, nearly all the schools in L town were intensely preparing for the appraisal of the implementation of the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education program. In 2011, the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Promoting the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education (Balanced Education, in abbreviation). This aimed to narrow the rural and urban education gap and promote educational equity. The idea of Balanced Education is broken down into numerous indicators that can be measured and calculated in detail. The modernization of a given school space is such an indicator. According to an official document on the implementation rules of Balanced Education assessments issued by the Education Department of Henan (2012), the scale of schools, class sizes,

per capital classroom area, light levels in classrooms, non-slip facilities of the teaching zone, office space facilities, toilet design, and other school space-related measures were critical indexes of assessment and scoring.

In addition to schools, children in schools are also subject to discipline. The children are constantly surveilled, trained, governed, partitioned, and ranked. First of all, children are assigned a specific grade, a specific class, and a particular classroom seat. Their spatial position generally reflects their learning aptitude and academic performance. Usually, students of different grades are arranged on different floors. In each classroom, high-achieving students sit in the front of the classroom while the low-achieving ones sit in the back rows. The spatial layout of the classrooms and teaching building divides students into different types (e.g., seniors and juniors, high-achieving and low-achieving, and so on). In turn, children can identify themselves as specific types of students according to the meaning associated with these spatial locations.

Additionally, school space embodies the management of students' conduct, dress, language, and spiritual needs. In every classroom, for example, the class rules are posted near the classroom entrance, detailing rules about children's behavior, language, sound, attitudes, appearance, hygiene, and personal relationships (see Table 2). These rules sometimes go into deep detail and keep children from misusing their bodies in prohibited ways. In addition, e-cameras can be found everywhere except for

the bathrooms in the school, and they are used to surveill children’s conduct and behaviors 24/7. As for the children’s spiritual needs, like most primary and secondary schools in China, the Dream School is plastered with slogans advocating the spirit of an excellent student, such as drive, unity, diligence, and so on. These slogans remind children of what a good student is supposed to be and what a qualified future citizen looks like. In sum, when subjected to spatial ranks, regulation, surveillance, and certain discourse, children come to know what types of students (e.g., high-achieving and low-achieving students) they are and what they should and should not do. A typical example occurred as I tutored some top students in a conference room. I saw Shu Hao (one of my child participants) and his friend standing at the door, looking around. I invited them in, yet they laughed and said, “Teacher, this is no place for us poor students.” Clearly, children see space as dividing and ranking them.

Table 2. Children’s bodies are governed by class rules in 7 categories.

Aspects	Examples of prohibited items
Language	Swearing and dirty words.
Sound	Talking during doing morning exercise, making strange noises, keeping silent in the reading sessions, and making noise in self-study classes.
Behavior	Talking, sleeping, passing notes, and whispering to each other, Pen Spinning, and looking in the mirror during class; fighting, fighting, drinking alcohol, playing cards, antics, chasing in the classroom, etc.
Attitudes	Disrespect teachers, disobedience to management.
Appearance	Makeup, hair coloring, and fancy dress.
Hygiene	Garbage found on personal seats, littering and spitting
Relationship	Relationships between students

5.3 Undisciplined time and space at the Dream School

Looking at the Dream School, I found that not all time and space were embedded in modes of disciplinary power. Some uses of time and space often undermine and contradict the exercise of disciplinary power and instead embody rogue adult authority. A typical case is that the school leaders often circumvent social regulations and laws to make a profit; these examples of individual authority interfere with the school system's order, regularity, and discipline.

At the beginning of each semester, every teacher receives a weekly class schedule, which denotes the grade and class, number of periods, and subject(s) to teach.

However, it is not uncommon for teachers to adjust their schedules temporarily.

Teachers often switch classes for various reasons; the principal may improvise school meetings, occupying the class time; and also, the school may assign a tutorial schedule for grade 9 students, which takes up students' lunch breaks, requires time after evening self-study, and takes up time on weekends. School adults' arbitrary use of time may interfere with time structures such as timetables and calendars. As a result, children may feel a conflict between the precision and chaos of school time. A typical case is that one class of students once had 6 math classes in one day because teachers switched classes.

Students are still subject to the time structure of a 40-minute lesson, but it is clear how

time is often freely manipulated by teachers. Many students say they feel the school is both strict and laissez-faire. The “strict” side dictates that they have to endure 40 minutes of class even though they find it tedious. The “laissez-faire” side says that teachers may finish their speech in 10 minutes and then let students fall asleep, read books, or do anything they like without disturbing the class order. These subtle behavioral rebellions, like falling asleep, reading novels in class, or even skipping class, echo tactics young people perform in other educational contexts (Cockain, 2011, p. 106-107) that suggest unconformity with study regimes and the identities these produce (Cockain, 2020, p. 72).

Space is similarly sporadically structured. Although class rules ensure the discipline of space within each class, they do not necessarily subject each child within the same teaching building to the same disciplinary standards. Firstly, class rules are mainly based on the teaching experience of the headteacher, and rules can be added or removed at any time. This essentially undermines the stability of disciplinary standards. Secondly, instead of seeming consistent, the class rules varied in content and in punishment measures among different classes. For example, in Class 4 Grade 7, the students were allowed to bring mobile phones into campus, but those in Class 3 Grade 7 were not allowed to do so. Students in Class 4 Grade 8 would be penalized 5 yuan for sleeping in class, while students in Class 3 Grade 8 would be punished by a deduction of 1 conduct point (a system of measuring student's conduct and morality). In contrast, students of Class 4 Grade 7 would be made to do 50 squats for the same

offense. The class rules of Class 5, Grade 9, did not even mention fall asleep in class as misbehavior.

Furthermore, most of the class rules were essentially punitive and lacked incentives for proper behavior, which went against the productive intent of disciplinary power. These cases reflect that the classrooms as disciplinary spaces may fail to maintain the effect of disciplinary power and sometimes instead embody teachers' personal wills and authority.

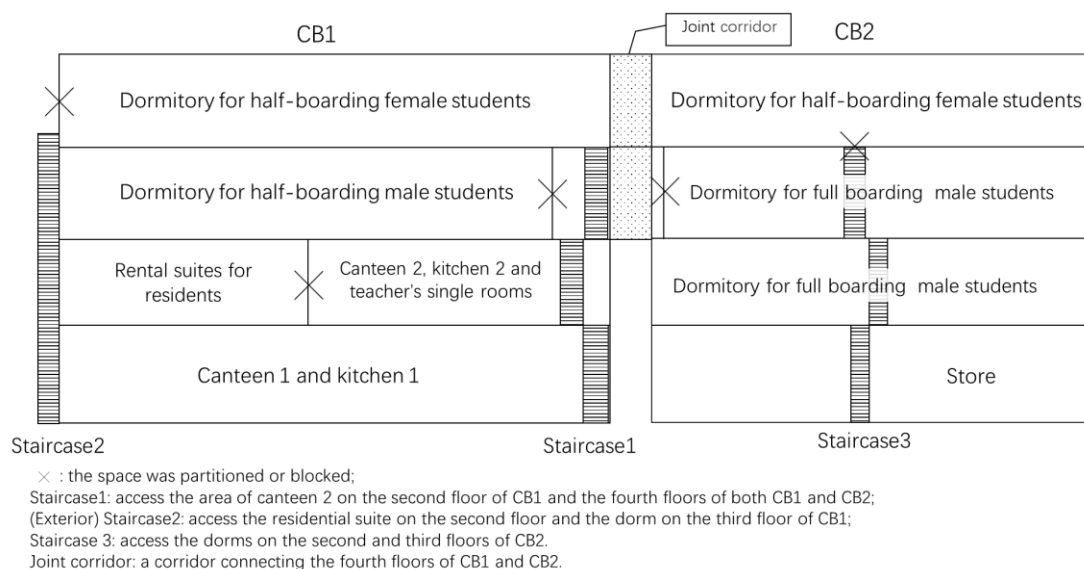
Compared to the teaching areas, the living areas of the school are messier, more disorderly, and undisciplined. The Dream School is privately-operated, so many of the apartments and rooms in the living zone of the campus are for sale or rent. As a result, they are occupied not only by child boarders, but also by teachers, school support staff, caregivers (primarily mothers or grandparents) who accompany the children to school, and some families without any direct relationship to the school. Usually, tenants needed to furnish the rooms with beds, tables, bureaus, and other furniture and equip the room with appliances like stoves, water heaters, air-conditioners, and refrigerators. Inside the rooms, the walls and roof are simply painted, and the floor is undecorated concrete. On high floors of the building, water flow was slim at times because of poor water pressure. Frequent power shortages often prevented residents from using high-powered appliances, such as water heaters and heat fans. However, as the residents did not consider these rented rooms as "home," they tended to make do

with these conditions. As a result, the distribution and use of these spaces are often “improvisations” of the residents.

For example, in the building where I lived, the first-floor rooms were unoccupied and often full of clutter. The second and third floors contained both decorated suites purchased by family residents and unfinished suites with their doors open. The fourth floor included two roughcast suites, one of which was temporarily occupied by a math teacher and her family. There were also four rooftop suites in the building. I lived in a tiny single suite of about 10 square meters. A teacher couple and their son lived in a room of roughly 15 square meters, and they also occupied a small suite with cooking appliances and storage for their spare items. A mother with her son and daughter lived in another suite, and she always cooked with a Liquefied gas tank in the roof stairwell. The stairwells were often blocked with unused personal items. The alleys leading up to the staircase were always filled with trash, and there were many unauthorized electrical wire connections. The space of the building therefore was messy, disordered, and frankly unsafe. The accommodation fees and water and electricity charges varied according to the room condition, rental period, the relationship between the tenants and Principal Zhong, and other factors. The poor living conditions and loose management drove residents to occupy, use, and reshape the spaces in an unruly or even illegal way, which prevented any disciplinary power or standards from emerging within these living zones.

Second, to strengthen management and increase the discipline of the student dormitory spaces, the school implemented a new renovation of the space and separated the different living groups. I will refer to the buildings where the students live as “complex buildings” because they contain not just student dorms but also a dining hall, shops, and teachers' dorms. Figure 1 illuminates the inner structure of the two complex buildings. Looking at them from the outside, complex building 1 (CB1) and complex building 2 (CB2) are two parts of the same building. Yet internally, CB1 has an internal-corridor structure while CB2 has an overhanging-corridor structure. Joint corridors connected the third and fourth floors of CB1 and CB2, under which passageways connected the teaching zone and the living zone. As the figure shows, the first floor of CB1 was a canteen for almost all middle school students. The second floor was separated into two parts, one of which was utilized as rental rooms for family residents. The other part served as teachers' dorms and contained a small canteen for teachers and full boarding students. The third floor was a dorm for male half-boarding students, while the fourth floor was a dorm for female half-boarding students. The first floor of CB2 included a store, a warehouse room, a Mahjong room, and a spare room. From the second floor to the fourth floor of CB2 were the full-boarding boys' dorm, the full-boarding girls' dorm, and the dorm for the half-boarding girls, respectively.

Figure 1. The cross-section view of the CB1 and CB2



In this way, the family residents were partitioned from the young single teachers; adults were partitioned from children; boys were partitioned from girls; full boarders were partitioned from the half-boarders; senior students were partitioned from junior students; and good students were partitioned from bad students. As Foucault (1995, p. 126) says, to make a disciplinary space, “one must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unstable and dangerous coagulation.....”. The partition of the inside spaces of the complex building thus avoids the potential disorder and chaos caused by contact between students of different genders, students of different residence modes, and students and non-students. The disciplined structure of student dorms was also ensured by closed management, dorm rules, fixed schedules, and surveillance. For example, a caretaker lives with students on each floor of the dorm to supervise them, particularly at night. There were also numerous e-cameras placed in the corridors to

monitor students' movements. The children living in the complex buildings were therefore already the objects of disciplinary space.

It is worth noting that, while these partitions created a disciplinary space, the creation of this space sacrificed the safety of the children. The partitions required management to block staircases, block corridors, lock off emergency exits, and use the escape stair as a regular entrance. This shows how the creation of disciplinary spaces within the campus is often accompanied by a violation of other disciplinary measures, such as fire and safety regulations. Thus, children may see such spaces as both disciplined and as violations of discipline. Another demonstration of spatial undiscipline can be seen in the illegal operation of the school store. The store was run by Principal Zhong's relatives used to be located at the south gate of the school. After being patrolled and inspected by government officials, the store was closed for violating regulations. A month later, however, students found that the principal's office on the first floor of the complex building had been demolished and replaced by the reopened store. The store had been moved to a location that could not be seen from the outside of the school. Its operating hours had also changed: it had previously been open all day, but now it was open only during students' lunch and dinner hours. Children therefore witnessed principal Zhong's domination of school space and his authority over discipline. For students, the Dream School in these ways embodies modernized disciplinary power and shows the authority of school adults over these disciplined uses of time and space.

5.5 The diversity of living status

Adult society often regards rural left-behind children as one homogeneous group. However, the various living modes of the students at the Dream School indicate that different left-behind children inhabit entirely different living environments. In this study, five different living modes at school are examined. We can see that different left-behind children live in different material conditions and in different disciplinary standards imposed by adults. It can be imagined therefore that children might have different perceptions of the situation of being “left behind”. Table 3 shows the five living modes at the campus.

Table 3. Five modes of living on campus.

Boarding status	Different living modes at the campus
Non-boarding	Living with caregivers in the purchased flat at the campus
	Living with caregiver in the rented room at the campus
Boarding	Homestay at the teacher’s home.
	Boarding at the half-boarding student dorm
	Boarding at the full-boarding student dorm

First of all, not all non-boarders live off-campus. Some parents have purchased property on campus, so their children live on campus as non-boarders. Ah Ye was one of these children. Ah Ye lived with her grandmother and younger brother and sister in a flat on campus. The flat was about 90 square meters and had two bedrooms, a drawing room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Ah Ye’s parents purchased this flat when she was in grade 4. The flat had been decorated and equipped with essential

appliances and furniture. Living in her own home, Ah Ye could bathe without waiting in line and enjoy her own bedroom. Her grandmother did not interfere with her studies beyond providing her with three meals a day and primary care. Ah Ye is Xing's classmate. Since Ah Ye lives on campus and does not need the school bus service, she was not involved in the confrontation between Xing and Principal Zhong described in chapter one.

Shu Hao lived in a rented suite on campus with his grandmother and younger brother and sister. Rental suites were smaller than flats, so Shu Hao had to share the bedroom with his little brother. Renting such a suite costs 2,300 yuan a year, not including water and electricity. There was little decoration and no furnishings or appliances, so Shu Hao's family spent extra money to buy beds, an air conditioner, a cooker, a washing machine, a water heater, and other necessary items. Shu Hao tried to live in the dormitory out of curiosity in his first year of middle school, but soon returned to the suite of his grandmother, which he finds more comfortable.

If not living with families, the most comfortable place for children to live on campus was perhaps homestay at a teacher's home. Yong Na's parents, for instance, sent her to stay at Mr. Guo's home. Mr. Guo was a math teacher and a school leader. He bought a flat at the school and re-decorated it to have a boy's dormitory room and a girl's dormitory room. The girl's room could accommodate 3-5 girls and was equipped with single beds, cabinets, tables, and chairs but no air conditioner. The

boy's room could accommodate 10 boys and was fitted with bunk beds and an air conditioner. All people shared one bathroom where they could go to the toilet and bathe. Mr. Guo's wife was responsible for the children's breakfast and dinner every day and for general primary care. According to Yong Na, her board at Mr. Guo's home cost around 5000 yuan per semester. For Yong Na, boarding at Mr. Guo's home was both good and bad. The bad side was that she did not have much private space; she did not dare chat with her roommates too loudly at night and on weekends she could only go out after getting permission from Mr. Guo or his wife. However, the good side was that the food was better than that at the canteen and she could decide when to go to bed.

Among the middle school students at the Dream School, the majority boarded at the half-boarding student dorm. On the third floor of CB1, there were 14 rooms arranged along a corridor at regular intervals, and each room could accommodate 12 children. The rooms were sparsely decorated and equipped with almost nothing except six iron bunk beds, worn wooden desks, and small wall fans (See Picture 3). The dusty concrete ground, the yellowing and stained white wall, dim lighting, and the permeating odor made the space quite shabby and undesirable. Children usually tucked some of their clothes in their suitcases or bags and hung others on the edge of the top bunk. As the half-boarding mode provided no laundry service, children had to pile up their dirty laundry and take it home to be washed on the weekends. At the end of the corridor was a humble restroom with a faucet and two "squatting posts". Ex.

“(the holes in the ground that act as the children’s toilets)”, but no dividers at all to separate stalls for private spaces. Children had to line up to use the water (See Picture 4). If the bathroom was full, students sometimes had to go downstairs and cross the playground to go to the bathroom in the teaching building. Students bathed in the Youth Palace building next to CB1. In the girls’ dormitory, the restroom had a few more faucets, but besides that girls told me that the conditions were almost identical to the boys’ dormitory.

Picture 3. A room in the half-boarding students’ dormitory (Left).

Picture 4. Boys lining up to brush their teeth in the restroom (Right).



The rooms of full-boarding students were only slightly better than those of half-boarding students. The full-boarding students lived in CB2, where the overhanging corridor structure made the dormitory rooms bright. There were 6 dormitory rooms on each floor, each accommodating 8 children. Due to the small number of full boarders, children from different grades and classes may be allocated to the same room. Each dormitory room was equipped with air conditioning and 8 small cabinets (See Picture

5). At the end of the overhanging corridor was a restroom where students could go to the toilet and take a shower (See Picture 6). An aunt was hired to do laundry and cleaning for all the full boarders. Although these accommodations were somewhat better than half-boarders', the full-boarders' lives were under more regulation and supervision. Full boarding means that the school completely takes over the familial role of children's management, care, and supervision. Whereas half-boarding student could leave school on weekends, the full boarding students had to stay at the campus all the semester and their lives were restricted all the time.

Picture 5. Full-boarding students' room (Left).

Picture 6. Full-boarding students' restroom (Right).



From the five living modes, we can see that different children experienced varying degrees of school discipline and faced differing material living conditions. Ah Ye, for example, could escape from school discipline and enjoy private time after school. By contrast, the half-boarding students could hardly enjoy such personal space. Their daily schedules dictate their activities all day, including when to wash up and when to go to bed. In addition, after leaving the teaching building, they continue to be

supervised by the dormitory staff and the school principal's family. Besides, children in different living modes also face different living conditions. A left-behind life suggests difficult living conditions for some, but for some, like Yong Na, Ah Ye, and Shu Hao, this perception may not be accurate.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter examines time, space, and power at the Dream School. The study found that with the adjustment of the geographical distribution of rural schools, rural children are increasingly separated from rural society and are placed in large-scale town-centred schools to receive the discipline of modern education. However, from examining the time and space inside the Dream School, I found that children are not entirely subject to disciplinary power. This echoes Gallagher's finding (2010) that disciplinary power can sometimes function yet sometimes fail to function in school. Through an ethnographic study, Gallagher observed that surveillance was very discontinuous in a Scottish primary school since the gaze is heavily dependent on teachers' presence. In the present study, I disclosed that disciplinary power was uneven over the different spaces within the Dream School and that adults' use of time and space sometimes contradicts and weakens disciplinary power. As a result, children are occasionally subject to the personal authority of adults rather than to disciplinary power. The coexistence of different forms of power generated a multifaceted reality filled with competing and contradictory values, norms, conventions, beliefs, and powers. In such a multifaceted reality, children may

understandably identify with multiple selves rather than with a singular self.

This chapter further reveals that left-behind children live in different material environments and are subject to varying degrees of institutional discipline. This challenges the stereotype that left-behind children are a homogeneous group facing one homogeneous living condition. The complexity and diversity of children's living situations thus necessitates a child-centred perspective to understand their lives. In the following chapters, I will shift my focus to how children perceive their lives and their identities at school.

Chapter 6 Children's Interaction with School

New childhood studies suggest that children play a significant role in constructing the social world around them (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998). In this chapter, as well as in chapter 7, I turn my attention from the school environment to children's understanding of and response to school arrangements. Both the power relations embedded in schooling and children's understanding of their situation are closely related to the process of subject formation. Power relations ruled in ways of thinking about and defining children's identity. Power is exercised to make children believe the "truth" that the identities given by school are more centralized and "true" than others. As I explained in chapter 4, I refer to these socially determined or school-produced identities as "centred identities". However, "centred identities" come to be true only when children make personal investments in these identities. Children as active social agents are capable of making their own identities beyond the control of powers and of interpreting the social world by their own measure. This is to say, in the process of identity formation, children are able to de-centre the "centred identities" produced by powers and discourse. In this light, the "decentred subject" characterized children by the "absence of strong singular identity" or "with no reference points or parameters" (Rosenau, 1991; p43). As I will discuss later, the child participants I met at the Dream School maintain their identities' fluid and unstable nature. They do not let schooling "rewrite" their identities into analyzable, coherent, and definite units, and resist the binary categories of "good/bad", "urban/rural", and "left-behind/non-left-behind" and

so on. As I will show soon, children's own discourses and practices constantly obscure the boundaries set for them by power mechanisms and instead show that their identities are inconsistent and fluid.

To illustrate this point, I examine how disciplinary power techniques and traditional forms of power aim to "re-write" children's identities, while simultaneously being subtly countered or evaded by children. In the present study, these power techniques include an "enclosed system", "grading system", "supervision system" and the traditional form of power referred to as "adult authority". These respectively correspond to the production of four "centred identities": "developing child", "graded child", "supervised child" and "submissive child". I will detail how the children I met cope with an "enclosed system" and "grading system" in this chapter while approaching children's responses to "supervision system" and "adult authority" in the next chapter. I separate these four topics because in the first two instances I mainly examine the interaction between children and the school time-space arrangement, while in the latter two I focus more on the interaction between children and school adults.

To be specific, in section 6.1, I discuss the rise of rural boarding schools and their inherent relations to the mainstream narrative that emphasizes the vulnerability and passivity of rural left-behind children. Notably, the child participants whom I met at the Dream School generally resisted this narrative. In children's eyes, it is precisely

the restrictiveness of school, rather than the status of being “rural” and “left-behind”, that realizes their vulnerability and passivity. Through imagining the enclosed space as a prison and embracing self-pity, children show their ability to create themselves outside of the control of adult discourse. This also suggests that while children cannot exert agency through bodily actions, they still can express agency in a discursive context. In section 6.2, I introduced the school grading system, which classified children into different groups according to their academic achievements. However, children rarely perceived themselves in accordance with these given labels of “top”, “average”, and “bottom”. Not only do they doubt the fixed meaning of grading, but they also challenge the idea that their social value can be measured at all by grades. At the end of section 6.1 and section 6.2, I review the enclosed system and the grading system respectively and suggest that children reconstruct meanings of space in order to reinterpret their own situations.

A point worth noting is the roles played by the teachers. In general, teachers are the endorsers of mainstream discourse and school systems. For instance, the teachers I met tend to evaluate the left-behind children by virtue of the discourse system that emphasizes children’s academic achievements and sees them as lagging behind urban children in nearly all aspects of development. However, this is not always the case. During the field, I also observed that on some private occasions (such as when teachers dine together outside school), teachers may talk about students’ strengths outside their learning ability and appreciate the low-achieving students for performing

better than the high-achieving students in some respects. This suggests that when the adults are temporarily removed from the role of ‘schoolteacher’, they would adopt a more open attitude towards what the children could or should be like. Such inconsistent discourses may also open up opportunities for unfixed modes of teacher-student interactions.

Moreover, the way the teachers interact with students changes as time passes.

According to my participant observation, as graduation approached, some teachers shifted their views of the students from ‘low-achieving’ to ‘future workers’. This results in teachers increasingly not judging the value of a child based on grades, focusing instead on whether a child’s characteristics, merits and strengths will help him/her smoothly adapt to the workforce in the future. One typical example involved a headteacher who evaluated Shu Hao, a low-achieving and disobedient student, as a boy of ‘fine character’. Such an evaluation can be understood with the essential changes in the teacher-student relationship during the approaching graduation period. In short, most of the time, teachers play the role of systematic and mainstream discourse endorsers in front of the children. But from time to time, children can observe a ‘disengagement’ between teachers and systems, in which children strive for more space to exert their own agency.

6.1 The enclosed system and the “developing child”.

Liu, Liu and Lin (2021) pointed out that China’s rural education, including the

adjustment of geographical layout of rural schools, was firmly grounded in the concept of development. Such a concept was characterized by a reduction of diverse human needs into growth measured only by economic indicators and often embodied in various strategies related to urbanization, industrialization, and modernization (Pan & Ye, 2017). The deputy director of the Education Department of Henan Province (Wang, 2018) illustrates this concept of development while explaining why the government promotes the development of rural boarding schools:

First, rural schools are small in scale. The school running effectiveness and the quality of education of rural schools are low... Second, there is the objective need of boarding for left-behind children in rural areas... Boarding difficulties increases the safety risks of day students. It also brings caregivers the burden of taking and picking up children, which makes it impossible to liberate more labour force to engage in production and increase income. Thirdly, improving the quality of education in rural schools can ... reduce the flow of rural students to cities and towns... reduce the pressure of urban schools, and thus solve the problem of “over-size classes” in urban schools.

It is therefore easy to see that the pursuit of large scale is consistent with the pursuit of industrialization, that managing rural/urban school populations embodies the idea of urbanization, and that an improvement in efficacy is linked to economic growth. The official’s justification of building rural boarding schools is fundamentally rooted in

the development concept.

Apart from guiding economic and educational reform, the concept of development also produces a certain type of subject to serve China's new market economy.

Zukosky (2012), for example, shows how discourses of development, such as *suzhi* (quality), provides Xing Jiang minorities with a market-oriented justification of poverty and privileged capital in its transformation of local residents into labour subjects. Likewise, Woronov (2011) explains the logic of the concept of development, parental investment in education, and China's new moral economy. Specifically, Woronov (2011) argues that the concept of development can be "measured in human terms partly by educational achievement" and that "human development is increasingly metonymic of national development". This means that children with higher test scores are believed to have higher chances of getting high-paying jobs and therefore of obtaining higher social statuses in China's new moral economy. In addition, just as the nation achieves its high economic growth through capital investment, parents now need to invest heavily in education to improve children's academic achievements. The discourse of development thus places priority on academic achievement in its production of student subjectivity. However, due to a lack of parental guardianship and undesirable rural school environments, left-behind children are seen as disadvantaged in achieving the same educational achievements or development as urban children or non-left-behind children (Pan & Ye, 2017; Mao, Zang, & Zhang, 2020). Given this, the boarding school system, with the advantage of

time, space, and teachers to help and care for children, is seen as an effective way to promote left-behind children's development.

Henan is identified as one of the provinces where the local governments vigorously promote the large-scale construction of rural boarding schools (Du, 2009). From the official statement shown below, we can see that the government generally holds a positive attitude towards the construction of rural boarding schools (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2019), although some scholars questioned such optimism (e.g., Wang, Dong, & Mao, 2017; Wang, & Mao, 2018; Wang, Medina, Luo, Shi, & Yue, 2016).

“Since 2016, Henan province has built, renovated, or expanded 1,503 rural boarding schools with a special fund of 2.2 billion yuan, improving the learning and living conditions of nearly 500,000 left-behind children and other children and teenagers in rural areas. The construction of boarding school has brought gratifying changes to rural compulsory education. The majority of rural students receive high-quality education at their doorstep, which relieves the worries of migrant parents and reduces the family burden and is deeply welcomed by the people.”

– Ministry of Education of PRC, 2019

In the above and other similar official statements, rural left-behind children are treated

as special objects of development projects, or subjects deserving special help for development. But a key concern is whether children themselves engage with this narrative and use the advantages of boarding to develop learning and living skills. If so, then their identification is also likely to be centred on the concept of development. To put it differently, the identity of the “developing child” might be adopted by the children I met as one of their centred identities. Keeping this in mind, I asked several child participants to give me general comments on the Dream School, such as listing the advantages and disadvantages of the boarding system in terms of their study and living. To my surprise, I found that few children could do this. No matter how I tried to reassure them in conversations or told them that they could give me very simple answers or no answer at all, they still felt it difficult to respond. Many children took substantial time to ponder my questions yet ended with ambiguous responses like “*hai xing* (not bad)” or negative answers like “teacher, I don’t know what to say”. As the project progressed, I realized that, although the boarding school is characterized in official discourse as a place benefiting rural left-behind children’s learning and lives, children may view it much differently.

Children’s construction of self-images and of place are gradually disclosed from photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs). PEIs are the primary research tool that helped me determine children’s subjective perceptions of their living environments. Through self-produced photos, children reproduced many situations they experienced in their everyday life, and explained to me how they understood, imagined, and gave meaning

to the place. It became evident that children rarely view the relationship between the Dream School and themselves as that between an educational institution and learners, but rather as that between a “prison” and “prisoners” or between “well” and “frog”, and so on. On the one hand, the official discourse depicts rural left-behind children as beneficiaries of the enclosed system, believing that children can develop well in such an environment. On the other hand, children’s own perceptions through photos presented themselves as helpless victims of the system. These findings were further confirmed when I carried out further research methods to explore similar questions. After triangulating data from different research methods, the complicated and multifaceted social reality seen through the eyes of children became clear.

6.1.1 Children’s re-imaginings of the enclosed space.

In analyzing the child-produced photos, I found that the theme of ‘the sky and views from windows’ accounted for exactly 25% of the 96 photos, and numerous photos relating to this theme were removed in advance by the participants due to unnecessary repetition. Initially, the participants tended to describe mostly the beauty of the captured views. However, when analysing the complete visual data, both I and the students realised that the *inside* view of the campus was largely absent from the selected photos. Only one photo captured a tree, and two photos captured the nonstandard basketball court and several table tennis tables on the campus. The participants then confessed that they felt that no object on the campus was worth photographing. They suggested that the boarding school provided limited facilities for

them to look at, play, socialise, and communicate with each other, as if the only allowed activity within the campus was learning. In a self-deprecating tone, one of the participants, Yong Na stated, “We’re used to it anyway, and we don’t care about it (the lack of entertainment and social facilities) anymore.” From the participants’ words and moods, I sensed their apathy towards the material environment of the boarding school. The response of Yong Na was typical of the interviewed participants.

Na: This place (the boarding school) is boring. Nothing is worth of photographing.

I: Could you explain more to me?

Na: As far as I am concerned, it (the boarding school) is no more than di fang (a place) for me to stay. Irrespective of whether this di fang is reported as good or bad, it is somewhat irrelevant to me. I have got used to staying here. I would rather engage in the interesting activities that I could control, such as play with my friends and my classmates....

The government and mass media often describe rural left-behind children as beneficiaries of the boarding school system because boarding schools provide these children with a suitable environment for studying and living. However, Yong Na’s words suggested that she did not share this discourse. Since 2017, Yong Na has spent most of her time on the school campus. She learned in class 9.5, a class where teachers were perceived as responsible and attentive to their students. After school,

she lived in Teacher Guo's home, under the care of Teacher Guo's wife. As a left-behind child, she ostensibly did not lack adult supervision and care. However, she referred to the boarding school using the term '*di fang*', which describes a 'place' without personal emotional attachment. Yong Na also directly stated that the relationship between the boarding school and herself was 'irrelevant'. Other participants appeared to have experienced the same sense of apathy. As the study progressed, I realised that the participants' emotional perception of the school was quite complicated. Just as Corrigan (1976) suggested, the experience of 'doing nothing' by street children involves 'something' that is significant to them. The child participants' apathy toward school represented their feeling that the place built for them did not truly *belong* to them.

More importantly, to many children school is not only a boring place but also a place that constrain them. Almost every child participant expressed during interviews or conversations a feeling of being constrained. The narratives delivered by Shu Hao, Bei Bei and Ah Cheng are very typical. The three children came from different classes and had different academic performances. They were also perceived by their teachers as different types of children at school. However, they all projected their sense of being constrained onto the school's everyday landscapes or objects and creatively documented them with cameras.

Before I invited Shu Hao to become my research partner, I did not know much about

him. I only knew that he was one of the boys who often came to the office to help teachers record test scores on the computer. He did not speak much but was modest and polite. His head teacher, Mr. Shen, thought highly of him, as did most other children. He was seen as reliable and kind. On the recommendation of teachers and other students, I invited Shu Hao, the boy from class 9.3, to participate in the photo-elicitation project. However, his explanation of the pictures he took changed my impression of him as introverted and obedient. The photographs he brought were insightful and critical, and using them, he fiercely questioned the closed management system of the school.

Shu Hao first showed me a group of primary school pupils who were about to leave campus one afternoon (See picture 7). When I looked at this picture, he pointed out the shadows on the floor and said to me, “I intentionally photographed these dark shadows of me and my friends...I wanted to use the shadows to reflect our feeling of being dispirited.... Because they (the primary school students) can leave the campus, but we cannot”. Shadows are dark and appear where the sun does not reach, and now Shu Hao used it to indicate not only their sadness but also the fact that their desire for freedom was neglected by the school. Throughout the interview, he did not mention any issues related to academics. In the end, he commented that “school is just a place to manage and control us”. I continued to ask him, “Does it (the school) have anything to do with knowledge?”. He immediately replied, “No”.

Picture 7. The shadow (taken by Shuhao).



At that moment, I sensed that Shu Hao had responded with his real feelings rather than with the instilled thinking of the school. In other words, he did not fully subject himself to the popular and official discourse that constitutes the boarding school as a place to endow children with knowledge and to realize their development. This also demonstrates that Shu Hao's subjectivity, though shaped and influenced by discourse and power, is not fully determined by them. Foucault explains that "there are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). The latter meaning of subject, namely the self-relation, suggests that "the subject is able to take itself as an object, to disengage from, double and reflect on

itself” (Armstrong, 2008, p.26). It also implies the compatibility of productive power and agency.

After showing me the picture of the “shadows”, Shu Hao used another three photos to depict his “life in prison”. The first photo presented a scene that was almost dark, with only a dim light; the second photo presented the classroom photographed from the external corridor; and the third photo showed the farmlands outside the school. Shu Hao explained these photos in sequence:

“This was our morning exercise (the first photo). What I want to say (through this photo) is that our life was repetitive. Once we get up, before dawn, we are asked to *pao cao* (run on the playground track). This is very like prison life... And from this picture (in the second photo) I wanted to show you the *tie chuang* (window with iron grating). It also looked like a prison, and we are imprisoned in it. The outside is beautiful (in the third picture), but we cannot go outside, because we are imprisoned in the school.”

It was apparent from Shu Hao’s interpretations of window bars, the comparison between the inside and outside worlds, and his perceptions of the repetitiveness of everyday life that he did not endorse the official characterization of the boarding school space as beneficial to their development. Instead of seeing the boarding school as a place to help left-behind children live and learn, Shu Hao regarded it as a place of

undesirable constraints and constant boredom. Initially, I hesitated when deciding whether I should attribute this to Shu Hao's poor academic performance. But it turned out that the so-called high-achieving students *also* tended to underscore the school's restrictions on their autonomy and freedom. Bei Bei, for example, was seen by her headteacher as a clever girl who had the potential to be admitted into an elite high school in the G county. However, just like Shu Hao, Bei Bei depicted the iron bars of the classroom window as occupying almost the entire picture frame (see Picture 8) to express her despair of 'being imprisoned':

Picture 8. The window bars (taken by Bei Bei)



“I always looked outside when I felt bored. The outside world looks free and

fascinating. Especially at night, with cars on, lights on, and sometimes the sparks of fireworks, (in comparison) it was so boring to be inside the “*wu zi*” (room). Sometimes, I envy the dogs and little kids running in the field because they have freedom to play. Look at the window bars. Doesn’t the school look like a prison? I feel that we are imprisoned here.”

From the words of Beibei and other participants, I gradually realized that such a feeling of being “imprisoned” was pervasive among the child boarders. Similar phenomena can be found in other studies on China’s rural boarding schools. For instance, Gao (2015) noted similar sentiments in a male boarder who described going back to school as “going back to jail”. The enclosure of the school space should have functioned to distinguish the school space from the outside world, identifying the school as a more suitable place for children’s development. However, the child participants constantly cast their sights on the outside world, thereby detaching themselves from the inner space of the school. Bei Bei even used the word “*wu zi*” (“屋子” or a room) to refer to the classroom. Unlike “*jiao shi*” (“教室” or classroom) which indicated the disciplinary, functional, and relational dimensions of space, the word “*wu zi*” seemingly only expressed the apathetic, material dimension of space. In other words, the classroom space had lost its symbolic meaning of knowledge and development for Bei Bei. Perhaps only the material features such as railings and walls remained in her mind.

Child participants described school life in much the same way, articulating their lack of freedom and feeling of imprisonment. However, as more and more child participants vividly described how they play with peers in school and even seek fun in class time, I sensed that they were perhaps not truly subject to literal spatial constraints. In their narrations, “prison” served merely as a reference point used to contaminate the positive meaning of the boarding school when they faced me. I will explain what I mean by this in the next section.

6.1.2 Agency in play and discursive context.

When discussing photos with child participants, I found a set of photos with a play theme. Child participants used photos to record what they thought of as fun moments, including making faces, playing games, going through events together, daring each other, and testing the limits of the rules together. When they talked about these photos, the children looked cheerful and often laughed loudly at things in the photos. This was a stark contrast to their frustration and cynicism when describing the environments of the school. Yong Na commented on this contrast: “Because we don’t have a say in big issues, we have to be *zhu dong dian* (more proactive) in our own affairs”. Other child participants showed great agreement with this statement. Later they explained to me that the “big issues” referred to were the school’s arrangement of their lives, while “their own affairs” generally referred to *wan* (play), including making free decisions on what to play, when to play, and whom to play with. In other words, children’s “passivity” in this context was the product of school constraints. In

effect, they intended to be more active in shaping their own lives, especially in negotiating with school about the opportunity to play. Although children felt it hard to define what exactly constituted “play”, they generally agreed that play constituted a world where they could act on their own interests, intuition, and curiosity for “now” and “here”, just as the children and animals did in the field shown in Bei Bei's photos.

Children’s adherence to adults’ rules may or may not conflict with actively asserting themselves (Agha, Thambiah, & Chakraborty, 2019)), because their autonomy to act is always located within a continuum of agency and structure (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). Skelton and Hamed (2011), for example, discovered in their research that the majority of Singaporean youths did not attempt to avoid adult-imposed rules while about a third of them responded to the rules by resistance. Children's resistance in this study might be reflected in their awareness that self-presentation under adult rules is hypocritical. Child participants did not voluntarily subject themselves to the restrictions on how a student ought to act, and instead consciously separated their own time or playtime from school-prescribed time, thinking that they could only “be themselves” in the former. On the one hand, this suggests that power relations are quite mobile in different domains of school time, and will not congeal into a fixed state of domination. On the other hand, it indicates that the subjectivity of these children involves certain degrees of agency that can sometimes exceed and resist the disciplinary.

When showing me a picture of class break, Yong Na pointed one boy sitting in the middle of the classroom and said, “See, Ah Tao’s facial expression looks funny and silly. He can have this silly face sometimes, and I think this is the real side of him”. As a top student who always ranked first in exams, Ah Tao demonstrated “two faces” in Yong Na and other children’s comments: one was rather serious and a bit stiff in front of teachers, while the other one was quite relaxed, or in Yong Na’s word, “real”. “Being real” seems always relevant to the idea of being around peers and not adults. In these situations, one’s words and actions are less likely to be judged by adult-imposed rules and expectations. Children could act in their own interests, free from the standards sanctioned by adult society, and obtain control over their own bodies again. Similarly, Xing differentiated instruction time from “their own time”, stating that “when we play, we have a lot of fun...If we could move the boring class time away, I think the school is not that bad because I can play with a lot of people at school”. These cases showed that the school is not entirely a prison, since it did not partition its “prisoners” (the child boarders) and interrupt their horizontal communications. In effect, children actively seek autonomy and freedom in play, a sphere that is not adult-dominated and is “wholly detached from meanings and values associated with work” (Shaw, 1994).

It is worth noting that children’s play doesn’t merely take place in defined times and spaces. In fact, children often try to commit minor delinquencies to seek more

opportunities to play. Through participant observation, for example, I found that almost every weekend, Beibei, as a full-boarding student, finds excuses to leave school and hang out with friends in the town centre and supermarkets. In order to pass boring time in class, Yong Na came up with improvised games with her desk-mate. Shu Hao even scratched the desk with a small knife or scored the classroom wall with a steel nail during class time. These cases show that students were not as passive and vulnerable as they claimed in the photo-elicitation interviews. More importantly, this shows that children are able to imagine how others might view them and have agency to choose the self-images that they present to others.

In his discussion of the notion “the self”, Mead (2015) distinguishes the “I” from the “me”, with the “me” representing “that group of attitudes which stands for others in the community” (P.194) and the “I” representing the response of “the individual to the attitude of the community as this appears in his own experience” (p. 165). This is to say, the sense of “me” suggests people’s ability to reflect the attitudes of others and act in a way influences on others. Likewise, the notion of “the looking-glass self”, coined by Cooley (2017), also implies individuals’ autonomy to decide whether they care about others’ evaluations, as well as their capability to control or manipulate the response of others. This is embodied in the process of the looking-glass self: (1) imagination of how we portray ourselves to others; (2) imagination of how others evaluate us; (3) combination of these impressions to formulate a self-concept or idea of what we are like (Thompson, Hickey, & Thompson, 2019, p.91). In sum, the

arguments of Mead and Cooley thus suggest human beings have the capability to embody different self-images in different contexts and can manipulate interactions through visualizing and symbolizing ourselves.

To emphasize the child-centred perspective of this study, I often told to my child participants that, “I’m here to listen to you”, “I hope to understand how you think and feel”, and similar phrases. This may lead them to think of me as a kind of journalist who can speak for them or someone who stands with them and against the school adults. As a result, they may have felt that the more they presented themselves as victims of the school’s enclosed management system, the more likely they were to win my empathy and thus take back some power. Their ability to identify my advantageous position amidst the power relations of adult society due to my high educational background and the images they chose to present to me during our discussions demonstrate children’s agency in shaping or reinterpreting their own identity. This does not only echo the arguments of Mead and Cooley, but also proves the sociological idea that children are social actors with agency.

There was also a case in which a child participant expressed his identity as a city child to me through discussion. Just like Bei Bei and Shu Hao, Ah Cheng showcased the school’s constraints on children through photos. However, Ah Cheng’s attitude toward children’s narrative was different: he did not romanticize the outside world but thought that the outside world also signified limitations. Like Bei Bei, Ah Cheng was

a full boarding student. He was tall and strong, and just as his name “cheng” (诚 or honest) suggested, he gave me an impression of honesty. Other students told me that Ah Cheng’s size meant few people dared to mess with him. However, when I talked with him, I found him to be a sentimental boy who often used heavy phrases like an adult. He showed me a small piece of sky he photographed on the exterior corridor outside the dormitory (See Picture 9). The sky was a rectangle surrounded by the other buildings. He explained the image in poetic words:

“What I want to express is *jing di zhi wa* (井底之蛙, or ‘a frog at the bottom of a well’). Living in this environment, they can only see a little piece of the sky. These kids can’t bear comparison with those free kids who can see a lot of places and a lot of beautiful things. Their aesthetics, the environment they live are definitely higher (better) than ours. These kids in *lao jia* or hometown villages can only see Li town, at best the G county.....However much they looked, their sight could not go beyond Henan Province. Studying is inherently boring. They were trapped here, they don’t want to study, and they had no future.”

Jing di zhi wa is a Chinese idiom used to describe short-sighted people. When Ah Cheng compared the school to the well, indicating that the child boarders were constrained within the enclosed space, he also suggested that the child boarders were as short-sighted as frogs at the bottom of well, as they were blocked from seeing the full sky. In Ah Cheng’s eyes, child boarders were vulnerable and pitiable. But their

vulnerability was not only because of the constraints of school, but also due to their presence in an underdeveloped area. Growing up in rural areas, children had limited access to high-quality education, aesthetic taste, and open-mindedness. This was consistent with Xiang's (2007) argument that the core issues of left-behind children were that rural villages more broadly are also left behind, both economically and socially.

Picture 9. The sky (taken by Ah Cheng).



However, it is worth noting that Ah Cheng used “they” rather than “we” to refer to the child boarders. This indicated that he did not see himself as one of the children who lacked agency. In effect, when he described the boarding children in a mournful tone,

I sensed that he seemed to be speaking of a distant group of people who had nothing to do with him. Later, I learned that Ah Cheng identified himself as a Beijing (the capital city of China) person rather than as a rural child or a Henanese (I will explain this later). In other words, Ah Cheng placed himself in the position of an outsider, viewing other children from a psychological distance. This implied that “left-behind children” were able to articulate their voices (such as what Bei Bei and Shu Hao did), but that their personal living experiences were far from being condensed into a shared discourse, based on which they could summarize and determine their peer group situation. As I will show in chapter 8, these children did not form a collective identity through their experiences of questioning, resisting, avoiding school constraints. This can be attributed to the high heterogeneity of their family backgrounds and early mobile experiences.

6.1.3 Boarding as a condition for diluting the “developing child” identity.

The discourses delivered by child participants dilutes the effect of the concept of development on their identity. Interestingly, however, the boarding system itself might contribute to children’s disengagement with the development discourse. Dwelling in a boarding school in which “left-behind children” constituted the majority group, children generally regarded parental migration as normal and took it for granted.

When I talked to them about issues pertaining to “left-behind children”, the children I met often responded like, “I have gotten used to it (living a life without parents)”, “this (labour migration) is very common and it is not a big matter for me”, or “I have

not much feeling about this (being left behind), because everyone is same”. This means that, in their boarding life, the children’s “left-behind” status has become mainstream, common, and expected, which may lead to difficulty identifying with the public discourse that considers them as special objects of development. As Yong Na said, “I think it is okay for the school to manage us. But I don’t see why we should be confined here. Such management is too much.”

The stereotypical perception of left-behind children as a disadvantaged group is often formed through comparison. In scholarly and media discourse, left-behind children are frequently compared with children living in cities or children living with their parents. And the conclusion is often that left-behind children are consistently worse off than their counterparts in various metrics (Huang et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2015; Chen 2016; Zhao & Yu 2016; Liang et al. 2017; Lei et al. 2018; Lu & Chang 2019; Mao, Zang, & Zhang, 2020). But this comparison is less accessible within the enclosed school system: beyond transforming left-behind children into a mainstream group, the enclosed school system also reduces children’s access to other child groups. As a result, the children I met rarely compared themselves with the children in families or in cities. This further reduced the likelihood of the children seeing their rural identity and left-behind status as a disadvantage. Sun told me that he knew that students in the county seat may have better living conditions but said that he rarely thinks about this because “I don’t know exactly how the inner environment of county seat schools looks like, and I rarely come into contact with the students who studied in

those schools. After all, it's even not easy for us to go out (the boarding school) once.”

In official and media discourse, the development measures designed for left-behind children in rural areas, including the replacement of small-scale village-based schools with large-scale town-centred schools and the construction of rural boarding schools, are closely related to the assumed disadvantage of these children. Now, the children gathered in boarding schools are able to normalize their rural and left-behind status, which may in turn weaken the legitimacy of these development measures in their eyes. Gradually, children downplay the relationship between development and the stereotype of left-behind children as a downtrodden group, though they may not fully reject the concept of development.

6.2 The grading system and the “graded student”.

Foucault (1995, p. 125) pointed out that enclosure is not a sufficient measure in disciplinary machinery. For Foucault, discipline also involved “an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (1995, p. 128). Such an art of rank is displayed in another noticeable feature of the Dream School, namely in the grading system. This system generally divides children into “good students” and “bad students” and relegates them to different arrangements in time and space. The “good students” are generally seen to have the chance to continue on the academic track while the “bad

students” may have to follow the non-academic track and go to vocational school or enter the labour market directly after graduation. The grading system further divides the “good students” into top students and average students. The top students are regarded as having the potential to be admitted into elite high schools or even the best high school in the county, while average students are likely to attend the regular high schools through *zhong kao* or to take the high school entrance examination. The identities of the “top students”, “average students” and “bad students” are constantly generated and evaluated by the ranking system, and in particular by the mechanisms of class division and the tutorial class.

Firstly, children are grouped into *hao ban* (good class) and *cha ban* (bad class) strictly according to their test score. The school used the median score number as the separation point to divide freshers of grade 7 into two classes, with class 7.3 consisting of high-achieving students and class 7.4 comprised of low-achieving students. The distinction between the “good class” and the “bad classes” is fixed and present in grade 8 and grade 9 as well. The children seated in the “bad classes” were generally seen by both teachers and by themselves as without academic merit (*mei you xue xi de tian fu*), and of low quality (*su zhi*), a lazy attitude (*lan duo*), and no promise (*chu xi*). The students from the “good classes” were seen as the opposite. The ranking of test scores therefore grounds the division of “good class” and “bad class”, which in turn labels children from different classes as “good students” or “bad students”.

Second, the top students from the good class were further differentiated from others through the tutorial class mechanism. Shortly after the start of autumn semester in 2019, the Dream School decided to carry out the weekend tutorial classes to improve the test scores of the students in class 9.5. The tutorial classes were not compulsory, but schoolteachers and managers tried their best to persuade all the top students to participate. Eventually, nearly all the students at the top of Class 9.5 took part in the weekend classes, and they received special guidance on homework and detailed explanations of test questions from teachers in different subjects. In addition, at the suggestion of the head teacher of class 9.5, Mrs. Fan, my intention to organize a voluntary English study group turned into a formal remedial class consisting of almost all top students. Through the tutorial class, the top students in Class 9.5 were differentiated from the rest of class 9.5 depending on how long they studied, what they studied, and how closely they communicated with their teachers and me.

The divisions between the top students and the average students in class 9.5 was further solidified in the second semester of grade 9. In May 2020, a strengthened version of the tutoring classes was implemented for 17 top students in class 9.5. From Monday to Friday, the 17 students went to the school meeting room to attend English or Math tutorial classes between 12:30pm and 13:30pm, and they also needed to take part in tutorial classes led by teachers of other subjects after evening study sessions at 8:30 pm. On the weekends, the school also arranged six consecutive weeks of special

tutorial projects (See Table 4). The 17 students needed to receive extra training according to the schedule shown below until the end of *zhong kao*. In order to keep these students focused on their studies, Principal Zhong allowed the 17 students to live together in better dormitories without paying extra fees. As a result, the top students were not only separated from the average students in terms of learning space and time, but also in terms of living space. This further widened the gap between top students and other children in school. In doing so, the school narrowed the possibilities of action and thought for the top students by trying to ensure that the top students constituted their own subjectivity without deviating from the subject positions produced by disciplinary power and discourse.

Table 4. The after-school tutorial arrangement.

The After-School Tutorial Arrangement							
	Subject	First round	Second round	Third round	Fourth round	Fifth round	Sixth round
1	Physics	Friday evening	Saturday morning	Saturday afternoon	Saturday evening	Sunday morning	Sunday afternoon
2	Chinese	Saturday morning	Saturday afternoon	Saturday evening	Sunday morning	Sunday afternoon	Friday evening
3	Ethics and Rule of Law	Saturday afternoon	Saturday evening	Sunday morning	Sunday afternoon	Friday evening	Saturday morning
4	Math	Saturday evening	Sunday morning	Sunday afternoon	Friday evening	Saturday morning	Saturday afternoon
5	English	Sunday morning	Sunday afternoon	Friday evening	Saturday morning	Saturday afternoon	Saturday evening
6	History	Sunday afternoon	Friday evening.	Saturday morning	Saturday afternoon	Saturday evening	Sunday morning
7	Chemistry	Friday evening	Saturday morning	Saturday afternoon	Saturday evening	Sunday morning	Sunday afternoon
Note: Take turns according to the table above. Morning includes the morning self-study section, and afternoon includes the noon self-study section. In case of special circumstances, teachers can negotiate with each other to transfer courses.							

School administrators not only used these mechanisms to keep students apart, but also to encourage the students themselves to develop and seek out a sense of rank and distinction. This was embodied in the daily discourse of school administrators. At an awards meeting, for example, the vice principal spoke to the high-ranking students: “I hope you have the good character of *chu yu ni er bu ran* (out of the mud but not stained) like lotus flowers”. Comparing the high-achievers to lotus flowers while likening other students to mud not only indicated the hierarchy between the high-achievers and low-achievers, but also encouraged the high-achievers to continue distinguishing themselves from the others. Another typical example of such discourse was when Principal Zhong preached at students on the playground. He told Xing and several other top students that, “You are all good children, and you can all go to good high schools”. Then he turned his back and point to Shu Hao, who was playing basketball in a distance and said, “He has no opportunity (of entering a high school). Remember, he is different from you!”

However, as I will show later, the students did not share the opinions of their superiors. At the award meeting, in fact, the reaction of the rewarded students was quite cool. One boy whispered and complained that school bonus notebooks looked cheap, while a girl quietly dozed off in the back row. Similarly, after Principal Zhong left, the students who had been silent began to grow angry. “How can he look down on upon people?” one boy said. “We’re all students. What’s the difference?” another added. The children’s words show the limits of the official definitions of children’s

identities. But what new definitions of their identities emerged? How did the children view each other? To what extent, if at all, did they deconstruct the fixed and rigid labels the ranking system constructed for them? To seek answers, I observed and documented the differences between classes before addressing questions to the children.

6.2.1 The uncaptured nature of “graded child” identity

In order to obtain first-hand experience of the difference between good class and bad class, I asked Mrs. Yang, who taught English in class 9.5 and class 9.4, to allow me to visit and record the situations in the two classes. I worried that my presence as an observer may make the class performance different from usual. However, I was surprised to find that though the students in Class 9.5 only reacted to my presence at first, but soon grew accustomed to it. The students in 9.4 did not seem to care about my presence at all. Moreover, the students in class 9.5 came to me after class, and said, “Because of your presence, our English teacher was more patient with us than usual”. Indeed, children as active agents were able to observe us adults too. Although I could not quite be an insider or a complete passive observer, children’s reactions to my presence and their insight into their teacher’s altered performance also said something about their understanding of their identities. This shows that children, as active agents, can gain insight into the mobility of power relations in adult society and the changes in their identity formation that this mobility brings. On the evenings of October 14 and 15, I attended the English evening self-study of class 9.5 and class 9.4

and wrote:

14.10.2019, The Class 9.5, English evening class.

Teacher Yang told students that I was here to observe the lecture and asked them to stop talking. Some students laughed and chatted in a low voice for a minute and then quieted down. At this time, Teacher Yang looked serious and began to criticize the students who did not finish their homework on time. She punished the students by making them complete their homework in the corridor. Almost a dozen students went out of the classroom, and several of them were the top students in the class.

Teacher Yang then began to lead the students in the classroom to read English vocabulary. About ten minutes later, Teacher Yang asked the students in the classroom to learn the vocabulary by themselves, and she went out again to check on the students in the corridor. After she left, some students in the classroom whispered to each other. There was an occasional burst of laughter in the classroom, and Xing, the monitor, warned them, "Stop talking". Although there was still some buzz of chatting afterwards, it did not expand to the extent that it interfered with other students' reading of English words. A few minutes later, a student heckled that it was another student's birthday, so a small group of people sang Happy Birthday, and then more and more people joined in the chorus. After singing, all the students in the class applauded and laughed. And Xing didn't stop it

as he did last time. Since then, the atmosphere in the class had changed. Some students began to speak and laugh loudly. And other students were also attracted by those who made improvisational performances in the classroom. The disorder in the class continued until Teacher Yang returned to the classroom. Under the supervision of the teacher, the students returned to the state of learning and began to recite, copy and memorize English words.

14.10.2019, The Class 9.4, English evening class.

Although the bell had already rung, many students continued to talk loudly, stand, passed notes, laughed or quarrel with each other. Teacher Yang had a hard time calming them down. When Yang asked them to read vocabularies, the students imitated them clumsily, and often made different sounds, so that Yang had to demonstrate the pronunciation of the same vocabulary again and again. Not all students followed Teacher Yang' demonstration. The students sitting in front of me reading novels, falling asleep, and talking blatantly, caring not much about my presence. The voice of students read English then became thinner and thinner, and it seemed in the end only the several female students were following the teacher.

“Give it back to me!” Suddenly, the boy in a red T-shirt on the left aisle stood up and shouted angrily to another boy in a black T-shirt on the right aisle. The boy in red stood up, left his seat and crossed the seats in the middle to grab the pen held

in the hand of another boy. When Teacher Yang tried to stop them, the boy in red had already taken back his pen and returned his seat on the left. Ignoring Teacher Yang's scolding and the gaze of other students, he continued to read his novel without saying any word. Not waiting for Teacher Yang to take a breath, another boy leaning against the window started to shout, "XXX (the name of a student) said he was not interested in English at all!" Then he laughed, followed by laugh of other students. Faced with more and more provocations from students, Yang had no way to teach, but punished the whole class to copy English words 10 times. It was only 15 minutes after class began.

After Teach Yang announced the punishment, some students kept making noises or doing their own stuffs. A boy sitting next to me fixed his attention on a Rubik's cube. I asked him, "Aren't you going to copy the words as Teacher said?" Without looking back, he replied with a lazy voice, "I will do it later". After he put down the Rubik's Cube, he stared out of the window and spun his pen. It seemed that he was in no hurry to copy the words. After a while, I asked again, "Is it not good to finish it earlier?" He answered, "We are asked to copy (the materials of the textbooks) every day. What's the difference of doing it early from doing it late?"

Comparing these two scenarios, I sensed that the labels of "good class" and "bad class" do not accurately capture reality. The students in class 9.5 were not as

disciplined as I had imagined. This was embodied in the fact that more than a dozen students, including the so-called top students in class 9.5, failed to complete their homework on time, and that the whole class could only maintain discipline under the prolonged observation of their teacher. I also sensed that the students in class 9.4 seemed to unashamed of being “bad”. When Teacher Yang lost her temper, the students either ignored her or pretended to be compliant, apologizing with crooked smiles and continuing to make trouble in class. Just as the Rubik’s cube boy suggested, they saw punishment as common and it neither made students felt guilty nor motivated them to learn. Instead of saying the students in class 9.4 were bad at learning, it is perhaps more accurate to say they have given up on taking themselves seriously as students. Children’s performance in classrooms suggests that the school discipline is still external to children. And the meanings the grading system gives to children’s identities may only partially take up children’s subjectivity. By "partially", I mean I cannot judge merely from participant observation to what extent children reject the importance of education and the value of grading system itself. To explore this question, I used in-depth interviews to elicit children's own perspectives on the grading system.

6.2.2. Children’s views on the “graded child”.

With this question in mind, I asked some of my child participants who were seen by teachers as typical representatives of the top, average and bottom groups. Xing, Sun and Yue Yue were ranked among the top ten students in grade nine tests. They drew

the attention of teachers and enjoyed all privileges the school gave to them. These included attending specially designed tutoring classes after school, living in air-conditioned dormitories free of charge for the last semester, and being given priority to enjoy extra points in the high school entrance examination. Xiao Pang, Zhong Yi, and Ah Ye were seated in class 9.5 as well, yet they enjoyed only partial privileges. For example, they were allowed to attend to the English tutorial classes developed by me yet could not attend tutorial classes for other subjects in the last semester. Shu Hao, Ah Lang and Xing Yi, who sat in the “bad” classes, not only got poor grades in every exam, but were often absent-minded or even disruptive during class. Interestingly, none of these children fully identified with the labels placed on them by the grading system. Their words again echoed with what Derrida calls deconstruction, namely, the questioning and challenging of the hierarchy of binary structures such as a hierarchy of good and bad students. Children’s constant doubt of the meanings of these labels and vacillation between them prevent the central identity—the graded student—from becoming instilled in the children.

The top students: not truly good.

The stereotype of Chinese school-age children often echoes Woronov (2011)’s account of the concept of development and how it privileges academic achievement in the constitution of student subjectivity. Normally, school-age children would be buried in homework and books and would study hard to live up to their parents’ and teachers’ expectations of them. Put differently, children’s agency is embodied in their

efforts to obey the school norms and view themselves as subjects in line with these standards and the concept of development. Xiao (2014), for instance, found that most left-behind children at rural boarding schools dedicated themselves to studying hard in order to repay their parents' sacrifice. Similarly, Murphy (2020) claimed that left-behind children were able to observe the hardships of *da gong* (migrant work) undertaken by their parents, and therefore generally cherished education as the only way to escape the same fate. The tutoring program gave the top students fewer days off, made them endure heavier workloads, and made them live under strict supervision. In view of this, when I asked children to use visual imagery to articulate their views about their school life, I thought they would focus mostly on study.

However, nearly all the child participants, including Xing, Sun and Yue Yue, reported little about the learning-related issues such as competition, homework burdens, exam-related anxiety, study interests and teachers' teaching styles. Sun took a picture of Xing falling asleep in class (see Picture 10) and Xing took a picture showing that he attempted to turn the camera to his back to have some fun in an English class (see Picture 11). These pictures captured the absent minds of the top students and their disengagement with teachers in class. When asked how he perceived his learning status, Xing told me that he actually did not feel too much pressure. He confessed, "I knew I wasn't active in my studies, but I don't feel motivated (to make myself active)". Sun and Yue Yue felt the same as Xing, and they tried to explain to me why.

Sun: “The so-called good students such as me and Xing are actually the underachieving students. This can be seen from our total score in the exam. I was often secretly pleased that it was very easy to become a top student in such a small environment. But I knew that, the real good students should feel the pressure. The students with better grades were supposed to have higher pressure. But we don’t have much pressure.”

Yue Yue: “I am kind of a salted fish (laugh)—I will do what the teachers asked us to do, but nothing more than that. Our class monitor (Xing) is about the same as me. When he plays, he could play crazily. In fact, I think the only difference between us (good students) and them (poor students) is that the teacher in our class is stricter with us. Other than that, everyone is same, being just as playful.”

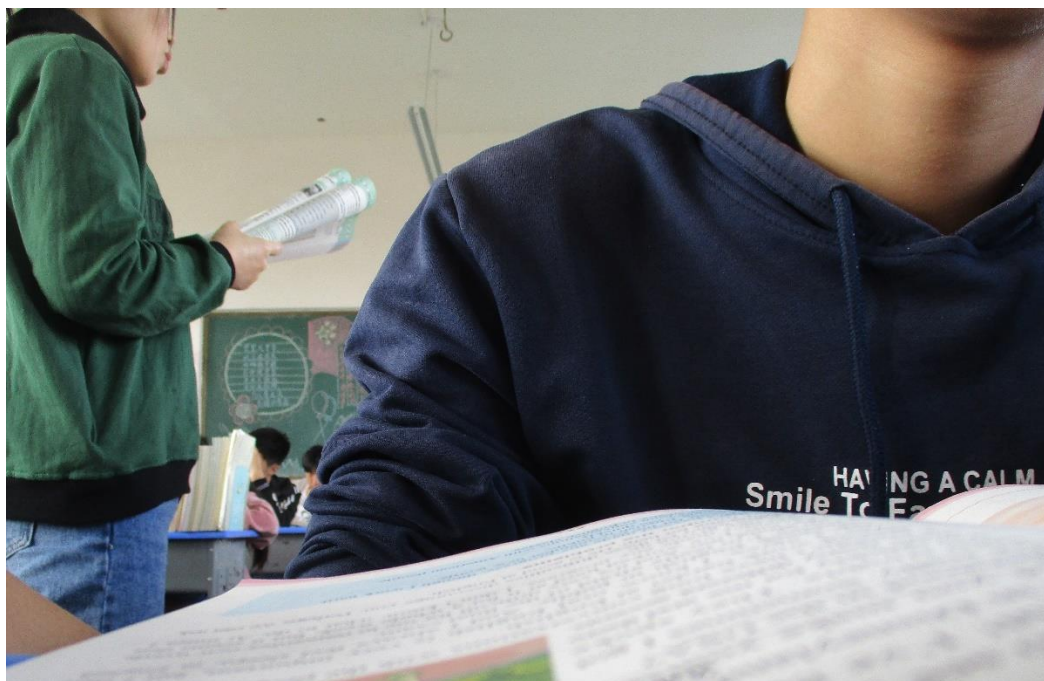
So, although the top students were treated differently, they did not identify themselves as good students or as different from others. This meant that the graded imagination was only imposed on top students’ behavior, but not on their consciousness. Children may not deny the significance of the grading system, but they are aware of the gap between the reality constituted by the grading system and the actual situation of their academic performance. More importantly, they don’t take test scores as the singular metric of value. Without adult supervision, these top students, like all other students, seek fun and excitement. Yue Yue even compared himself to a salted fish and claimed that he was neither driven to learn nor ambitious for academic success. He confessed

that he didn't feel guilty or stressed about it. His words demonstrated that children are able to articulate themselves according to a value system which stresses the experience of play and devalues functionality or practicality. And hence, Yue Yue's words weaken the popular discourse that takes academic success as the primary measure of social value for youth (Cockain, 2020; Woronov, 2011).

Picture 10. Xing falls asleep in class (taken by Sun).



Picture 11. Seeking fun by taking photos (taken by Xing)



However, it is also worth noting that children may also align with “official discourse” from time to time, especially when they find it difficult to ascribe their academic failure to someone else. For example, when asked why the students at school generally had poor exam grades, Xing thought for a moment and replied to me that, “I am not sure. But I think maybe we are too lazy or playful”. For the same question, Sun commented that, “I feel this is because students at this school are not clever”. Living in a world permeated by adult discourse, children’s self-articulation is still, to a large extent, constrained by accounts of the causality of individual responsibility and academic success. Put differently, although children are able to rework the disciplinary power acting on their conduct and behavior, it is hard for them to get rid of the adult discourse that ascribes their academic performance to individual talent and self-worth. As a result, children’s subjectivity is simultaneously constituted by

both their subjective experience of school discipline and their endorsement of the discourse that legitimates this discipline. Their subjectivity is thus inconsistent, conflicting, and fluid, vacillating between acknowledgment of and doubt of the grading system.

The average students: neither good nor bad.

Compared with the so-called “top students”, who did not experience much academic pressure, the children labelled as “average students” often oscillated between the desire to learn and the impulse to give up learning. These students fluctuated between feeling confident in and insecure about their learning aptitude, between being hopeful and hopeless about their future academic achievements, and between strict and lenient management of their own behavior. So, being an average student, for children, meant that they felt excluded from the group of top students, yet were also not willing to identify with the bad students.

Ah Ye, Zhong Yi and Xiao Pang were typical examples. Ah Ye was a girl who lived downstairs from me with her grandmother and younger brother. When I first met her, she was crying about the weekend tutorial class. Tearfully she told me that she did not want to attend tutorial class at all because she believed that the tutorial classes were set up for top student but not for regular students like her. “Keeping pace with the normal classes had been exhausting enough. Attending tutorial class was just a waste of time for me”. She later told me what really puzzled her was that very often she felt

motivated to study hard, but the “*huan jing*” (environment) didn’t allow her to do so.

When I asked the meaning of *huan jing*, she explained:

“Take our class for example. I think the first three rows in the classroom exclusively belonged to “xue ba” (学霸; the excellent students). Teachers will only pay attention to those students. In contrast, the students sitting in the back of the classroom were generally “xue zha” (学渣; the study slackers). Sometimes I got an impulse to sit in the last row because I could not get the material into my head (xue bu jing qu).”

By environment (“*huan jing*”), Ah Ye meant the situation of average students being treated poorly compared to the top students in class. The top students were seated closer to teachers and received more attention and supervision whereas others were placed farther away from and had less interaction with teachers. Murphy (2020) had a similar observation when she taught English in a rural primary school. She found that the students seated in the back rows often averted their eyes to avoid answering the question she asked. However, Murphy only showed the observable effects of seating distribution on children from observation, and she did not explore how the children themselves saw such a spatial distribution. In this study, child participants related this seat arrangement to the exclusion and neglect of teachers. Zhong Yi’s accounts expressed his feelings of being excluded.

Zhong Yi moved from class 9.4 to class 9.5 due to his outstanding grade in class 9.4. Bei Bei said that Zhong Yi loved chemistry, so I asked her to explain a picture she took of him sleeping during chemistry class. She told me that every time Zhong Yi raised his hand and tried to answer a question, the teacher ignored him. In Bei Bei's opinion, the chemistry teacher valued only the top students and looked down on the average ones, let alone those who had transferred from a poor class. What Beibei said may or may not be true, but children's feelings and subjective understandings of seat arrangements correspond in any case to real behavior. Since then, Zhong Yi decided to sleep in every chemistry class but work hard secretly at night in his dormitory. In the second semester of grade 9, Zhong Yi argued with Mrs Fan in the staff office about the seating arrangement. He claims that he objected not for himself but for his fellow students in the back row.

Zhong Yi: "when those sitting in the front row got confused about what the teacher said, it was very convenient for them to ask the classmates next to them to get the answer. But if we students seated at the back row did not understand a question, we could not find answers from others next to us as easily as the top students. Very often we could not keep up with the teacher only because we get stuck on a small problem."

For Zhong Yi, the average students felt excluded from the interactions between top students and teachers, not only because teachers attended more to the top students, but

also because top students developed a group rapport that the other students could not easily access. Furthermore, Zhong Yi's passion for studying was not always strong but rather quite sporadic. He did not last long studying chemistry in his dormitory at night, but often turned to playing with his cell phone. Zhong Yi was seen by teachers and himself as a bit addicted to online games. He once gave up his cell phone to me to show his determination to mitigate his internet use. But two weeks later, Ah Cheng told me that Zhong Yi had borrowed his classmate's cell phone to play games again. When I met Zhong Yi, he slapped himself harshly in remorse and swore he would not do it again. But soon, he was re-engaged in games and put learning aside. Similarly, Ah Ye told me that when she felt anxious and frustrated about school, she would turn to her friends who had lower grades to get consolation. Being with friends with lower test scores made Ah Ye feel that she was not so bad, and it lessened her guilt over exam failure. However, when this anxiety was gone, so was her motivation to learn.

Ah Ye and Zhong Yi's inability to stick to their studies reveals another side of *huan jiang* (environment): that students are easily influenced by the students who did not study. Zhong Yi's roommate, Xiao Pang, illuminated this point. He once confided to me his distress about the difficulty of learning in an environment where few students cared about learning and saw it as unwelcome, worthless, and weird. Unlike the top students who could enjoy learning spaces created by teachers, other students had to find these spaces by themselves. Xiao Pang often felt excluded when he tried to study in dormitories, because everyone else was playing with their mobile phones. But

when he attempted to find a quiet place to study, he was teased by others.

For Xiao Pang, *huan jing* (environment) also meant being stuck in peer groups consisting of “bad students” who did not care about studying and wanted to play all day. Such an environment attaches importance to “fitting in” through playing with each other rather than “standing out” by gaining high scores in exams. In short, the unfavorable environment for the average students, on the one hand, means that they are always placed outside the elite group, thereby earning little attention from teachers and enjoying few of the priorities I mentioned before. On the other hand, it also means they are constantly “tempted” by so-called bad students into playing games, out of fear that they will not fit in with the majority of the students at school. As thus, the label “average student” does not denote a stable and fixed identity to children, but a fluid, even contradictory, position.

The “bad student”: we are good people!

Students in Class 9.5 may have doubted if they were truly “good students”, but students from class 9.3 and 9.4 readily accepted the label of “*cha sheng*”, or bad students. However, they did not see themselves as inferior to the students in class 9.5. Talking with Xing Yi and Shu Hao from class 9.3, and Ah Lang from class 9.4, I sensed they were not looking at themselves according to the standards imposed by the grading system. Instead, they had normalized the status of “bad students” in a number of ways. Firstly, the students with poor grades comprised the majority of students,

which made the underachieving students feel that they fit in. Secondly, some schoolteachers “gave up” on the underachieving students, becoming apathetic toward either their academic failures or their disengagement in class. This gave the students in class 9.3 and class 9.4 chances to constantly redefine the boundaries of ‘dos and don’ts’ and rebuild their relationships with teachers. As thus, while the grading system labelled these students as “bad students”, they independently produced themselves as new moral subjects.

Shu Hao took a picture (See Picture 12) showing the normal situation in class 9.3. From the photo, I saw boys and girls talking with each other, reading novels, knitting scarves, or falling asleep, and I assumed that class had ended. But then I learned that the teacher had been actively teaching when Shu Hao recorded this moment. Shu Hao told me that this was the situation in their class every day. Xing Yi, the classmate of Shu Hao, articulated her opinions on this situation.

“We just get used to it. And we have been very familiar with this (not learning) class atmosphere for a long time so that no one would see it as a problem. We know that we really can’t learn, and teachers know it as well. So as long as we don’t go too far in disturbing the class order, the teacher won’t interfere with us.”

Xing Yi described herself as an introverted and obedient girl. She never made trouble in class and never disobeyed the teacher’s orders. However, instead of criticizing the

“disobedient” students showed in the picture, she saw their behaviour in a positive light. For her, this behaviour helped maintained class order and helped children get through the boring class time while the teachers could complete their basic teaching tasks without interruption. In other words, when the grading system lumped all the underperformers together, it created a small environment in which teachers were discouraged from teaching and students did not want to learn. This in turn provided space for the children to standardize the behaviors that schooling normally considers deviant and unruly. When asked what behaviors should not be done, Xing Yi thought for a while and said, “Maybe fighting and smoking”. “Why?” I asked. She said, “Because teachers will prohibit these behaviors and punish the violators harshly”.

Picture 12. The class situation of a “bad class”.



Note: the exposure of face in the picture has been approved by the student.

So, I turned to Shu Hao to understand how he viewed smoking, because he once revealed to me that he was a smoker. To my surprise, Shu Hao claimed that violating the school rules did not necessarily mean one was deficient in moral value. He also said that being punished by teachers would not prevent him from earning a decent reputation. He recalled being caught smoking in the toilet by the head teacher. The head teacher slapped his face and kicked his leg in anger. He told me that he accepted teacher's punishment because he felt that the head teacher was good to him, but that he did not think smoking made him a bad student or person. In Shu Hao's opinion, smoking in the toilet did not bother others. Moreover, he respected teachers and treated his friends very well. He claimed that, "I am a bad student. I admit it. But I am a good person".

In addition to smoking, Shu Hao engaged in drinking alcohol, fighting, and getting a girlfriend onto campus (which was prohibited by the school). However, he was not considered a troublesome boy by his teachers and classmates, but rather thought of as a boy of "fine" character. The child participants explained to me that they often value a "good person" more than a "disciplined student". In specific, being a 'good person' meant being loyal and trustworthy, and getting along well with others, whereas being a 'disciplined student' referred to policing one's own behaviour but had little to do with others. Therefore, smoking in private spaces did not prevent Shu Hao from maintaining good relationships with others and thus did not ruin his reputation as a

“good person”. In addition, in Shu Hao’s opinion, accepting teachers’ punishments testified to both his respect for teachers and his good social character—he knew how to maintain good relationships with adults. And that’s something that many of his peers did not know.

Al Lang further explained the difference between being a “good person” and being a “disciplined student”. Contrary to Beibei and Zhong Yi, who were moved from class 9.4 to class 9.5, Al Lang was transferred from class 9.5 to class 9.4 for his poor grades. He shared with me his view on the two classes. He expressed his love for class 9.4 and contempt for class 9.5. In his opinion, the students in class 9.4 were funny, interesting, and loyal, while the students in class 9.5 were rigid, stingy, and cliquy.

Ah Lang: “The students in class 9.5 were cowards! I could not believe that one reported his (or her) classmate cheating on an exam. Our people in Class 9.4 would never do that. Although we had poor grades, we never betray each other. Moreover, the students in our bad class actually have closer bonds with our teachers. We dare to joke with the teacher, and message bless to teachers in festivals. They (the good students) would not do this.”

Valuing “good people” thus suggests that children separate social value from academic value. They place themselves outside the mainstream view that exam scores are the key indicator of children’s worth or that academic failure means personal

failure. Through this, Ah Lang subverts the hierarchy between the “good class” and “bad class” prescribed by the grading system. Interestingly, Al Lang’s words also show that the student-teacher relationship had diversified. Under the teacher-dominated and exam-orientated model, the relationships between teachers and students were essentially unequal, with students being subordinate to teachers. However, such a hierarchy was dissolved when children were no longer viewed through a lens that emphasized student academic achievement. In fact, as graduation day approached, the relationship between teachers and students in bad classes grew more flexible. This was because, when graduation was closer, both students and teachers gave up pursuing grade improvements. Gradually, a variable and multi-faceted teacher-student relationship was formed – adults and children could be teachers and students in class time but be friends at other times.

So far, it can be seen that children labeled by the grading system as top, average, and bad students often do not see themselves completely according to these standards. Child participants often questioned the meaning of these classifications or subverted the hierarchical relationship between different grades. Their understanding of their identities was based on multiple measures, such as sociability, loyalty to friends, trustworthiness, and humor rather than by exam grades alone. In this sense, the “installation” of the centred identity of graded children failed. It can be concluded that firstly, these children’s subjectivity cannot be reduced to an object endowed with an essential identity. Rather, their subjectivity comprises inconsistent identities, and

children constantly negotiate the way these identities are assembled. Second, the constant negotiation of subjectivity is concomitant with the variations of power relations. Ah Lang and Shu Hao suggest, for instance, that as the relationship between teachers and students changes, so does their sense of identity.

6.2.3 Deconstructing the “grading system”.

Children’s understanding of the “graded student” identity echoes Derrida’s idea of deconstruction that works in “overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated” (Stocker,2020). Although the idea of the “graded child” is formed by binary institutions that explicitly distinguish a “good child” from a “bad child”, children’s interpretation of positions in the grading system complicates this dualism. More precisely, children tended to believe that their graded status cannot be identified as a dichotomy. For example, grades in the eyes of Xing seemed to be neither good or bad, or alternatively are both good and bad at the same time. When he described this, I could not help but think of the “ghost” (Derrida, 2012), “pharmakon” (Derrida, 1977), and “hymen” (Derrida, 1981) in Derrida’s writing that cannot be confirmed as “present or absent”, “cure or poison”, and “inside or outside”. For Derrida, texts can never monopolize meanings because the difference between the signified and the signifier is never fixed. Returning to the context of grading system, the “good” students do not view themselves as good while “bad” students do not view themselves as bad, which displays deconstruction from within the system.

Teachers' views on grading systems can well illustrate this point. Teachers refer to the grading system by a colloquial name: *qia jian* education. *Qia jian*, literally translated as “pinching off young shoots”, refers to how schools compete to recruit high-achieving students and ensure the top students become “young shoots” for the next stage of learning institutions. However, the unbalanced educational development rooted in the urban–rural divide put the Dream School at a disadvantage in recruiting high-achieving students. As many teachers have mentioned, it has become increasingly difficult for rural middle schools to recruit top students in recent years. On the one hand, the public blindly followed the standard of judging schools by the number of top students. On the other hand, county schools attracted high-achieving students from rural areas with generous offers that rural schools often did not have. Driven by a cultural and practical interest, most of the outstanding rural students chose to study in schools in the county seat.

Additionally, the explosive growth of private schools in county seats sharpened the schools' competition for students in enrollment. As a state-level poverty-stricken county, G County had been long faced a lack of educational funds. To improve the educational infrastructure, the local government introduced a policy called “民办公助” (the private capital operates, the public finance supports). This policy stipulated that the local government allow teachers whose salaries were funded by the government to work for private schools. These teachers' positions would be retained

in public schools and their salaries would be covered by the public finance. This policy stimulated private investment in local education, but the boom of private schools also led to excessive competition for students. As a math teacher recalled, about ten years ago, although many rural students with excellent grades were recruited by county schools, there remained lots of above-average students in rural schools: “We (teachers) could teach them... but now we are unable to recruit even average students. What else can we do but keep an eye on a few decent students?”

Such words suggest a vicious cycle: enrollment disadvantages made it hard for the Dream School to cultivate outstanding students, which in turn led to a decrease of the school’s reputation and difficulty recruiting in the future. The grading system of Dream School was implemented in this background. However, the inferior status of the school itself blurred the definition of “good student” and “bad student” within it. This is consistent with Derrida’s argument that “there is nothing outside the text” (1977, p. 158). However, it should be noted that although the element of deconstruction dwells in the text itself, this does not mean that deconstruction will happen naturally. In this study, we can see that it is through children’s reflection on the grading system that deconstruction is promoted. To be specific, students are well aware of the gap between the signifier (the centred identities given by the grading system) and the signified (their sense of self perceived through daily experience). Such an awareness leads them to reinterpret the grading and their own status, albeit their interpretations are always wavering. In other words, the process of

deconstruction embodies children's agency—they are able to judge and rejudge themselves by a variety of standards rather than taking up any one fixed identity.

6.3 Short conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed how children respond to the internal time-space structure of the boarding school. The arrangement of time and space in schools is closely related to adult-imposed views of “rural left-behind children”. For example, the creation of an enclosed system in rural schools is grounded in the view of development. Rural left-behind children are firstly seen as a vulnerable group in less-developed environments and then thought of as needing special “remedies” for development. The popularity of grading system is also essentially rooted in the educational desire prevalent in China's society as a whole, in which children's worth is measured only in reference to their academic success. The school-prescribed time-space structure derived from these adult-created views also attempts to make children to view themselves in the same way. Put differently, it aims to make children understand their identities within the framework of development and educational worth and hence to regard “developing child” and “graded child” as centres among all their identities.

However, the children I met did not take these identities as core and central. They gave meaning to their own situations largely based on their subjective experiences rather than on how they were viewed by school adults. In resisting, questioning, and avoiding the time and space prescribed by school, children embodied their agency.

However, it is worth noting that children's agency does not work necessarily to deny the "centred identity". Occasionally, children actually agree that they can be a "developing child" or a "graded child". Rather, they do not see these concepts or identities as determining their nature and overall worth. In their view, being a person with a sense of humor, a loyal friend, a reliable companion, etc., is not necessarily inferior to being a developing child and a high-achieving student. The hierarchy of multiple identities can be constantly changing, and a specific identity can be given new meanings again and again. In this sense, these children can be seen as "de-centred subjects", dissociated from the centred identities imposed by adult society and instead embodying the diversity, fluidity and undecidability of their own self-identity.

Chapter 7 Children's Interaction with School Adults

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that children were not fully dominated by the closed system and grading system of school and that they did not accept the “centred identities” that these systems attempted to imbue in them. In this chapter, I will shift the focus from children's interaction with ‘systems’ to children's interaction with adults. Specifically, I will reveal how children gain insight into the conflict between different forms of power within the school, namely the modernized disciplinary power and traditional form of power. By “traditional form of power”, I mean the authority possessed by adults by way of acting the visible coercion or violence on children. As discussed in chapter 5, there is no circulation of single power within the school. Under the process of modernization, either the disciplinary power or the traditional adult authority is unlikely to be permeated every corner of the Dream School. The tension of competing forms of power in turn provided children with room to exempt themselves, at least temporarily, from being caught by any type of power that shapes their identity.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how disciplinary power works to produce the “developing child” and the “graded child”. Similarly, in this chapter, I will introduce the “supervised child” and the “submissive child” childhood models. The slight difference, however, lies in that the “supervised child” corresponds to the effects of the disciplinary power while the “submissive child” corresponds to the influence of

the traditional adult authority. Specifically, the mechanisms of supervision from schools and the government attempt to discipline the left-behind children to view themselves as the objects of ongoing observation and surveillance, while the adult authority is often exerted to make the children submit to adults by making children fear external physical forces.

Section 7.1 starts by discussing the supervision system. The daily checks, the newly adopted e-monitoring device of school, and a series of documentation and surveys implemented by the government on children echoed the belief that rural left-behind children needed interventions from non-family sectors to supplement the insufficient parental monitoring. These interventions were carried out with the main purpose of protecting children from being victimized and/or engaging in delinquent behaviours, so as to produce the “supervised child”. In reality, however, the child participants felt that it was quite easy to escape from the “supervising eyes”. They may counter-monitor the school adults or provide false information in government-launched investigations. Very interestingly, the school adults may also take actions to evade governmental control over them, which indirectly facilitates children’s escape from supervision system.

In section 7.2, I, therefore, examine the nature and effect of adult authority on children. I argue that the adult authority embodies the continuing influence of the Chinese traditional culture as I also attempt to construct the image of a “submissive

child”. The traditional form of power and the modern disciplinary power colluded at times, making children suffer a lot. However, the two forms of power could collide as well, leaving possibilities for them to not submit to either of them. In particular, the school adults do not always hold the traditional value, but alternatively, adopt traditional and modern values in parenting and schooling. This leads to that the relationship between children and adults is always in flux. In this light, I will also discuss the idea that both children and adults could be regarded as “becoming”, which means that they have to constantly negotiate their relationships to accommodate multiple social norms and value systems. The description of children’s active response to both the supervision system and the adult authority suggests that children are capable of decentring the identities that both forms of power try to instil in them. This further illuminated via the concept of the thought of the “decentred subject” proposed in chapter 6.

7.1 The supervision and the “supervised child”.

The lack of adequate parental supervision of left-behind children because of parental labour migration has been always a great concern for the general public. Gu (2021), for instance, analyzed the public discourse on rural left-behind children that have appeared in mainstream newspaper articles and policy documents since the early 2000s and found that these discourses indicated that migrant parents were negligent in their guardianship responsibility and that grandparents were inadequate guardians or caregivers. Extant research also reported the negative association between lack of

parental supervision and left-behind children's mental well-being and conduct (e.g., Mao, Zang, & Zhang, 2020; Song, 2018; Chen, 2017; Yang, 2016; Jiang, 2015; Wu, Lu, & Kang, 2015). In 2016, the "Opinion" issued by China's State Council pointed out that "(labour migration) has led to the lack of family care and supervision for left-behind children, making them suffer mental health problems and even extreme behaviours" (the State Council of PRC, 2016). Whether in the news media, academic reports or government documents, left-behind children were often portrayed as a group lacking familial supervision. And the lack of supervision is damaging to left-behind children's well-being and all kinds of developmental outcomes.

In response, the Opinion (2016) called for a joint force of family, school, local government and other social sectors to provide a sound supervision system for rural left-behind children. These surveillance-related measures include but are not limited to 1. the town-level government, which is to set up special archives for each rural left-behind child, grasping basic information of their situations; 2. primary and secondary school, which should carry out overall management of left-behind children. Schools should not only supervise children's educational status, but also help parents/caregivers to grasp the situation of their children at school (such as via telephone, home visits, etc.); 3. School and other governmental or social sectors should establish a mandatory reporting system to report children's safety issues, such as children being released from custody, missing, or being subjected to domestic violence or illegal abuse; 4. schools, hospitals, social work institutions, township

governments, and other sectors should establish a sound evaluation system to investigate and evaluate rural left-behind children's safety, guardianship, and physical and mental health.

In line with the national policy as well as the social belief that rural left-behind children should be provided with special supervision, the Dream School implemented a series of measures to supervise child boarders. Generally, these supervising measures included a surveillance system that managed children's behaviours, as well as a registration system that subjected children to the force of scientific assessment and quantitative analysis. These measures aimed to change the status of rural left-behind children from unsupervised, semi-supervised to fully supervised, or in other words, to produce the "supervised child" identity. However, as I will show soon, the child boarders I met could evade the surveillance by actively exploring loopholes of supervision and counter-surveilled the school adult. Moreover, with help from school adults, they often provided false information in assessments or investigation projects initiated by the government. Obviously, children themselves did not participate in the process of producing the "supervised child" subject, nor did they make the "supervised child" central to their identities.

7.1.1 Daily checks, e-monitoring, and governmental documentation

The supervision system the child boarders were subjected to could be roughly divided into two levels. One level is conducted within the school, namely the school daily

checks and e-monitoring on children's conduct and habits. Another level is about the governmental documentation or paper works, which is a way to prove the school's compliance with the governmental control on rural populations, including teachers and rural children. Surely, the examination can be also a means of supervision, which makes each child the object of analysis according to the distribution and rank of test scores. However, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, most students at school have given up learning. In terms of school supervision, one math teacher, who has taught at the school for more than 20 years, comments that "the main purpose of our supervision is to keep the students from making trouble." Therefore, the examination mechanism will not be discussed in detail here.

The daily checks and e-monitoring.

Child boarders are first submitted to the daily checks of school adults. These checks mainly concern whether child boarders went to bed and got up on time every day, whether they played with mobile phones on campus, whether the dormitory and classroom were clean, and whether they were where they were supposed to be. Generally, schoolteachers, especially the headteachers, took turns to make regular checks on children while Principal Zhong, his two sons, and other school staff conducted spot checks on children at times. In addition, the Dream School was equipped with an electronic monitoring system, exerting a more subtle, invisible, and omnipresent sort of supervision. Dozens of e-cameras recorded different spaces at the school, such as the gates, classrooms, corridors, stairs, playground, canteens, the

school store, and so on. The real-time videos were displayed synchronously on a large screen in the surveillance control room and could also be viewed on the screens of mobile phones. Anyone who obtained the permission of the school was able to access the real-time video on phone, and this meant that not only teachers, school managers, but also migrant parents could now easily watch their children's behaviours at school. Electronic surveillance thus extended parental control and multiplied the visibility of children yet increased the invisibility of the supervisors. In this study, however, the children were well aware that they are constantly being watched by adults. It was such a feeling of both being confined and being watched all the time that reminded child boarders like Bei Bei and Shu Hao of prison. This might be different from Foucault (1995)'s discussion of the panopticon in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

Panopticon was a prison design proposed by Bentham. The circular building around the prison was divided into different cells, centred by a tower in the middle for surveillance. The supervisor in the tower could monitor any prisoner in any cell at any time while the prisoners could not see the supervisor. Foucault saw this as a metaphor for a modern disciplined society, in which, the likelihood of surveillance replaced the fact of surveillance so that everyone voluntarily complied with the power exercised on them. He even directly pointed out the functional similarity between prisons and other modern disciplinary institutions like schools, by asking "is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?"

(Foucault 1995, 228).

Now it is not uncommon for researchers to compare schools to prisons, offering a variety of empirical evidence to support or expand Foucault's idea (Gallagher, 2009). In particular, Prio (2008) saw the abuse of school video surveillance in a public school district in the USA as a sign of an increase of disciplinary power in a Foucauldian sense. Jiang and Ye (2015) investigated a rural boarding school in China's Sichuan province and found likewise that the installation of e-monitors enabled effective monitoring of students without the presence of teachers, which echoed the idea of a panopticon. Gao (2015) concluded arguing that many characteristics of China's rural boarding school she visited were already similar to the panopticon. If looking only at the techniques and strategies used by rural schools to surveil students, it is not difficult for scholars to observe the similarities between China's rural schools and what Foucault described as a panopticon. However, the key to Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon was an observation that power could be exercised in a productive way, enabling the subjects to govern themselves in the same way that they were governed (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). From the children's perspective, as I will show later, the supervision means of dream School was far from achieving this effect. Instead, the implementation process of supervision still reflects the visible and intermittent authority held by adults, rather than the invisible disciplinary power that can continue to play a role in children's consciousness.

The documentation or paper works

Apart from daily checks and e-monitoring, supervision also included the government-assigned series of survey and statistics activities. Foucault saw this as the “system of permanent registration”, one characteristic of modern disciplinary power. For him, “the registration of the pathological must be constantly centralized” (1995,196).

Individuals could be only related to these pathological attributes through the representation of power, namely the registration system. In this way, a more thorough control over the population is made possible (Foucault, 1995, 196). Similarly, the registration of the rural population, including rural children could be centralized as well. Individual information would be recoded in both a written form and digital form in order to form a massive database that would control the rural student population more effectively. The Dream School administration entailed the conduct of a lot of paperwork and documentation bearing school children’s age, gender, health condition, safety, family economic status, family structure, and residing status. Through the registration system or the documentation, all the information would fall into the field between good and bad marks, normal and abnormal poles, and healthy or unhealthy status. The registered student was thus defined or produced as a “normal child”, a typically developing child, and if not, the school could take measures to correct the children who were considered to deviate from the normal, or manifest a lack of development.

Children were asked to report their information ranging from their physical health,

safety, exam grades, the contact information of caregivers, whether they were left-behind children and their family poverty issues. Each aspect of information collected could be subdivided into different surveys and records. For example, for the poverty registration, investigation forms had the titles “贫困家庭学生登记表” (the registration form of students from poor families), “低保家庭学生登记表” (the registration form of students from low-income families), “贫困学生生活补助发放花名册” (the list of students receiving living subsidies for poor students), and “义务教育阶段贫困家庭学生人数统计表” (the statistical table of the number of students from poor families during compulsory education). The documentation categorized these children into different sorts, transforming children into objects that could be analyzed, and thus their identity was further centred by the power of supervision. However, as I will explain soon, as adults often were overburdened in filling with documentation and often thought surveys and statistics as going through the motions, children were allowed to provide inaccurate or fake information. In other words, it was still in the process of interaction with teachers that children come to know about the governmental survey and statistics activities.

7.1.2 Counter-monitoring the school adults.

The time I started to doubt whether the concept of “panopticon” applied to the situation of the Dream School was when I met Zhong Yi. It was a Friday afternoon when teachers had left the office and been on their way home. I happened to find two boys wandering by the staff’s office. They hold a mobile phone in their hand and

looked at the screen from time to time. After exchanging a few words with them, I was told that they were updating games on their phones by “stealing” the WIFI from the staff office. “How could you know the password?”, “Aren’t you afraid that Principal Zhong may catch you playing with your mobile phone at campus?” I asked. One of the boys, whom I later knew as Zhong Yi, answered with a knowing smile:

“We don’t know the password, but we could use “the Universal WI-FI Key” app to crack it. The principal is not on campus now, because his car was not parked on campus... There are no people in the surveillance control room as well.”

Zhong Yi exhibited no qualms about discussing the ways to “steal” teachers’ WI-FI. When he knew I could play that game as well, he invited me to play with them in the student dorm room. Later, in Zhong Yi’s dorm, I asked Zhong Yi and his roommates about how they evaluated life as a boarder life. On the one hand, they complained a lot about the school management, but on the other hand, they shared proudly how they were pitting their wits against the school control. For example, child boarders complained that on hot summer days, they were only allowed to run the air conditioner for an hour at night. Soon they showed me their strategies to open the air conditioning at night — they downloaded a universal remote-control app (like the Universal WIFI Key app) to turn on the air conditioner secretly after the dorm managers and principal had checked the dorms. Meanwhile, they would assign a student to take responsibility for turning the air conditioner off around 5 am, and thus

when the dorm managers came to their dorm at around 6 am, they would not perceive their rooms cold. In addition, to play with their mobile phones at night without being caught by Principal Zhong, they usually put an iron bar against the closed dorm door on the first floor. This way, if someone suddenly came to check the dorms, the sound of a falling iron bar would alert the students upstairs, and they would have enough time to hide their phones. Children shared other similar strategies with me in laughing as if they were smarter than the school adults. This suggested that the children were not subject to the power of school but actively exercised their own power.

Later, I came to know that child boarders were also able to evade the surveillance of e-cameras by making use of school space flexibly. Zhong Yi and Shu Hao, for example, told me that although the school prohibited students from bringing mobile phones into the classroom, they did so very often. During breaks, they would walk to the areas being directly below the e-camera in the classroom, and play with their phones without fear, because they knew that the e-cameras could not capture the area right below itself. Ah Lang even smoked in that corner occasionally. In addition, Ah Lang and Shu Hao also told me that they once dated girls at the connecting corner between floor 3 and 4, because they knew that the corner was another monitoring dead end for the school e-surveillance system. I was curious about how they found these monitoring dead ends. Shu Hao explained to me as follows.

Shu Hao: You know, when we lose some personal belongings, we go to the

surveillance room and check the recorded videos. That was how I get to know the monitoring dead ends.

I: So, you stumbled on these monitoring dead ends by accident?

Shu Hao: Not at all. I also paid attention to it deliberately (smile).

Children's familiarity with facilities, locations and placement of e-cameras made it easy for them to evade surveillance and regain a certain degree of control of the space, albeit in limited ways. This indicated that the Dream School did not develop a panoptic gaze that made children visible in all places and at all times. In investigating another rural boarding school, Li (2016) discovered that left-behind children deliberately provoked the supervisor in the control room by giving their middle finger, making a face or pretending to smoke with a lollipop in front of the e-cameras. Li's research, like mine, provides evidence that left-behind children were not subject to invisible disciplinary power. But this study differed in the extent to which children resisted the monitoring system. In effect, the child boarders in my study did not show the same explicit hostility to the surveillance system as the children Li observed. Li ascribed children's straightforward resistance to the decline in the social status of rural teachers. According to him, as children saw their rural teachers with low salaries, low social status and lack of social connections outside the countryside, they tended to adopt a 'study is useless' (du shu wu yong lun) mentality and mocked that the rural teachers earned less than many of their migrant parents. However, the economic and social consequences that labour migration brought about to migrant families in L town

often saw huge disparity—through labour migration, some earned a lot while some still remained quite poor, which I will discuss in the following text. Because of this, teachers told me that parents' expectations for children's educational achievement varied widely. Some parents held very high educational expectations for their children, while others did not attach much importance to their children's test scores. In turn, the children I met did not develop a collective and direct resistance to all the teachers, although they may dislike individual teachers.

Very interestingly, not only did children avoid being monitored by adults, but they also countered monitoring school adults. A typical case was that teachers and students would rather address the principal as “董事长”, (Chairman of the Board) than “钟校长” (Principal Zhong). Students even gave him the nickname “老钟” (the old Zhong). This showed that students and teachers tended to deny Principal Zhong's function and service as an educator. Instead, they viewed Mr Zhong more concerning his ownership of the school and through a lens of commerce and authoritarianism. Thus, Mr Zhong's saying, conduct, orders, and family situations turned out to be under the gaze of the people who were governed. This was not like a panopticon, but a synoptic, a concept understood as a phenomenon of the few monitoring the many. Thomas Mathiesen (1997) who proposed the idea of the 'synopticon' pointed out that in the late modernity of postmodern society, surveillance was not always a top-down approach, but could occur from below. As a result, children paid more attention to the observer behind the camera than was the case in the modern discipline system that the

e-surveillance represented.

Examples that children counter-monitored the school adults were often found in children's chatter. After I visited the English classroom of Class 9.5, for example, several students came to my office to remind me that their English teacher was more patient than usual. They also taught me about the interpersonal networks of the school administration. Here was a snippet of their chat that I recorded:

A boy: I heard Zhong XX (Principal Zhong's full name) has ceased to be the chairman of the board. He had “传位子(or passed on the chairman position)” to Xiao Zhong (Principal Zhong's youngest son).

A girl: Why did not he pass on his position to Da Zhong (Principal Zhong's eldest son)?

Another boy: Because Da Zhong had a job in the county and his wife has been in charge of the kindergarten.

Children's discussion about Principal Zhong and his family indicated their capability of counter-monitoring adults. Not only that, but child boarders also understood the traditional power relations in this regard. The term “传位子” (passing the chairman position) implied the logic of a hereditary monarchy, namely, the king or emperor should pass the throne to his eldest son. Children were clear that the highest power owner of the school was not produced by any forms of intellectual merit, free

competition or democratic election but was based on the model of the hereditary system. Their insight into the nature of the school could not be separated from their constant monitoring of Principal Zhong's family. While some of the statements of the children were partial or inaccurate, their constant gaze on the school supervisors could not be denied, and they did know much more about how the school was run than the school supervisors thought they did.

It was also worth noting that the Internet and mobile phones played a significant role in counter monitoring school adults. Children may take advantage of cyberspace to monitor the conduct and words of the principal. For instance, children compared the school advertisements propagated online with their real lives and pointed out the fakeness of the advertisements. For the story, I introduced in Chapter 1 where I saw a video and audio in a QQ group recording Xing's confrontation with Principal Zhong, later I got to know that the video was recorded by Yong Na while the audio was recorded by her desk-mate. When the confrontation took place, they immediately used their mobile phone to record what was happening and posted these messages online. Yong Na regarded spreading that event online as a means of self-protection. She commented, "although the school was closed managed, the cyberspace was open and out of control of the principal". As expected, the message was quickly disseminated online and read by the migrant parents who worked in faraway cities, including Xing's father. That evening, Xing's grandparents hurried from the village to the school and said angrily that they wanted to ask the principal for an explanation. As a

result, Principal Zhong had to consider the gaze of the majority (students and other cyber citizens) on the Internet, and thus let the matter drop.

7.1.3 Falsifying documentation.

Although there were tons of documentation that classified these children into different sorts, in reality, children did not identify themselves according to the given categories, such as healthy/ unhealthy, poor/ non-poor, or left-behind/ non-left-behind in various documentation. I learnt this fact when I came to know Xiao Pang. One afternoon, I saw a group of students filling in a poverty registration form at the door of the office. They told me that they filled in the form to receive a living subsidy. Soon, I noticed that almost everyone filled in 2,000 or 3,000 RMB in the column of the annual income of their parents, that is to say, the monthly income of their parents was only about 200 RMB. I wondered if they had made a mistake because their cell phones had each been worth more than 1,000 yuan. The students then replied to me that they just followed their teacher's instructions in filling out the form. Soon, the teacher explained to me that the lower the students reported their parents' income, the easier they could get their applications approved. However, the teacher did not agree that all students were from poor families. He pointed to Xiao Pang, and said, "you know, his parents work in Shenzhen and could earn 30,000 to 40,000 yuan a month. His family is quite rich." I was surprised that the teacher said these words in front of the students yet none of the students reacted. They seemed to have become accustomed to making fake information in this survey and statistics activities. Later I asked Xiao Pang if he felt

awkward about the teacher's words. Xiao Pang replied in a calm tone, "it doesn't matter. We just did what they said. That's all. We didn't think about it deeply".

Being labelled as rich or poor did not matter to the children themselves. Xiao Pang got along well with students whose families were considered by teachers as really poor, such as Sun and Ah Tao. It seemed that children had no difficulty separating the labels assigned to them from their sense of themselves. For Foucault, the working of a power/ knowledge regime is to provide a "truth game" in which "*who* is authorized to speak matters more than the *intentions* and *actions* of any specific speaker" (Power, 2011). In filling out the registration forms, it was not the "poor/non-poor" children identified by expert knowledge who were authorized to speak, but rather the adults who carried out the survey and downplayed the expert knowledge. That is to say, the children I met did not enter the "truth" game informed by the survey activity, and thereby they would not easily take the group categories identified by the survey as the "truth" of their self-identity.

Later I learned that the situation that children witnessing adults faking information collection and other activities is common, thus diluting the authority of top-to-down policy. For example, Xing told me that once several students were asked by Principal Zhong to help fill in the materials for a democratic evaluation of China's Communist Party members in a village. "It was all fake," Xing said, "just because they needed different handwriting, they asked us (Xing and other students) to help them forge

documents.” It can be seen that because the children were so used to filling out forms and providing required rather than necessarily accurate impressions, the documentation did not induce children into the intended field of knowledge. One of the main reasons was that the adults around them were somehow resisting the top-to-down policies as well. Adults who falsified, concealed or manipulated information made the registration system less accurate and authoritative. Children often saw data collection activities as a game that could be manipulated at some adults’ will, this is because, in the process of data collection, it is never the statement of the expert knowledge that is authorized, but the adult authority. The social norms and values behind the logic of adult conduct diminished the norms and values informed by official documentation. This allowed children to negotiate their subjectivity according to different knowledge systems and not necessarily to bound their identity to a singular childhood type, say, the “supervised child”.

Surely, there were objective factors leading school adults to passively resist the documentation or paper works. First, with the modernization of rural education, rural schools had become an object of quantitative evaluation and scientific analysis. This meant that schoolteachers were often involved in overwhelming amounts of documentation or paperwork, with teachers keeping a written record of very small details and every single aspect of the school, themselves, the children and the children’s families. These abundant and time-consuming form-filling tasks often left teachers exhausted, and in response, teachers sometimes had to make up information

to accomplish the tasks in time. Second, many teachers complained that the submitted forms were not always checked and that the requirements for filling them in often changed. This made them feel like they were wasting their efforts on useless work. Over time, teachers took a cynical attitude towards these tasks, seeing them as a part of a bureaucratic procedure with little substance other than making people overworked. Once I asked a local official who was in charge of the registration of all the schools in L town about the registration of left-behind children in the town. The officer said to me with a meaningful smile, “Teacher Zhou, I can give you whatever data you want.” A teacher sitting next to him explained to me, “he means, the statistical data in documents were all fake and cannot help you do serious research. If you want to know the real situation, just ask us and we’ll be honest with you”.

For Foucault, modern disciplinary power is characterized by “a system of permanent registration” (1995, p. 180) that is productive because it marks each individual’s possible utility and maximizes efficiency while decreasing inconvenience and insecurity. However, documentation came at a huge cost in human resources, especially for the low degree of modernization, and highly mobile rural areas, the registration was neither accurate nor efficient in itself. Instead of improving management, it affected the quality and efficiency of teachers’ teaching activities. As a result, the mountains of documents often failed to capture the true information of people. Foucault (1995, 184-185) argues that discipline “manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are

subjected”. For him, subjectivation and objectivation are interdependent. The formation of the subject depends not only on the individual being taken as an object to a certain type of knowledge but also on the individual voluntarily occupying the subject positions produced by the power/ knowledge regime so as to become the legitimate subjects of that type of knowledge. In this study, however, the schoolteachers and the children did not take themselves as the objects to the knowledge informed in the official documents. Rather, they created false “objects” through falsifying documentation. In a Foucauldian sense, this suggests that although the official discourse has authorized a certain type of knowledge, such as a set of knowledge determining the criteria, nature and causality of poverty, it could not unilaterally decide the historical condition that allowed the objectivation and the subjectivation to appropriately happen. Regarding the documentation or registration system, the children in the Dream School could place themselves outside the process of subjectivation, and therefore did not necessarily produce themselves as the legitimate subjects of the given knowledge related to supervision and left-behind children.

7.2 Adult authority and the “submissive child”.

In a Foucauldian sense, the traditional form of power was often seen as “negative”, because power is something occupied by a certain group of people and often deployed to oppress, torture, and even destroyed others’ bodies. By contrast, the modern form of power was sort of “positive” since the disciplinary power functions to produce

“useful” and “docile” bodies for the sake of economy and production (see, Foucault, 1995, p.178 and p. 191). While Foucault analyzed power in a historical evolving sense, namely, that the modern one substitutes the traditional one according to the historical conditions of possibility, this study discloses that the two forms of power can co-exist at the same time.

As I have discussed above, the three techniques of discipline, namely enclosed system, grading system, and supervision system, had failed to tame child boarders and reshape their identities. Thus, the school adults sometimes resorted back to the traditional form of power, expecting to manage children through coercion and visible forms of power. In this light, I call the power grounded by the traditional culture and notions as the traditional adult authority, so as to show the difference with the modern disciplinary power. The coexistence of traditional adult authority and modern disciplinary power in the Dream School was in line with the studies that focused on profound changes in the social and cultural structure of rural China. Peng (2017, p78) for example, maintained that women migrant workers often face a transitional and globally inflected society when they returned to rural China. Similarly, Han (2021) found that rural women now could make use of the market force to negotiate with familial patriarchy, while aligning with the patriarchal resources to keep the capital chain at arm’s length. In this study, school adults were not only the endorsers of modern educational ideologies but also actively engaged in spreading the traditional Chinese culture, such as *Xiao* or filial piety. Murphy (2020, p. 76) noted, China’s local

officials generally believed that the lack of parent-child communication caused by parental labour migration had led to children's incapability to fully understand filial piety, and therefore, rural schools tended to urge their students to re-pick the traditions of filial piety. The rural teachers, especially the headteachers often assumed parent-like roles and encouraged their students to study hard to repay the sacrifice of their parents in migrant work.

On top of that, teachers' turn to the traditional adult authority could be also attributed to the revival of Confucianism, which has recently played a significant role in counter-discourse on westernization in various social spheres in contemporary China (Wu, 2019). A senior teacher once claimed, "now our rural students were poisoned by the western idea of 'happy education'. Students had a lot of boldness (*da zi da*) and becomes more and more disobedient". Although there were overlaps between Confucianism and modernized thoughts in terms of schooling, teachers often saw Confucian means of education as a remedy to the failings of a modernized education model. They expected their relationships with children to return to a fixed hierarchy between adult and child so that the children would submit themselves to the orders of the adults without deliberate thinking. For this reason, I called the fourth centred identity the "submissive child". However, the traditional adult authority and disciplinary power often interfered with each other. In the last section, I illustrated how teachers' authority undermined the effect of the disciplinary power when teachers engaged in paperwork or what Foucault calls "permanent registration". In this section,

however, I will spotlight the constraints of disciplinary power on adult authority. For example, although many teachers at the Dream School tended to believe that corporal punishment is the most effective way to achieve student control, the modern education system through laws and regulations has largely limited them to inflict corporal punishment or any forms of violence on students. In addition, the values, such as equality, independence, and freedom informed by modern education could be used by children to challenge the traditional notions that justified the violence and coercion of teachers on them. Eventually, the efforts to construct the “submissive child” failed as well.

7.2.1 The traditional notion and adult authority.

During my participant observation, I found that the messages related to Confucian ideologies permeated rural schools. The Town-centred Primary School, for example, broadcasted The Standards for Being A Good Child and Student (di zi gui) every day and encouraged the students to regard it as a code of conduct. On the classroom walls of the Dream School were printed the contents of The Three Character Classic (san zi jing) and The Standards for Being A Good Child and Student (di zi gui) as well. These vibrant Confucian discourses inside school spaces were synchronized with the revival of Chinese traditional culture promoted by the Chinese government occurring outside the school. In 2007, the State Language Affairs Commission, which was administered by the Ministry of Education, issued an official language policy titled “Chanting the Chinese Classics” (zhong hua song) as part of a larger classics reading movement

aimed at preserving traditional culture and spiritual civilization (MOE 2010). China's President Xi Jinping once urged that the de-Sinicization of school curricula was a disgrace, and must be addressed by reinforcing classics (particularly the Confucian legacy) as the "culture gene of the Chinese country". Wu (2019) pointed out that, in the past 20 years, the Confucian revival has spread to various sectors of society, and its revival could not be seen as theoretical speculation, but as "a moral cultivation oriented towards political, educational, and pragmatic goals."

Apart from state will, Confucian values were also inherently interrelated to today's exam-centred and fiercely competitive education model. First, Confucianism complimented the quality of diligence and the spirit *chi ku* or eating bitterness in the study. *The Three Character Classic* state: "One tied his head to the beam above him; another pricked his thigh with an awl. They were not taught but toiled hard of their own accord" (tou xuan liang, zhui ci gu; bi bu jiao, zi qin ku). This was not only embodied in today's excessive burden of schoolwork, but also in the ways the schoolteachers trained children's bodies. Moreover, play was seen as negative in Confucian culture. Confucianism believed that children should keep "stillness" and act like adults. *Shang Shu* for example stated that "people who lose themselves in play will lose their aims" (wan wu sang zhi). Besides, in Confucian culture, study was elitism-natured and could promote one's social status. Mencius said: "he who rules lives by his mind; he who is ruled lives by his labour" (lao xin zhe zhi ren; lao li zhe zhi yu ren). Bo (2017) commented that the only way for Chinese people to "build

their reputation and honour their families” was to go into politics. Being an official will bring wealth, power, status, and all possible honour. This explained why today’s education was characterized by encouraging children to fiercely compete with each other and stand out in exams.

However, the promotion of traditional values in schools may bring about the risk of coercive forces. Core to Confucianism is filial piety which emphasizes a strict hierarchy between children and adults. The Three Character Classic (*san zi jing*), for instance, stated that “filial piety towards parents, is that to which we should hold fast. To behave as a younger brother towards elders, is one of the first things to know” (*xiao yu qin, suo dang zhi; di yu zhang, yi xian zhi*). The principles in Confucian discourse placed children in a subordinating position to adults and the subordination, according to the norm of filial piety, was a virtue in itself. Hence, prohibition and coercion were justified as something beneficial to children. The Standards for Being A Good Child and Student (*di zi gui*) wrote that “When your parents are calling, don’t be slow to respond. When your parents give you an order, act immediately; When your parents teach you, listen with patient respect. When your parents scold you, accept it with faithful compliance” (*fu mu hu, ying wu huan, fu mu ming, xing wu lan; fu mu jiao, xu jing ting, fu mu ze, xu shun cheng*). Li (2020) criticized Confucian tradition as a reason for child abuse in contemporary China, because it did not only rationalize, but moralize the unbalanced power between adults and children.

Several child participants recalled being beaten or physically punished by teachers or other school adults. In the Dream School, one of the commonly seen corporal punishments was asking children to squat still for quite a long time. A teacher explained that the posture itself may give children a sense of inferiority, subconsciously putting themselves in the position of the submissive. Meanwhile, it also gave teachers a sense of control over the children. This widely adopted punishment was thus not only for the child to correct their misbehaviours but also for the child to realize his submissive position in front of teachers. It could be analyzed by the concept of “bodily hexis”, which Bourdieu (1984, 437) proposed to show one’s body is in effect “a site of incorporated history”. When individual bodies were used or regulated in a certain way, they might adapt to the new situation based on their intuitions and gut feelings. Bourdieu pointed out that such an intuition was historically shaped and socially structured. In this case, the teacher’s management of children’s bodily gestures was reflective of the current prevalence of Confucianism as a response to the ongoing changing teacher-student power structure in rural schools. If the surveillance system and the closed management system tried to fix children’s identity on the discipline and ideology of development, then the school adult authority could be seen as a power to fix children’s identity in China’s traditional ethical relations based on filial piety.

It can be seen that from the perspective of teachers, coercion or corporal punishment can be an effective means of maintaining discipline, which was not different from the

effects the disciplinary power devices such as timetables, enclosed space, and the grading system can bring about. In effect, there seemed no difference in the performance between the “submissive child” imposed by the traditional adult authority and the “docile student” produced by the disciplinary power. To teachers, both the “submissive children” and the “docile students” are the children who would be obedient to teachers and dare not make trouble. Teachers may not care as much as researchers about whether discipline acts only as an external force on children or can produce an “inside” as an “interiorization of the outside” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 103). However, as I will show soon, as the objects of adult authority and disciplinary power, the children I meet can acutely distinguish the two kinds of power, especially the types of knowledge behind them.

7.2.2 Children’s perception of adult authority.

Although adult authority, grounded by Chinese traditional cultures, was exercised to make children submissive to adults, children themselves may see it as a sort of violence and irrationality, thereby eroding the spirit the modern education. The urban-oriented education system often disseminates a meritocratic ideology that labels rural people as low *su zhi* (Murphy, 2004), and Confucian tradition was often narrated as hampering curriculum innovation and promotion of the child-centred educational style (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). In other words, children were confronting different texts which delivered different types of childhood. In general, traditional texts construct children's obedience to adults as a virtue in itself, while modern educational texts

encourage equality, independence and freedom. The latter thus enabled children to question the adult authority constituted by the traditional text. For instance, the children I met could easily take values from their textbook to question adults when they punished children by the way of coercion. A case in point was Xing's explanation of how he came up with discourse like "right of speech" against Principal Zhong. Xing, Sun and Yong Na told me that they learnt these discourses from their textbooks. After the confrontation between Xing and the principal, I once asked him why he repeated the individual's right to speak in his defence.

I: Where do you get this idea of "right"?

Yong Na: We learnt this point from the textbook called *dao de yu fa zhi* (Morality and the Rule of Law).

Sun: We learned the spirit of the law and human rights in eighth grade. The Constitution and other laws give us these basic rights.

Xing: Yes. Since then, our whole class has reached a consensus that confiscating our mobile phones is a violation of our rights. The mobile phone is my property. He (any adult) can't take it away. Because he can't violate my property right.

Yong Na: Of they (school adults) look at what's on our phones without our permission, they're violating our privacy".

The subject *dao de yu fa zhi* (Morality and the Rule of Law) aimed to cultivate students with civilized spirit and high *su zhi*. In the second semester of eighth grade,

the students were required to grasp knowledge concerning the nature of the Constitution, the rights and duties of citizens, the basic economic and political system of China, fairness (gong ping) and justice (zheng yi). The following content selected from the textbook *Morality and Rules of Law* (PEP Edition) were key points that students needed to recite. These concepts related to freedom, equality and fairness and stood sharply against the coercive and violent nature of adult authority, and therefore became intellectual sources for Xing and his friends to defend themselves in front of adults.

- Personal freedom is the freedom that the person that points to a citizen does not get illegal encroachment, including personal freedom does not get encroachment, personal dignity does not get encroachment, the residence does not get encroachment, correspondence freedom and correspondence secret get legal protection. (Zhu, 2017, p. 34)
- To practice equality, we must dare to resist acts of inequality...In the face of the inequalities, we should not stand idly by, but argue vigorously and protect our rights according to the law (Zhu, 2017, p.104)
- Fairness should be transformed from a beautiful wish into reality, which cannot be separated from people's active participation and unremitting efforts of each of us. We need to pursue and defend fairness in our daily lives (Zhu, 2017, p.117).

There is another case showing that children often saw adult authority as a cause of unfairness. When I met Shuai, he was still a member of class 9.5. He was tall and good at playing basketball. Because of his talent in sports, he was moved to class 5 from class 4 when he was in eighth grade. However, the good times did not last. he was caught on the e-camera falling asleep during class and then disqualified from studying in class 9.5 as a punishment. The reward and penalty seemed fair and measured up to the grading system in hierarchizing the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ students. However, Shuai’s desk-mate was also caught falling asleep in class, but he was exempt from being sent to a bad class. Students told me this was because Shuai’s desk-mate was a relative of a vice-principal of the Dream School. To children, the decision that Principal Zhong turned a blind eye to Shuai’s desk-mate violated the principle of fairness written by the textbook, because according to the textbook (Zhu, 2017, p.107), fairness was defined as an “attitude or manner in which people deal with things reasonably and impartially based on certain standards or principles” yet Principal Zhong failed to do so. The discourse and attitudes delivered by Xing and his friends showed their approval of the knowledge instilled in modern education and their dissatisfaction with the adult authority.

Interestingly, however, the students from “bad” classes seemed not to have as strong a sense of personal right as those from the good class. Shu Hao, Xing Yi, and Ah Lang confessed that they had no idea about the subject of Law and Morality. More importantly, since Principal Zhong did not care much about ‘bad’ students’ academic

performance, their conflict with Principal Zhong was less intense than that of students in class 9.5. That is to say, the more children engaged in the modern model of education and discipline, the more likely they were to clash with adults whose thoughts were regarded as out of fashion. This was consistent with Prout (2011) argument that adult society often bears competing expectations and divergent values. It was from these incompatibilities and inconsistencies that children found space to take over their own thoughts and conduct and decide whether to submit to the adults they were facing.

In addition, although children tended to regard such adult authority as violent, they did not fear it in their hearts, because they could undermine the adult authority by belittling the morality of individual adults. The private nature of schools made it easy for children to regard school adults, especially principal Zhong and other school leaders, as profit-seekers, selfish people, exploiters, rather than educators. As a result, even the rules or requirements made by school adults for good reasons were often seen by child boarders as excuses for profit or as hypocritical. Chatting over breakfast, for instance, Shuai once joked that the school adjusted the daily timetable to “save money”. He explained that since the fall semester began, all boarding students were required to have breakfast after running 10 laps in the morning. Exhausted from exercise, however, he had no appetite at all. “Won’t the school save money soon if everyone misses one bite from breakfast?” Shuai certainly knew that his speculation was groundless. But point was that children like him took

delight in undermining the authority of school managers by creating an image that school managers lacked morality.

Not only senior students did this, but also students from low grades. Principal Zhong once required all middle school students to write an essay themed with “寒门出贵子” (the impoverished families can nurture rich sons). He expected students to pursue the spirit of bitterness and establish a belief in changing their fate through study.

However, an anonymous essay was sent to the headteacher of Class 7.3, with cursing words to criticize the principal. On the top of the paper were two pencil-drawn figures, one of whom was holding a knife and seemed to kill the other. Underneath, the student wrote:

“...After hearing what you (Principal Zhong) said, I laughed. What do you (the principal) mean that the poor people have to endure bitterness? What is called ‘we should cherish the current learning condition’? You (Principal Zhong) recruit so many students and earned a lot of money, but the food tastes so disgusting! Fuck you, you pay my money back!” (A part of this student’s essay)

This seventh-grade student was accusing the principal of self-contradiction – making ill-gotten wealth, but in turn, preaching morality to all students. In the children’s eyes, adults were not naturally qualified to preach morality to them. This is because grown-ups themselves might be self-giving, but greedy, selfish, and hypocritical. Put it

differently, in the process of socialization, adults did not naturally act as moral models, truth interpreters, and models of conduct. In a multifaceted and conflicting reality, children could access diverse standards by which to judge the morality of adults.

Finally, children were clear that sometimes teachers and parents could do nothing with them. Boarding at school meant that the children suffered less control from guardians, which in turn weakened the effect of the teacher's exercise of adult authority. In China, parents often joined forces with teachers to criticize their children. However, in the case of left-behind children who boarded at school, this rarely happened. I once witnessed a girl being reprimanded by her headteacher in the office. The headteacher tried to contact her migrant parents, but the girl found various excuses to refuse to provide the contact information of her migrant parents to her teacher. In the end, the angry teacher had to let her go and talked to himself "it is not easy to be a teacher nowadays". Similarly, another headteacher once contacted the father of a boy through real-time video via WeChat. She hoped the boy's father could give a lesson to this rebellious and bad-tempered boy. She held up her cell phone and told the father on the screen that she had run out of tricks to get the boy to admit a fault. Ten minutes later, however, I saw the boy's father crying in the screen, but the boy turned his face away without saying a word as if he knew that there was nothing his father could do about him.

To conclude, children learnt from observing the real world that adult authority was not necessarily flawless, reliable, or morally acceptable. And therefore, their submission to adults became conditional and context driven. Besides, they seemed to have realized that schoolteachers were less likely to punish them with excessive violence although they sometimes looked very furious and spoke harsh words to them. In general, teachers would only take minor forms of physical punishment such as standing still, squatting still or respectively copying textbooks, yet children had been quite accustomed to these punishments. As a result, school adults failed to instill a “submissive disposition” within the children.

7.2.3 The changeable child-adult relationship.

In effect, the children I met often decided themselves whether to obey adults or not. As a consequence, the relationship between children and adults was not fixed by unbalanced power relations but by highly changeable power relations. A typical example could be found in the changed relationship between Xing and his headteacher, Mrs Fan. After Xing’s confrontation with Principal Zhong, Mrs Fan tried her best to protect Xing from being punished. She believed that Xing did not make a principled mistake in that event and thus rejected the principal’s request to remove Xing from his position as class monitor. In the eyes of the children, Mrs Fan was a considerate, devoted and sometimes a mother-like teacher. Mrs Fan was Xing’s teacher when Xing transferred from the village primary school to the Dream School in the third grade. When Xing went to middle school at the Dream School, Mrs Fan also

transferred to the secondary division of the Dream School and continued to be his headteacher. For six years, Xing has been the class monitor, helping Mrs Fan deal with various class affairs and managing other students. It was not an understatement to say that Xing was a submissive child in front of Mrs Fan.

Things changed after Xing graduated from the Dream School. One day I received Xing's message on WeChat. He told me that Principal Zhong planned to visit several students' homes to congratulate them on their success of being admitted to the best high school in G county, and Xing was one of those students. In such a jubilant atmosphere, Mrs Fan proposed an idea to Xing's father that Xing may send a pennant to Principal Zhong to ease their intense relationship. Xing's father happily accepted Mrs Fan's advice and sent Xing multiple voice messages on WeChat to persuade Xing to follow Mrs Fan's advice. However, Xing rejected this proposal and he showed me the screenshots of the conversation between him and his father.

Xing: Dad, I know Teacher Fan is in a pickle. But I really don't want to send anything to the principal.

Xing's father: Voice message

Xing: Then he's too narrow-minded for a principal.

Xing's father: Voice message

Xing: I really don't want to make him happy.

Xing's father: Voice message.

Xing: I don't want to go, and I don't want to send a pennant to him. Teacher Fan is really nice to me. That's true. but I don't want to return teacher Fan's kindness to an irrelevant person (the headmaster).

Xing's father: Voice message (several pieces)

Xing: You could send it, but not in my name. I had no intention of that all along.

Xing's father: Voice message (several pieces).

Xing: I can't thank him. I don't want to do anything against my will. I did well in the exam because my teacher helped me. What's that got to do with him (the principal)? Anyone can send a pennant but me.

Xing: For once I say no. I could promise you anything else, but you can't talk me out of this. If you want to send him a pennant, please leave me out of it, okay?

Xing refused Mrs Fan's kind-hearted suggestion and his father's firm persuasion, and he decided to obey his own will. Xing's attitude, of course, hurt Mrs Fan's feelings. When she heard Xing's reactions, she was shocked that Xing could be such disobedient and saw Xing's reactions as "almost heartless". In contrast, Xing seemingly remained rational despite suffering emotional pressure. He told me that his respect for Mrs Fan never changed but he did not want to submit himself to adult orders this time. It can be seen that Xing's submission to Mrs Fan largely depended on his own will and judgment towards the situation, rather than being subject to adult-led authority over children. When there was a conflict between Xing's understanding of things and adults' understanding of things, Xing chose not to obey. Interestingly, for

Xing, disobedience did not mean that he had any intention of changing his relationship with Mrs Fan but an articulation of his reasoning. Yet for Mrs Fan, their relationship had changed. It seemed Xing valued reasoning, while Mrs Fan, at least, in this case, valued *mian zi* (face-saving) and *ren qing* (obligation and indebtedness in social relation) emphasized by Confucianism. Other child participants had similar tendencies. If they wanted to, they could easily refute the hierarchical and rigid order prescribed by traditional social norms.

In addition, some teachers would like to treat children with open mind as graduation approached. For example, Shu Hao's headteacher told me Shu Hao was a well-behaved child with high quality, but I doubted that because Shu Hao was low achieving in academic achievement and often broke the rules. However, his headteacher did not change his view on Shu Hao but explained to me that "we cannot hold these kids to normal standards. Academic performance aside, this kid is reliable and clever. He has leadership and know how to respect his teachers. I believe he will have a promising future when he starts earning money." Shu Hao also told me he was willing to show his sincere respect to his headteacher and his English teacher, Mrs. Huang. He added that "I feel we are more like friends than students and teachers".

Shu Hao's case opened up the possibility for a re-articulation of the adult-child relationship in an educational institution. To be specific, when Shu Hao and his teacher simultaneously gave up coinciding with identity categories constituted by the school institution and discursive practices, they re-developed a relationship of mutual

trust and understanding. Half a year after their graduation in 2020, Shu Hao told me that he still kept in touch with his teacher at the Dream School. It is ironic that Xing, who was regarded as a good student by mainstream norms, became alienated from his beloved headteacher. So were other “good students” like Sun, Yue Yue and Bei Bei.

7.3 Short conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how child boarders interacted with school adults. So far, I have introduced 4 centred identities that the school or school adults tried to install on children and how children de-centred or amended these given identities. First, in terms of the “developing children” identity, they diminished the correlation between the boarding school and the concept of development and meanwhile refused to take their “left-behind children” status as a special object to the mainstream development discourse. Thus, they did not fully view themselves as “developing children”. Second, as for the “graded child” identity, since they observed the ambiguity and inaccuracy of the meanings of each grade designated by the school, or they took another value standard to grade themselves, they kept themselves from becoming the “graded children”. Third, child boarders were able to counter-surveil school adults and provided false information in various survey activities initiated by the government. In this regard, they resisted being “supervised children”. Finally, in the modern character of the school education system, teachers’ appeal to traditional values, often mutually contradictory, which allowed children to negotiate relationships with school adults and refusing to act as a place the “submissive children”. The multifaceted and

contradictory reality gave children more freedom to exert agency and loosen the rigid relationship between school adults and children. In sum, children's identities were still subjected to change and challenge, but in ways that involved rejections of the sources of identity that adults tried to encourage children to internalize or submit to.

However, several issues remain unaddressed. First, this study must continue to ask if children's resistance to school or school adults meant that their identity was centred on their collectivity or the sense of group belonging. In other words, how their peer interactions would shape their identity? Second, as a study with "left-behind children", this research must address the impacts of their life with parental migrant experience on their identity formation. Murphy (2020, p. 7) observed that the left-behind children she met in Jiangxi and Anhui often saw their parents' migration as a sacrifice and thereby they would like to honour this sacrifice through study. However, as I have suggested, the children I met generally had no passion for learning, and many had given up learning. So how would they report their relationship with their parents? Finally, when it came to the future, the child participants seemed not to have very strong aspirations for urban life, and nor did they see migrant working as a desperate way out. Does this suggest that these children did not read their identity in terms of the "developing/ backward", "urban/ rural", "having/ having no quality (you su zhi/ mei su zhi)" dichotomies? To answer these questions, in the next chapter I will continue to explore children's identification with each other, their early experiences of mobility, and their feelings about their parents' work experiences. These discussions

will show that left-behind children are not a highly homogeneous group. No matter within the groups of children I met or comparing the children in my study with the left-behind children in other researchers' studies, we can see their high heterogeneity. This also demonstrates the core proposition of the New Sociology of Childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998): childhood is socially, politically, economically and culturally constructed and can differ across time and space.

Chapter 8 Rethinking the Term “Rural Left-behind Children”

In chapter 6 and chapter 7, I noted that children’s identity formation often does not fully abide by the way that the “systems” or school adults classify and manage them. Rather, children exert agency to cope with powers in the school and shape their identities in their own ways. However, as I mentioned at the end of the last chapter, it is still unknown how these children perceive their peer groups, understand parental migrations, and build place-belongingness. To deal with these three themes, we may return the term “rural left-behind children” and re-examine how each component element—namely, “children”, “left-behind” and “rural” —is perceived by children. I will first explore whether children have formed a unique perspective that exclusively belongs to them; put another way, whether an identifiable "children’s identity" has emerged through children’s daily interactions with peers. With “left-behind”, I will interrogate children’s subjective perceptions of parental absence and presence rather than only categorizing objective residential patterns. Finally, in examining “rural”, I will focus on the ever-changing place that children once lived in, examining how they relate themselves to these places with fewer boundaries, which in turn, shape their unique view on China’s rural-urban dual structure.

In response to these questions, I divided this chapter to three sections. In section 8.1, I discuss the tendency of peer relationship to be based on a strategic playmate-ship rather than a rooted friendship. This makes their circle of peers quite fluid,

changeable, and hence without "a centre" or fixed group culture. Put simply, the children I met often experienced fluid friendships, which are hard to congeal into stable and extensive networks of peers. I attribute this fluid friendship to the irreconcilable group diversity created by the social fluidity of their early childhoods.

In section 8.2, I disclose how children's subtle perceptions of parental presence/absence are influenced more by parental emotional attention than by physical distance. In the age of mobile technology, however, parent-child interactions are not necessarily limited by physical presence. Parental visual presence enriched the means of parenting and therefore the concept of "being with parents". Finally, I questioned children's place-based identity. In section 8.3, I emphasized that nowadays the boundaries of place are increasingly blurred. Children often inhabit a transitional zone that is neither urban nor rural, and the nature of their identity thus became more fragmented and hybrid. So far, we can see that the signifier of "rural left-behind children" was not equivalent to its signified, nor its meaning was fixed. No matter how schools or larger social system attempted to fix children's identities through rigid typologies, children were capable of exerting agency to maintain and continue to develop an undecidable, fluid, even contradictory identities.

8.1. The playmate relationship and strategic identity.

At the Dream School, children not only studied together, but also lived together. It was thus easy to imagine that they may form intense and deep peer relationships and

thus a collective identity. To my surprise, children thought their relationships with others were not very deep or strong. In general, their companionships were mostly about having fun together during the boring school days. In addition, boys often formed groups to avoid being bullied or sought leadership among others. Xing, Ah Cheng and Ah Lang, for instance, shared the opinion that it was easy to find playmates, but difficult to find “heart-to-heart” (jiao xin) friends who could understand their inner feelings and thoughts. Bei Bei, Yong Na, Xing Yi, and Ah Peng claimed that at first they had their own close friends at school. But soon after, they fell out with their friends over small things, or even turned against them. Shu Hao, who was recognized by other students as a powerful and influential boy, was always followed by many “friends”. He was brave in gang fights and had close ties with the senior students who could fight as well. Therefore, he had the power to protect his “friends” from being bullied. However, Shu Hao did not see the children around him as true friends and described his relationship with them as “complicated and interested in the stakes”. Like the children mentioned above, Shu Hao felt that he didn't have many true friends.

It seemed that children's identification with their peers was limited. Correspondingly, the peer relationships they formed were fluid and unstable. After talking with child participants, I found that this largely had to do with children's early mobile experiences. On the one hand, children experienced such different trajectories in early childhood that they often felt it difficult to open up about their past experiences with

their peers. On the other hand, different primary school experiences had infused children with different cultural orientations, values, languages and behavioral preferences, which in turn made it hard to identify with the people around them. As a result, children, though gathered together in the Dream School, retained irreconcilable and variable identities. They formed groups through playing together or seeking power among peers, but meanwhile were always open to the possibility of being excluded from groups.

8.1.1 Different early childhoods.

When talking with children, I perceived that they often distinguished between playmates and friends, consciously or unconsciously. Ah Lang, for instance, told me that “I can have fun playing with others, but I will never expose my personal feelings to them. At school, I was only willing to share my personal affairs with one or two friends who really know who I am.” Other child participants shared similar ideas. For them, playmates referred those with whom they could play yet to whom they would display only parts of their identities, while friends were those whom they fully trusted and to whom they were willing to expose their real selves. So, why don't they share their full identity with their playmates? What did their “true friends” have in common?

During the spring festival, Ah Cheng texted me that he felt lonely because his best friend, Ming, had left him for *da gong* (migrant work). This friend was special to Ah

Cheng because they grew up together in Beijing and went back to L town to study together at the Dream School. In other words, wherever Ah Cheng moved, Ming had always accompanied him. Ah Cheng felt that had had a bond with Ming and so identified him as a “true friend”. Besides this one friend, Ah Cheng had another two close friends—Zhong Yi and Shuai— at the Dream School as well. Ah Cheng, Zhong Yi, and Shuai were all full boarding students who had transferred from schools in Beijing, and they agreed that staying together would help them cope with daily troubles at boarding school. However, Ah Cheng told me that Zhong Yi and Shuai were far less important to him than Ming. This is because he had known Ming for far longer than Zhong Yi and Shuai. More importantly, although Ah Cheng, Zhong Yi and Shuai all were born and had grown up in Beijing, the living environments of Zhong Yi and Shuai were different from that of Ah Cheng, meaning it was difficult for Ah Cheng to share his childhood with them.

In Beijing, both Zhong Yi and Shuai lived in rental bungalows with undesirable conditions. The neighbors were all migrant workers or low-income local residents. Their families made their living by collecting and selling recyclable garbage in Beijing. By contrast, Ah Cheng lived in a rented bungalow at first, but as his family's finances improved, he and his parents moved to an apartment building in a local community. This neighborhood was mostly populated by urban residents. Like many urban children, Ah Cheng's family lived in a flat with three rooms and one hall, and Ah Cheng enjoyed his own bedroom. Moreover, Ah Cheng's parents run a small

hardware store, meaning they were the self-employed rather than being physical labourers like the parents of Zhong Yi and Shuai. As I mentioned in chapter 6, Ah Cheng was the only child participant who saw himself as an urban child. This is largely because Ah Cheng experienced an improvement in household finances, gradually moved away from the residential places filled with migrant workers and integrated into an urban residential environment in his early childhood. This childhood experience, as well as Ah Cheng's inclination to identify himself as a Beijinger, was not shared by Zhong Yi and Shuai. As a result, Ah Cheng said of his relationship with Shuai and Zhong Yi that, "We do get along well, but they are not the kind of friends who can fully understand me."

Almost all children I met experienced mobility in their early childhood. Of the 14 child participants, some children had experience moving among different places within a city, some had experienced moving from one city to another, some had experienced transferring from village schools to boarding schools in towns, and most had experienced returning from cities to rural hometowns to attend middle school. Alongside these variable moving experiences was a huge disparity among families' economic conditions, primary school environments, parents' occupations, the age at which students begin to live in the countryside, children's use of language, and their modes of attending to school (boarding, half-boarding or non-boarding). Thus, when these students with vastly different life experiences came to the Dream School, they would be very sensitive to the differences between them and others. Admittedly, the

long-term collective lifestyle at the boarding school may allow them to find common interests and habits with others, but it was still hard for these children to ignore the individual differences caused by social structural factors, such as family finances, parents' occupations, and their early mobile experiences.

Paul Willis (2017) illustrates the intrinsic link between the formation of youth group culture and parental socioeconomic status. In his influential work, *Learning to Labour—How working-class kids get working class jobs*, Willis (2017) states that the anti-school group culture of English young males was derived from their active identification with their parents' working-class status. However, scholars have uncovered that China's peasant workers or migrant workers have not completely transformed into working-class subjects and so do not yet occupy a class-based identity. Pun and Lu (2010), for example, points out that the Chinese peasant workers are still under the process of semi-or-unfinished proletarianization. In addition, Ma and Xiang (1998) emphasizes that researchers should not misrepresent reality by eliding migrant workers' "heterogeneous ways of life, diverse employment patterns and income differences" (p. 548). This suggests that the left-behind children in this study may be less likely to identify with each other on the basis of their parents' working-class status, as the young males in Willis's book did. Coupled with their complex mobility experiences, the children at the Dream School may find it difficult to meet someone with the same growth path and life experiences as they. And this was perhaps why they claimed that they had many playmates but encountered few heart-

to-heart (交心的) friends.

8.1.2 Diversified cultural capital.

The shared experience of living together at the Dream school may fuel new friendships among children. However, the diversified cultural capital accumulated by children interfered with this process. Bourdieu understood cultural capital as familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society (2013), and it is often embodied in a collection of symbolic elements and behavioral dispositions such as skills, tastes, posture, dressing, mannerisms, material belongings, and credentials. Sharing similar forms of cultural capital with others may create a sense of collective identity and group position. Bourdieu proposed the concept of cultural capital to understand how cultural practices of different social classes maintain the existent social structure. For Bourdieu, school education is a medium of cultural reproduction that legitimizes cultural styles favored by the dominant group and conceals varying forms of social inequality. Children with privileged family backgrounds can attend high-quality schools easily, acquire the mainstream cultural capital, and thus perpetuate the status quo between generations. This is often very difficult for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In China, the uneven distribution of school capital or cultural capital is often embodied in the disparities between city schools and rural schools. Rural schools generally endorse an examine-oriented education and teacher-centred didactic

teaching, which can make the learning material dull and difficult to master. By contrast, city schools, especially the elite ones, often implement the so-called *suzhi jiaoyu* (often glossed as “quality education” or “education of quality” in English) reform launched since late 1990s (Murphy, 2020, p.67). This reform entails a transformation from the teacher-dominant, rote memorizing, and examination-oriented educational model to a student-centred and inquiry-based educational model. Subsequently, children from city schools could enjoy a wider range of subjects, which enhance students’ engagement with learning. Over the past two decades, more and more rural-to-urban peasant migrants have moved their families to cities, and now some officially defined “rural children” attend primary schools in cities as migrant children and thus can access the cultural capital transmitted by city schools. However, due to the hukou system, these migrant children had to return to their "place of origin" to prepare for higher education. Koo et al. (2014) once revealed the difficulties that these returned migrant children encounter in the conversion of their cultural capital. She observed that returned migrant children not only have difficulty adapting to different languages, diets, habits and values, but may also be looked down upon for using non-local cultural capital. From an identity perspective, a major concern is these children’s difficulty in reassembling their identity when vacillating between ‘here and there’.

In the present study, however, the narratives of the children I met complicated the situation of cultural capital embodied at the rural middle school. The sharp opposition

of different forms of cultural capital (e.g., city school cultural capital versus rural school cultural capital) did not appear in the Dream School. Rather, the Dream schools seemed to allow for the coexistence of diverse cultural capital and children did not have to face the either-or dilemma. This difference between my study and Koo et al.'s might be explained by the primary schools the children attended. In Koo et al.'s study (2014), the schools were generally divided into city schools and rural schools. However, the child participants in my study extended this categorization and detailed four types of primary schools: city public schools, city privately-operated migrant schools, rural town-centred schools, and rural village-based schools. It is worth noting that many migrant schools in cities were substandard, often running without school licenses and without qualified professional teachers. So, these "city schools" were not necessarily better off than the newly established town-centred boarding schools in rural areas. For their cheap tuition fees, many migrant workers chose to send their children to city privately-operated migrant schools. Xin Yi, for example, attended such a school in Beijing. She mentioned that the Dream School had multimedia equipment that the migrant school in Beijing did not have. Also, the Chinese class and the math class at the migrant school in Beijing were taught by the same person, while each teacher at the Dream School taught only one subject. Besides, Like the Dream School, the students at the Migrant school in Beijing were mostly the children of migrant workers. Xin Yi also described the advantages of city migrant schools in terms of curriculum design and teaching style. As a result, when Xin Yi returned from Beijing to her rural hometown to study, she didn't feel much

difference between schools. In short, Koo et al.'s study may not have considered the experiences of students returning to rural hometown's schools from city privately-operated migrant schools. It is also possible that the rural schools Koo and her colleagues visited in 2014 might be still poorly modernized. In adjusting to the new environments, the difficulties faced by returned migrant children in her sample would, understandably, be far more prominent than those faced by the children I met.

There were also many returned migrant children who once studied in public schools in cities. In 2002, the Ministry of Education suggested that "both the government and the public schools of receiving cities should play a key role in safeguarding the education of migrant children" (liangweizhu zhengce; 两为主政策) (Xiong, 2015). Since then, some public schools in cities have begun to institute quotas of migrant workers' children. Bei Bei, Zhong Yi, and Ah Lang, Shu Hao once studied in public primary schools in Beijing. They often missed the days they studied in the city's public school and detailed the huge disparity between city public schools and rural schools. For instance, Ah Lang compared the school he attended in Beijing before with the Dream School:

When I studied in Beijing. We had a course called "*shehui da jiang tang*" (the big social lecture; 社会大课堂). Teachers would take us to go skiing and visit the museums. I also joined a football team, and I learnt a lot from it. Rural school would not offer these activities. Also, my classmates in Beijing were quite polite and easy to

get along with. In contrast, my classmates here often used foul language and liked provoking others. I felt the school here was worse off than the school I attended in Beijing in all aspects.

Bourdieu (1984) identified cultural capital in three forms: objectified (e.g., cultural goods), embodied (e.g., dispositions of body and mind), and institutionalized (e.g., qualifications and credentials). Obviously, Ah Lang's acquired cultural capital, such as football skills, extra-curricular knowledge of museums, and behavioral manners were unavailable to children from rural schools and urban migrant schools. By contrast, some children studying in village-based primary schools recalled that there were just a few teachers and dozens of students in the school. The classrooms were small and dilapidated, and there were few educational facilities and equipment. One teacher taught several subjects and often emphasized rote memorization and repetition. In addition, teachers and students in village-based school barely used Mandarin. It can be seen from children's past school experiences that the school cultural capital of the child boarders was more likely to be evenly distributed, rather than binary. They came to middle school with different or pluralistic attitudes to many things and often used mixed language in their daily lives.

For example, some children at the Dream School were keen on wearing "odd" shoes and pants to show off their "cool" spirit and uninterest in ordinary people. They claimed that dressing like this manifested their identity as a *shehui ren* ('shehui'

literally means social and ‘ren’ means people). Li, Tan, & Yang (2020) explained that *shehui ren* is a newly developed youth subculture prevailing among rural youth from low-income families. It is mainly featured among rural adolescents who believe that they have ample social experiences and can use violence to take care of their own. However, not all children I met recognized this subculture. Ah Lang and Zhong Yi felt that *shehui ren* was a vulgar and trivial idea. Shu Hao thought it was novel and fun at first, so he comported himself as a *shehui ren* with his friends for a while. But soon he grew bored with the way the *shehui ren* dressed, postured, and behaved, and began to despise those who continued to play into the *shehui ren* game. Interestingly, though, while the child participants mentioned above did not like the *shehui ren* game, they still never interfered with its participants. There seemed to be as many people who liked this subculture as there were people who did not. No one group was dominant. Children could always find playmates who thought like them and were less bothered by their cultural tastes being different from others. This fluid disposition kept children from forming hard-and-fast groups or collective identities. By adapting to the coexistence of multiple cultures, or constantly participating in and exiting new cultures, these children maintain the fluidity and diversity of their identities.

Another case in point would be the mixed use of Mandarin and the local dialect among children. Some children, like Yue Yue, could neither speak nor fully understand the local dialect. Some, like Zhong Yi and Shu Hao, could speak local dialects, but were used to speaking Mandarin in their daily lives. Some could speak

Mandarin, but were more likely to use the local dialect, like Xing. There were also a few children, like Ah Lang, who spoke the local dialect with an affected hybrid accent. In Koo et al.'s study (2014), a typical case shows the failure of conversion of cultural capital: returned migrant children could not adapt to their hometown dialect. The children I met, however, did not see language as a big issue. I once saw Yue Yue chatting with a friend in Mandarin while his friend used a local dialect, and the students around them were not surprised at all. This was perhaps because more than half of the children at the Dream School had previously lived in cities, and also perhaps because the town-centred schools now required teachers to lecture in Mandarin. As a result, Mandarin and local dialects coexisted, neither eclipsing the other in the eyes of children.

Peng (2017) held that returned migrant women had developed a mixed cultural preference, combining the traditional rural and Confucian notions with a modern desire for consumerism, independence, and personal autonomy. Likewise, child boarders' cultural identities were now mosaics of disparate and coexisting hues. There seemed no dominant shade, and each child could find their preferred color. As a result, children neither acquired a deep sense of belonging from their temporarily assembled peer group, nor were they in absolute opposition to peer groups that possessed cultural capital with which they could not identify. Their identity formed through peer interactions was highly inconsistent and non-uniform. The plurality and hybridity of their cultural identities meant they could not be explicitly defined as

mainstream or non-mainstream, modern or traditional, or urban or rural. This means that the “decentred subject” is not only created by children’s resistance to centred identities produced by the powers in the school, but also by their subtle refusal to identify as members of one homogeneous peer community. In their investigation into children’s peer culture, Xiong, Shi and Wang (2013) observed that the children of migrant workers could adopt what Gibson (1988) called the “accommodation without assimilation” strategy to deal with peer group culture. The “accommodation without assimilation” strategy refers to children’s conscious embrace of multiple identities to gain acceptance and support from many different groups while also maintaining a certain distance from those groups. Their study thus aligns with the idea of a “decentred” subject by showing children’s adaptation to multiple identities and their ability to de-centre any imposed group identities.

8.2 Children’s subjective perceptions of parental absence.

The second component of the term “rural left-behind children” that I am concerned about is *liu shou* or left-behind. The monolithic view of left-behind children is primarily grounded by their childhood experiences of parental absence. But while this objective experience may be shared among all rural left-behind children, it is worth inquiring into whether the children *perception* of this experience is similarly homogeneous. In chapter 6, I discussed the fact that children did not feel they were members from non-normative society, since most of the students in the Dream School were “left-behind children”. When I tried to elucidate what the situation of being

“left-behind” meant to these children, many of the child participants expressed their conflicting and ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, they acknowledged the objective fact that the term “left-behind” signified that their parents worked far away from them. Yet they were closely aware of the difference between geographical separation from parents and lack of care and attention from parents.

8.2.1 Parental physical absence and residential patterns.

Children’s perception of parental absence stemmed more from their perception of parental care and attention than from their parents’ physical absence. According to child participants, especially returned migrant children, even those who lived with their parents may not always *see* their parents much. Just as has been found in many previous studies (e.g., Murphy, 2020, p. 73; Xiao, 2014, p. 119), *dagong* was “*bitter*” (hard), the children I met recalled that their parents often extended their working hours in exchange for more earnings. This meant that parents were often too occupied by work to provide enough attention and companionship to their children even though they lived together. In addition, the current study is slightly unique in that few migrant workers from L town chose to work in factories in cities. Rather, they mostly engaged in the recycling industry or held irregular or temporary jobs. This gave them more ‘freedom’ to work longer hours when they chose. Not bound by factory rules, children’s parents often intentionally maximized their working hours, and thus sacrificed family time that they could spend with their children. Some child participants recalled that their fathers also went to another zone of the city to do a

temporary work. For them, their fathers who worked in another zone within the city were no different from those migrant workers who left their home village to seek jobs in far-away cities.

Perhaps the most striking example is found in Ah Cheng and Ah Peng's early experiences as migrant children in Beijing. Cheng and Peng had been living with their parents in Beijing for over a decade before returning to their hometown. This meant that, strictly speaking, they became left-behind children for only two or three years. Ah Cheng's relationship with his parents was not good. He shared with me his story of being neglected by his parents when he lived in Beijing and concluded that "I felt like a left-behind child when I lived with them in Beijing".

Ah Cheng: When I was a kid, my parents didn't give me door keys because they thought I'd lose them. Once I got out of school at 4:30 p.m., I waited until 9:30 p.m. before my mom came back. As you know, Beijing is very windy and dry in winter. The cold wind hurt my face and my hands were frozen and cracked. Sometimes I would go into a kennel near my house and cuddle with the dog to keep warm. Actually, I was alone in my Beijing home every day. My parents went out for work and sometimes they did not come home for the whole night. In Beijing, we met only at night, and didn't talk much.

Although Ah Change lived with his parents, this period of his childhood was defined

by physical parental absence that made him feel no different in his later life than a left-behind child. More importantly, Ah Cheng claimed that his parents' care and respect were absent during his whole growth experience. In his memory, when his mother found him asleep in the kennel, she didn't express worry, but simply told him, "This happened because we don't have enough money. We have to go out and make money." In addition, Ah Cheng recalled that his father always beat him whether he had done wrong or not. His father rarely listened to him or showed respect for him. In Ah Cheng's eyes, parental absence thus primarily referred to the lack of parental care, support and understanding. In this sense, despite the fact that Ah Cheng lived with his parents, he experienced what he felt as parental absence.

Ah Peng had a closer relationship with his parents, but he reported a similar situation that his parents were absent from his daily life because of their work.

Ah Peng: "I longed for my parents to accompany me when I do my homework every day and to take me out to play on weekends. But they're busy making money. When their business was good, we had dinner very late. Once my mom didn't come back to cook dinner until after 11:00 p.m., and I was starving to death".

Interestingly, when he talked about his parents' business failures, Ah Peng expressed both sadness and happiness. He worried that the economic downturn would put more

pressure on parents, but meanwhile he felt happy because his mother could stay at home and would cook his favorite dishes for him. Murphy pointed out that left-behind children often felt an inner conflict regarding parental migration; these children felt “torn between recognizing their migrant parents; contribution to their future on the one hand and missing them on the other” (2020; p. 84). Ah Peng’s case indicates that such inner conflict is not limited to left-behind children but applies to all children whose parents frequently sacrificed family time to bear the household financial burden. Hence, Ah Peng fully understood his family’s decision to send him back to his hometown. In his opinion, leaving Beijing to attend a boarding school in his hometown would allow his mother to devote more energy to her work. Ah Peng told me that he didn’t feel forgotten by his parents when he left for his hometown of Henan, but rather mentally closer to them, forming what Murphy (2020, p. 71) calls the “Family Striving Team”.

8.2.2 Parental visual presence and physical absence.

Another reason children were hesitant to respond to the issue of parental absence was that they now have convenient access to their parents’ virtual presence. When discussing how left-behind children suffer from parental physical absence, little attention has been given to the role of mobile communication in helping them maintain connectedness and affection with their parents. China has witnessed the rapid growth of mobile phone usage and networks. In 2019, China had over 800 million mobile phone subscribers, accounting for a quarter of the global total across

the world (Statista, 2021). Mobile technologies allow multiple forms of communication and facilitate communication regardless of time and space (Wellman, 2002). It is thus not surprising that mobile communication has become a vital way for separated family members to strengthen their ties and connectedness (Geser, 2005; Madianou, & Miller, 2011). Liu and Leung (2016) observed that Chinese migrant workers often equip their children in rural hometowns with mobile phones for distant communication. This suggests that left-behind children with mobile devices may not feel the same sense of parental absence as children without mobile devices, especially when they are allowed to freely use their own mobile devices to talk with, send messages to, and make real-time video calls to their parents.

After returning to his rural hometown, Ah Peng told me that he maintained frequent contact with his parents. Sometimes he sent text messages to his parents and sometimes he video chatted with them. When I asked what family meant to him, Ah Peng responded by drawing a picture of his mobile phone. He explained that he felt as if all of his life was spent on a tiny mobile phone, including his experience of his family. For Ah Peng, in Beijing, the caring words he most often heard from his parents were simple ones such as "Have you done your homework?" or "Do you have enough pocket money?". After returning to L town, these same words from his parents appeared the screen of his mobile phone. This made Ah Peng perceive little change in the frequency and content of parental presence. Similarly, Xin Yi chatted with her mother on WeChat almost every day. She would share her difficulties and joys in

school with her mother, which made her feel comforted and safe. She said, “Although it might be better to live with my parents, I don't think there's any 'parental absence' when I lived without them. It was very easy for me to find them (parents) when I needed them. Also, there was an online chatting group exclusively established for our extended family. Members of my family showed off their daily lives in that group all the time. It made me feel like I was in sync (tong bu) with their lives”.

Xin Yi's words echo what Madianou (2016) called the “always on” culture prevalent among transnational migrant families. Drawing on ethnographic data from UK-based Filipino migrants, Madianou (2016) proposed the idea of “ambient co-presence” to understand a new type of family bond at distance realized by transnational migrants and their left-behind family members. In general, ambient co-presence refers to “the increased awareness of the everyday lives and activities of significant others through the background presence of ubiquitous media environment” (p. 183) and has “powerful emotional consequences for relationships at a distance” (p. 184). For left-behind children, their emotional attachment to their parents was far more important than geographical distance in determining their perception of "presence". This means that the concept of “presence” is enriched by newly developed communication possibilities. Previous studies have demonstrated that mediated communication is beneficial to children's health and well-being (Abar et al., 2013; Coyne et al., 2014; Rudi et al., 2015; Mesch, 2016). Surely the digital presence of parents is not a substitute for physical parental presence, but it still enriches the subjective feelings of

parental presence/absence among left-behind children.

It is clear that public discourse that emphasizes only the physical absence of parents does not accurately capture the complex feelings of left-behind children. In sum, the physical absence of parents perceived by migrant children and the virtual absence of parents felt by left-behind children complicates the binary of parental presence/absence. This is another instance of the fact that the children I met generally did not accept public discourse's definition of them or their lives. The label "left-behind child" meant much less to the children themselves than it did to scholars, journalists and policy makers; they felt that their identities were not founded on or centred by an objective status of being "left behind". This suggests that the children I met have agency to resist not only the identities produced by power relations in school, but also the identities constituted by the power and discourse of the whole society. The understanding of "left-behind children" as "decentred subjects" therefore applies not only to the small world of the Dream School, but also to the wider social context outside the school.

8.3 Beyond urban and rural.

The concept of "left-behind children" is inseparable from China's urban-rural dual structure, because their household register status (hu kou; 户口) and their access to educational resources and social welfare are largely restricted by this binary (Zhou, Murphy, & Tao, 2014; Goodburn, 2020). A typical example is my above discussion of

returned migrant children, who were born, raised and educated in cities yet are defined as rural children under the household registration system. They may be allowed to finish their basic education in the cities, but then they have to return to the countryside to prepare for higher education. Therefore, the final issue I will discuss is to what extent these children see themselves as rural or urban children.

As mentioned earlier, half of the participants in my sample had resided in urban areas for over 10 years. They were born and raised in cities, where their parents sought jobs as migrant workers, and often seldom visited their rural hometown. As a result, these children may know little about rural society. Moreover, the remaining children who grew up in the countryside also experienced the drastic changes of rural community, such as commercialization of rural towns, the spread of mobile devices among rural youth, and changes in the geographical layout of rural schools. These social changes affected left-behind children's understanding of what “rural” fundamentally meant. Given this, I asked child participants to recall their moving experiences and describe as best they could each place they had lived. Through children's objective descriptions and subjective evaluation of these places, I analyzed the extent to which they constructed themselves as “urban children” or “rural children”.

8.3.1 Living in urban-rural transitional zones in cities.

Based on children’s narratives, I find that although Bei Bei, Shu Hao, Ah Lang and other returned migrant children often reported that residing in cities made them

somehow different from their rural counterparts, there were also limits on the difference their urban living experience could make. Specifically, although these children attended much better primary schools than their counterparts, their living conditions and living environments in cities were not necessarily better than those of rural children. During winter vacation, Zhong Yi sent me a short video showing his “home” in Beijing. Based on the visual information he provided, I asked other child participants about their own living situations in cities. I found that, except Ah Cheng, who lived in a residential building near the city centre, the other child participants lived with their parents on the fringes of the city, in villages-in-the-city (cheng zhong cun; 城中村) or in urban-rural fringes (cheng xiang jie he bu; 城乡结合部). And these places, for children, resembled neither city nor village.

The 2-minute video recorded by Zhong Yi in Beijing reflects the complex visual experience of his daily life. The recording starts with Zhong walking alone on the sidewalk on a wide and tidy street lined with trees and several tall apartment and office buildings. So far, the view seems no difference from what you may find in any other metropolis in today’s China: modern, spacious, and well-organized.

Approximately 100 meters (about 330 feet) later, Zhong Yi turns and passes a gate. Behind the gate, the world looks quite different: in this walled area, there is one single-story brick house with a traditional Chinese roof covered with ceramic tiles. In front of it, an unpaved road barely covered by gravels welcomes passers-by. Right over the short wall next to this humble house stand the tall buildings Zhong passed

earlier while walking on the street. Stepping into the room, the light dims. This is where Zhong lives in the capital city of China, a city with over 20 million population, Beijing. In this dark and small room, beyond very simple household items, such as pots, buckets, and unstable tables, are undecorated concrete walls with deep marks on them. Trash is strewn everywhere.

Such a place is typically referred to by scholars as *cheng zhong cun*, or villages-in-the-city. During China's rapid urbanization, rural farmlands were often suddenly requisitioned while retaining some rural features (Liu, 2003; Li, 2005). Cheap rent and a high level of self-government make *cheng zhong cun* a frequent settlement destination for migrant workers, which in turn reinforces the non-urban landscape of *cheng zhong cun*. Feng (2020) points out that *cheng zhong cun* are often considered to be in the city but not *of* the city. Zhong Yi, likewise, had never thought of his life in Beijing as an urban life. To him, an "urban life" comprises spacious rooms with fancy sofas, a big-screen TV, and elaborate decoration. His home lacked these. Besides, he recalled that he and his companions usually only played within the *cheng zhong cun*, although they all knew that there were entertainment facilities for children on the other side of the wall. The space of *cheng zhong cun* thus functioned as a bubble. It "circled" migrant children's early childhoods into a less modernized, underdeveloped space, channeling his gaze into his own small world and turning the urban life beyond into a blurry background or mirage. In this sense, his early life in Beijing was defined by exclusion from the urban space, and a "non-urban" identity had been instilled in

him from the start.

In addition to living in *cheng zhong cun*, many returned migrant children also lived in the urban-rural fringe, or *cheng xiang jie he bu*. Hu and Zhang (2016) understand *cheng xiang jie he bu* as an extension of *cheng zhong cun*, because it was larger in scale and often retained the form the countryside and agriculture to a greater extent. The urban-rural fringe is often located on the periphery or exurbs of cities and attracts a huge number of migrant workers. Rural-to-urban migrant families are often crammed into small red-brick bungalows of around ten square meters, which are freezing in the winter and scorching in the summer. Conditions inside the bungalows are as dismal as those shown in Zhong Yi's video. People often extend the bungalows illegally in search of more living space. Dozens or hundreds of bungalows form a circle, which children often call *da yuan*, or big yard. Xin Yi, Ah lang, Shu Hao, Ah Peng, Ah Cheng and Zhong Yi had all lived in the "big yards" in Beijing's fringes, although some of them later moved to *cheng zhong cun* (such as Zhong Yi) or urban zones (such as Ah Cheng).

Compared to the children who could glimpse the urban landscapes in villages-in-the-city, those who lived in the rural-urban fringe were hardly ever exposed to the urban landscape. Some children jokingly referred to the rural-urban fringe they dwelled in as "Li Town in Beijing". There was often nothing around the big yard, and few outsiders came in. Most of their activities took place within the big yard, except when

they went to the nearby schools. Shu Hao, Xin Yi and other child participants all recalled that the big yard was distant, both in geography and in appearance, from the urban space.

Shu Hao: the first big yard we lived in was in Shun Yi, Beijing. There's nothing outside the yard. It often took my parents more than ten minutes by electric mopeds to get to a place where they could shop. When I backed to L town, I did not have the sense of loss as if I had gone from the developed city to the backward countryside. Because both places were pretty much the same.

Xin Yi: The place was neither urban nor rural. People around us were all migrant workers from different places. Outside our yard was only a big road with nothing there. Normally I played with other kids within the big yard. The adults in the yard would drive us to and from school, so much so that I felt that my childhood life was either in the yard or the migrant worker school.

Most children's parents were engaged in the garbage recycling industry, so they either lived in villages-in-the-cities, which allowed them to collect garbage in every corner of the city, or lived in the urban-rural fringe, where they could set up garbage recycling stations. Although many children were considered to be returning to the countryside from cities such as Beijing, in the children's eyes they were simply

transferred from one non-urban place to another. They had never truly “entered into” the urban realm. Their homes in Beijing were far removed from the modern, fast-developing, and civilized city. Therefore, returned migrant children often embrace the “non-urbanite” status as their primary identity so as to coordinate the inconsistent and restless parts of their identity. As Bei Bei, Shu Hao, Ah Lang, and Zhong Yi recalled, although they felt very disappointed when they left Beijing and first arrived at the Dream School, they were very clear that they were not urban, and it was their "fate" to return to their rural hometown to study. As a result, they quickly adjusted to the environment of Dream School and found their respective playmate groups.

8.3.2 Living in urban-rural transitional zones in hometowns.

Interestingly, the rural areas where many left-behind children reside now can be seen as transitional zones as well. In China, both rural townships (乡) and villages (村) are rural units while towns belonged to urban administration. In general, upgrading to urban administration often came with greater autonomy, heightened political status, and more available development funds. According to the stipulations concerning urban and rural definitions, the National Bureau of Statistics of PRC (2006) categorizes a town as a unit of urban area while a rural township is a unit of rural area. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government has proposed a “new type of urbanization” (新型城镇化), pointing out that urbanization not only includes the transfer of rural populations to cities and the shift to non-agriculture industry, but also includes *in situ* changes, such as making towns into transitional zones linking big

cities to the countryside. Kan and Chen (2021) teased out four paths of rural urbanization, one of which is the reclassification of rural townships as towns (撤乡设镇). The L township experienced re-designation and was “upgraded” to a town in 2015 (Civil Affairs Department of Henan Province, 2015). Since then, the place where I conducted my research, should, at least administratively, not be considered rural anymore.

In their investigation, Kan and Chen (2021) found that the percentage of residents engaging in farming activities in rural townships was much higher than that in rural townships converted to towns. This meant that towns were social spaces that not only belonged to urban administrations but that were also not centred by agricultural production. Indeed, in L town, forms of living blurred the divide between rural and urban. Residents in L town may still farm part-time, but they also shop in the town's department stores or supermarkets. At the main street of the L town, one can find not only a traditional market, but also the bathroom shops, two Internet cafés, late-night snack bars, and even a fast-food restaurant selling fried chicken and burgers. In addition, with the development of e-commerce and logistics in China, town residents also shopped online, and were used to going to the logistics station located in the town to pick up or send goods. In short, the co-presence of urban experiences and rural lifestyles partially defined L town. Interestingly, since the village-based schools were largely in decline in the School Merge Movement I introduced in chapter 6, rural students rushed from villages to town-centred boarding schools. They either boarded

at school, lived in rented rooms with their caregivers, or lived in their own house their parents had purchased in the L town. As a result, for the children, village may still signify “rural” even though town had been transformed to look “non-rural”, since town, according to Kan and Chen’s analysis, participate in the urbanization process of turning rurality into modernity. Ah Ye, a girl who moved from the village to the L town in the third grade, commented that “I felt town and village were different places. My classmates had the same ideas. To be honest, I have lived in this town for years and I know nothing about people or things in the villages around the L town”.

Last but not least, prolonged immersion in cyber-space also reduced children’s perceptions of difference when residing in rural versus urban spaces. I once went to a village to help a teacher farm during the busy farming season. When almost all the villagers came to the farmland to collect and transport sun-dried rice, I saw many children and teenagers concentrating on their phone screens with their heads down in the courtyards or at the corners of the village. Similarly, almost all children dwelled on the Internet during the weekend holidays. Child participants told me that almost every child boarder had a mobile phone. And playing with mobile phones had become the most important way of entertainment. Similarly, when investigating the rural students’ lives at another boarding school, Hansen (2015) found that cyberspace opened up a whole new world in which boarding students could communicate with each other, allowing them to engage with their friends inside or outside of school.

This meant that, although the children I met lived in L town, they were not necessarily

limited by the physical space of L town. Via the internet, they could access outside worlds and virtual worlds, and thus extend their relationships to space. Zhong Yi, for example, got hooked on online games while living in Beijing. Now, back at school in the village, he spends the weekend playing online games. He said, “My life is like eating dumplings with different shapes. Although the skins are different, the stuffing is the same.” Here, “skin” signifies the real world while the “stuffing” refers to the virtual worlds. In other words, Zhong Yi’s and other boarding children’s devotion to the cyberspace may lead them to ignore the impact of their changing physical environment on their real lives.

In conclusion, while the children I met were labelled as rural children or migrant children, their childhoods were not exclusively constructed as “rural” or “urban”. The places they once inhabited were in effect urban-rural transition places, encompassing both modern and traditional elements, urban and rural lifestyles, and developed and untouched landscapes. Their access to cyber space allowed them to shrug off local constraints, making their identities more global and diverse. This is in line with the argument of Giddens (1991) and Bauman (1997) that in a late-modern era, (rooted) identities based on place are transformed into (routed) hybrid and flexible forms of identity. In other words, the nature of children’s identities should be understood as no longer fixed but rather as expanding beyond traditional boundaries.

8.3.3 Informal economy and urban-rural dichotomy.

Rural and urban are not only spatial or geographic terms but are also inherently related to people's productive activities. *Nong cun*, or rural, for instance generally refers to a place where the majority of people engage in agricultural production, while *cheng shi*, or urban, is understood as an area with developed industry and commerce and a substantial non-agricultural population. So the nature of productive activity also affects people's identities. However, most parents of the children I met engaged in what Hu and Zhang (2016) call informal economy business. Huang (2009, p. 9) explains informal economy as “not the modern, industrial, urban sector of enterprise or economy, or the traditional agricultural sector. It lies between tradition and modernity”. In other words, the nature of the economic activities of these children's parents also blur the urban-rural dichotomy. This indirectly influences children's perceptions of urban people and rural people.

Many migrant workers from G county work in the garbage recycling industry. Among the 12 child participants, 8 children had parents who once made their living by collecting and selling recyclable materials in Beijing. This echoed Ma and Ma and Xiang's finding (1998) that the recycling business in Beijing attracts a large number of Henanese from Zhumadian and Xinyang prefectures (G county was administratively affiliated with Xin Yang). As an informal economy, the garbage recycling industry is not integrated into the country's governance system, nor is it subject to the intervention of formal capital. Practitioners therefore engage in this

business with often varied measures of economic return and modes of working. Zhou, Zhou, and Liu (2007) identifies those engaged in the informal economy as “casual workers” (散工), distinguishing them from general migrant workers working in factories. Because of the complexity and indefinability of the informal economy, the families of the children I met were in vastly different situations, which indirectly influenced how the children compared their own families with urban and rural residents. Some children, for example, thought that their families were superior to low-income urban families. But some children constantly felt the hardships their family faced and tended to consider themselves to be at the bottom of society.

The children I met rarely saw migrant workers as a group, but rather as individuals. Unlike most migrant workers who often settled down together and formed close ties in cities (Ma & Xiang, 1998), the parents of these children often lived in spatially scattered places. This offered fewer chances for the children I met to engage in a broad network of *lao xiang* or native-place fellows, and thus they could less well perceive the social configurations, convention, values and traditions of rural society inherited or retained by the *lao xiang* network. In an investigation of Beijing’s different villages (or enclaves) formed by different *lao xiang* groups, Ma and Xiang (1998, p. 567) point out that “Henan Village in Beijing is not spatially well-defined. It is also much less physically attractive and lacks a strong sense of community”. This is because collecting recyclable waste materials is a simple and individually operating process, so practitioners often rely less on cooperation with other migrants to run their

businesses. Indeed, the children who once lived in Beijing described their parents' work as "doing their own". Zhong Yi, for example, told me that once his father took him to collect recyclable materials at a construction site. He and his father worked there for hours in silence, and there was no one else to talk with them. He commented that, "I rarely thought about the concept of migrant workers, so I cannot tell you what the difference is between rural migrant workers and city people as well".

Second, the children I met perceived huge differences in the income and hardships of individual migrant workers. Hu and Zhang (2016) detail the division of labor within the garbage collection industry and point out that the activities of those involved in different stages of the garbage collection system vary greatly. Indeed, while Zhong Yi thought the work of their parents was bitterly exhausting, leaving them with no time to attend to him, Shu Hao and Yong Na felt that their parents had relatively easy work. This was because Zhong Yi's father, as a garbage collector, had to pedal his cart around the city to pick up or buy recyclable waste materials for selling, whereas Shu Hao's father was a middleman who ran a small garbage collection station to collect materials from sellers like Zhong Yi's father. He was able to run a business from home and made a profit by the use of spreads. Additionally, Hu and Zhang (2016) point out that garbage recycling is a low-cost business, and people can make a fortune on their own merits. Some people became successful entrepreneurs by taking risks and making huge profits, while others remained poor after years of hard working. This led many children to be concerned more with how to make money than how to

acquire an urban identity. Ah Peng, for instance, believed that low-income residents in the city were inferior to his parents. His parents run a recycling factory in Beijing. He said, “At the best of times, my parent could earn almost a million a year, but the ordinary Beijing local people work very hard in factories but only earn less than 10 thousand yuan per month.” In many children’s views, urban and rural identities do not determine one’s income or quality of life. Hence, they take a more pragmatic approach to the question of whether they aspire to live in city in the future; they consider only where they can maximize their income and meet their living needs. Obviously, the attributes of their parents' work also became an important factor in rendering the urban-rural dualistic framework unable to capture the nature of these children’s identities.

8.4 Short conclusion.

So far, I have scrutinized every component of the term “rural left-behind children” and found that this term fails to capture the nature of children’s identities. These children had different growing trajectories and experienced frequent mobility. Although they were gathered at the Dream School due to institutional factors, they did not share or recognize each other's past experiences. Moreover, in the eyes of children, the status of being left behind did not necessarily lead to the subjective feeling of parental absence. Even children who lived in cities with their parents sometimes felt a lack of parental attention and companionship because their parents were frequently preoccupied by work. Meanwhile, with the development and

popularity of mobile technology, even children separated from their parents can obtain the feeling of being cared for and supported through their parents' virtual presence. Finally, the children I met, whether they previously lived in so-defined urban or rural areas, in fact lived in urban-rural transitional zones. The places they lived often mixed urban and rural elements, presenting both modernity and tradition, and comprised people with vastly different incomes and lifestyles. Not only that, but the time and scope of children's outdoor activities was shrinking, forcing their identity formation process to detach from any one place. Therefore, the children gathered at the Dream School should not be considered as "rural", "left-behind", or any other uniform label. The nature of their identities is not fixed, but fluid, multi-dimensional, de-localized. This is also aligned with recent literature that documents the ambivalent feature of the identity of migrant children, returned migrant children or rural children of contemporary China (See Chen, 2021; Ling, 2017;2020)."

More importantly, children are not passive receipts of external social forces but active actors with the power to de-identify. This power is enabled by children's agency to distance themselves from the norms and discursive practices that inform who and what they are. Interestingly, due to social structural changes and the high-speed flow of population, China's rural society does not seem to have achieved the historical condition under which authorized statements and expert knowledge can be conceived as "truth". Rather, it created a social condition conducive to children's exertion of agency in the independent construction of different "truths". Admittedly, when

children left the Dream School and entered into labor markets or higher educational institutions in cities, their agency in shaping their own identities might grow increasingly limited. However, their childhood stories have demonstrated the possibility of a gap between subject and the social power that constitutes it and evidence that the Foucauldian subject is "simultaneously constituted and constituting, both embedded and detached" (Armstrong, 2008). This is arguably sufficient to provoke deep reflection on children's agency, the complexity of children's identities, and the new constructs of childhood in a mobile society.

Chapter 9: Conclusion and Discussion

9.1 Summary

This study aims to understand “left-behind children” with an emphasis on how these children view their socially given identities and view themselves. In presenting how “left-behind children” understand the social world around them as well as themselves, this study does not seek to make a final statement about the situation of their lives, but rather to attend to children’s feelings and perceptions of their life experiences. On top of that, this study attempts to obtain a new and reformed understanding of children’s subjectivity. In some parts of this thesis, I consciously use the term “subjectivity” rather than the “identity”. In general, identity is understood as ways in which peoples see themselves as same with, or different from, each other’ (Woodward, 2000, p.6), and thereby identity is something fixed or inclined to be fixed. In contrast, subjectivity is a more inconsistent, conflicting, and fluid process by which a self is produced (Cockain 2012, p. 10). The inspiration of the latter is subjectivation. It assumes that children are not socialized into the social world by external forces but are actively subjected to power relations wherein they take up the social world’s spoken and written discourses about them. In this regard, this study places particular emphasis on how left-behind children come to know themselves as subjects in a multifaceted reality. Drawing on the idea of the new sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 20032005), this study discusses how rural left-behind children can exert agency by evading, doubting, or challenging the disciplinary norms and authoritative knowledge that traditionally form their identities. In negotiating with multiple facets

of reality, children keep the fluid and fragmented nature of their identity. Their accounts and actions largely challenge the passive and vulnerable images of rural left-behind children popularized in public discourse, such as in news articles titled “Boy’s Death Highlights Tragedy of China’s Left-behind Children” (2014), “‘Left-behind’ Children Pain China” (2014), “The Death of Left-behind Children” (2015), and “The Plight of China’s Left-behind Children” (2021). This study also adopts Hall’s idea of the post-modern subject, which assumes subjects “having no fixed, essential or permanent identity” in a post-modern era (1992, p. 275-277), to further explore how these children view themselves. The lives of these children have been riddled with the “postmodern-looking” factors such as mobility, complexity, and uncertainty brought about by intensified social changes. A more nuanced picture of children’s living experiences contributes to shedding new lights on child-related and childhood studies.

Ethnography, which enables an interpretive understanding formed through immersion in the lives of insiders of a community for a lengthy period of time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1), is deployed in this research to access and interpret left-behind children’s accounts of their situations. Multiple methods, including photo-elicitation, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews were deployed under the ethnographic umbrella to depict the multiple facets of children’s daily lives. The theoretical foundation I used in this research draws on Foucault’s (1995) challenge of the traditional view of a person as having a fixed and essential identity and describes identity instead as a normalizing classification legitimated by dynamic power

relations (Weir, 2009). Such a view helped this study highlight the distinction between children's views of themselves and their socially assigned identities to stress the child-centred perspective.

The study then begins by analyzing the powers in the boarding school at which these children live and study. By taking a closer look at the time and space of the Dream School in chapter 5, I reveal the coexistence of the disciplinary power and traditional authority possessed by individual adults at school. Moreover, I find that adults' use of time and space sometimes contradicts and diminishes discipline, resulting in children being subject to the personal authority of adults. According to Foucault, subjects come into being by exerting disciplinary power over themselves (Armstrong, 2008). Since the children in the Dream School were not always subject to disciplinary power, they may not view themselves as the legitimate subjects that the school discipline designates them as. This discrepancy points to the necessity of further study into how these children view, evaluate and reflect on themselves. The focus of Chapter 6 thus shifts away from the researcher's observations of school and toward the children's own subjective feelings, perceptions and understandings of the school disciplinary “systems” and of themselves.

In eliciting children’s voices through photographs, I demonstrate that children don’t integrate themselves into the discourse of “development”. The concept of “development” places priority on academic success in constituting student

subjectivity (Woronov, 2011), and justifies the governmental project of building rural boarding schools. The children I met, however, generally denied the official discourse that rural boarding schools were constitutive of their development. Through photos, they described the school as a prison while visualizing themselves as victims of an enclosed system. In other words, when the authorities hope to develop left-behind children by building rural boarding schools, so as to correct the image of left-behind children as victims, children constructed themselves as victims of the boarding environment itself.

Interestingly, based on long-term participant observation, this study further discloses that these children are not as powerless and vulnerable as they claim in their narratives. The children's words were not lies per se, but evidence found that children can exert agency to actively participate in the power game. I suggest that the main reason for their adoption of a self-pity discourse in front of me is that they recognized my high social status due to my high educational background among the adults at school and identified me as an adult whose sympathy they could win and who could help them take back some power. In other words, these children unintentionally revealed themselves as active agents in the discourse/power game, and development programs that ignore children's agency prevent them from seeing themselves as subjects of development. Likewise, children do not see themselves and others according to the way they are divided and graded by school. They can either blur the boundaries of grading designated by school or challenge the hierarchy constructed by

the grading system. This is because, in the context of different social expectations and parameters, children are allowed to constantly reinterpret the meaning of “good students” and “bad students”, thereby repositioning themselves in whatever way they like. In examining children’s interactions with the boarding system and grading system, I argue that although these children remain within the systems and discourses of power, they can find spaces to exert agency and diminish the effects of structural or discursive constraints on their identity formation, so as to keep their identities unfixed and variable.

I then turn my attention to how children interact with school adults in chapter 7. Through participant observation, I observe that children can evade both school supervision and the supervision of the wider society. Specifically, children can tactically identify loopholes in e-monitoring and can counter-monitor the school adults so that they are not fully subject to school supervision. On the other hand, by virtue of the school adults’ attempts to evade bureaucratic administrative tasks, children can provide false information to surveys and statistical polls conducted by the government, thereby escaping the surveillance of the wider society. This, again, uncovers the complexity of the adult world the children face—the school adults are both executors of and evaders of supervision mechanisms. Finally, children often resist school adults who exert traditional authority over them, especially if they see adult authority as violent, threatening, and unreasonable. When contradicting adults, Xing and his friends, for example, leveraged the textbook discourse, which values

individual freedom and rights, to challenge Principal Zhong's subordination of children to adults. Numerous cases have shown that it is difficult for adults to impose traditional adult-child hierarchies on children in a place where modern values and disciplinary powers are still at work.

In chapter 8, I shift my focus from children's interactions with school and school adults to children's interactions with peers, parents, and the places where they live or lived. My demonstration of children's subjective perceptions deeply destabilizes the term "rural left-behind children". In brief, the children I met rarely perceived the sameness and collectivity of the peer group with which they live but rather frequently experienced heterogeneity and diversity within the group. Child participants' subjective perceptions of their peer relationships cannot fit in the homogeneity that the term "rural left-behind children" indicates. In addition, from children's viewpoints, even migrant children often felt without parental presence when their parents are too busy with work to attend to them. By contrast, many rural left-behind children now make use of mobile devices and the Internet to gain a sense that their migrant parents are "always on" and to feel connected with the daily lives of their migrant parents. This suggests that the term "left-behind" can indicate variable family bonds, different quality of parent-child communication, and new forms of parental presence, thereby leading to children's different self-identification processes. Finally, many child participants do not consider the city is superior to their rural hometown. Even those children who prefer to live in cities can quickly integrate into the

countryside. This is because nearly all the children I met lived or live in rural-urban transitional zones, such as “villages-in-the-city” (城中村), “urban-fringes” (城乡结合部), or towns recently upgraded from rural townships. These places are defined by coexisting urban and rural, modern and traditional, and global and local features. This means that children’s identities cannot be accurately captured by the simple urban-rural dualism. In sum, the children I met consciously or unconsciously distanced themselves from identity constructions as members of a peer community, as left-behind children, or as rural children. The insufficiency of the term “rural left-behind child” and the subjectivity of the children I met implies that children’s identities are not fixed but fluid.

9.2 Conversation with the new sociology of childhood.

In the beginning of this thesis, the idea of the new sociology of childhood coined by Prout & James (2015) was adopted to problematize the mainstream viewpoint that regards rural left-behind children as a vulnerable and passive group who are doomed to miserable lives. Prout (2011) summarize three key tenets of the new sociology of childhood and each of them inspired this study to reconsider the live experiences of the “rural left-behind children” in contemporary China. First, the new sociology of childhood posits that childhood is socially constructed and can vary across time and space (James & Prout, 2005). This proposition thus urges researchers to explore the life experiences of left-behind children in very concrete contexts, being aware of their childhood as it relates to both the generality produced by mainstream discourse and

the particularity given by local sociality. Second, the new sociology of childhood places an emphasis on children as active social actors capable of giving meaning to the worlds around them (James and Prout, 2005). This claim implies that the world of left-behind children is partly of children's own creation, so their voices and perspectives must be understood from their own perspective. Finally, children should be regarded as incomplete, fluid subjects-in-the-making. Lee (2001), for instance, suggests that the concept of childhood should be reconsidered through the idea of "being" and "becoming", because adulthood in a late modern world cannot be viewed as the endpoint of growing up and thus the child-adult distinction is no longer useful. This idea enables this study to question previous assumptions and concepts and keep an open mind when thinking about left-behind children's statuses.

Grounded in ethnographic data, this study both supports the core idea of the new sociology of childhood and sheds new light on its three tenets. Guided by the idea of childhood as a social construction, this study takes a close look at the environment that left-behind children lived in. This study finds that the social forces that shape the childhoods of the children I met can be multiple and inconsistent. For example, while the national-level policy "School Closure and Merger" (*che dian bing xiao*) aims at reducing the urban-rural educational gap, the county-level policy that encourages privatization of schools actually widens this gap. The children who studied in rural schools are simultaneously constructed as developed children and as children who are doomed to lag behind. In addition, when registration becomes an onerous and

pointless bureaucratic task, teachers may encourage students to provide false information to survey and statistics. In adult society's construction of childhood, the out-of-control or misbehaving children are opposed to the obedient or good children (Sorin, 2005). The former can be transformed into be the latter by abiding by the adult-initiated rules. However, the children in this study are thus simultaneously encouraged to become "rule-abiding children" and "rule-breaking children". These cases demonstrates that, in micro practice, there are often multiple and inconsistent childhood constructions in play. While the sociology of childhood argues that childhood can vary across time and space, the findings of this study suggest that childhood can be fragmented "here" and "now". In a world of profound social changes, childhood can no longer be treated as a cultural entity of time and space comparable to another cultural entity in a different locality or different time.

Moreover, the empirical instances demonstrate the new sociology of childhood in terms of the idea that children are social actors with the capability to interpret what they see around them. A typical example is that the child participants tend to see the status of being left behind as normal, which directly challenges the discourse that considers the separated family structure as pathological or unhealthy (Gu, 2021).

Likewise, the children I met are able to maintain a distance from the social forces that shapes their lives, and this proves their agency in determining their own lives. More importantly, this study accesses the nature of this agency by inquiring what the "children's voice" and "child-centred perspective" are. Ethnographic data implies that

the voices articulated by children are not necessarily the voices that belong to the child group, and also insists that a child-centred approach does not necessarily lead to a sort of perspective exclusively belonging to children. In fact, children can engage in adult discourse, and also may make use of one set of adult discourses to challenge another in order to satisfy their specific needs. Typical cases include when Xing and his friends use modern discourses to challenge principal Zhong's traditional notions about the child-adult relationship, when Ah Cheng speaks mainstream adult discourse to suggest his self-identification as an urban child, and when Shu Hao measures himself by the social definition of a "good person" rather than school norm of "good student." These cases indicate that "the child-centred perspective" should not be understood as participating in a child-adult dualism, but rather should consider both children and adults as subjects-in-the-making. Childhood studies must pay more attention to the conditions underlying the logic of children's speech, behavior, and thinking in a particular time and space.

Besides, the responses of this study to the first and second tenets of the new sociology of childhood imply an identification with its third tenet: that both adults and children can be considered as "becoming". What I mean by this is that the accumulated life experiences of adults are perhaps inadequate to cope with a rapidly changing world and its new knowledge, new wisdom, and new competency demands. Adults, like children, are facing a new world that they have never experienced, and often feel uncertain of their own futures and those of their children. In this sense, both they and

children can be seen as unfinished people “belonging to a complex web of interdependencies.” (Prout, 2011, p. 8). Given the past 30 to 40 years of intensified social change and the high mobility of rural residents, the adult society of the left-behind children is similarly marked by a sense of uncertainty, risk, and insecurity. The rural teachers I met, for example, experience undefinable employment relations. In the context of local policies encouraging school privatization, many teachers are employees of public school but have long worked at the private school. Likewise, most children’s parents do not have urban residency and are excluded from the city’s employment and welfare system. They frequently move, change jobs, and adjust their family’s lifestyles in response to changing living conditions and markets. As we can see, children’s parents and teachers are also living in an era in which new people, new things and new information constantly flood into their local niche, leading to the constant redevelopment and reformation of their lives and subjectivities. This study argues that it is time to see both childhood and adulthood as “unfinished projects” or “incomplete personhoods” in our rapidly changing society. In this “unsettled time” (Swidler, 1986), policy makers must recognize that the factors of instability, the factors of uncertainty, and what Derrida (1988, p. 148) called the undecidable (e.g., that the children’s graded identities seem neither good nor bad, or alternatively are both good and bad simultaneously), appear in the childhoods of “left-behind children” as universal and normal. Instead of obliterating these differences through modernized discipline or traditional domination, policymakers, educators, and caregivers should try to understand them more deeply by listening to children’s voices and helping them

master the competitive and contradictory orderings of their daily lives and anchoring the remembered past in an anticipated future.

9.3 Rethinking children's agency.

This thesis focuses on how “rural left-behind children” exert agency to maintain a de-centred identity in the midst of China’s rapid social transformation. The main consideration of extant literature about left-behind children in rural China is how they are constrained by familial (e.g., Gu, 2021) and societal structures (e.g., Xiang, 2007). Even though there has been a growing body of research reporting on how “left-behind children” exert agency to cope with challenges and plights caused by parental labor migration and institutional barriers, little is known about how they can exert agency to resist the powers that attempt to instill particular identities in them. This is, however, a crucial task in order to gain a dynamic and comprehensive understanding of left-behind children, because their given identities may not accurately and holistically depict them. Put differently, children, though labelled as rural-left-behind children, do not necessarily see themselves through the restrictive prism of “rural-left-behind children” in real life.

Following this idea, we may reconsider the agency that children can exert in two scopes: discursive context and in real space. Some scholars (Honwana, 2005; Klocker, 2007; Punch, 2007; Robson, Bell, & Klocker, 2007) use the terms “thin agency”, “limited agency”, and “restricted agency” to emphasize the scope in which children’s

agency can be exerted. This study further argues that the scope and ways that children display agency in discursive contexts and in the actual world might be different. In the actual world, the agency of the children I met is mostly expressed in challenges to the organization of time and space to create more opportunities for their own interests. So, the focus should be to what extent the children's bodily actions can resist the spatial rules and time structures that govern their bodies. The finding of this study is consistent with Hansen's findings in her study of high school students at another rural boarding school in China (2016): that left-behind children suffer many restraints, but are still capable of controlling their bodies relatively freely even in a restrictive campus environment. This means that even though there is insufficient latitude for children's actions to achieve significant change to the environment, they are still able to avoid subjecting their bodies to school discipline through tactical actions, which indirectly prevents their identities from being defined by the specific knowledge embedded in mechanisms of disciplinary power.

Apart from bodily actions, children also express agency in doubting, resisting, and tactically reusing adult discourse. In doing so, children put themselves outside the power relations embedded in adult discourse and thus obtain the possibility of resistance in the discursive context. This study shows that left-behind children can make use of the multiplicity of and conflicts in adult discourse to defend their own interests. In many cases, children's bodies are clearly restricted, but in the discursive context they can still sustain autonomy, free choice and resourcefulness. Prout (2011)

writes, “The German educationalist Giesecke (1985) suggested some years ago that children, like adults, live in a pluralistic society. They are confronted by a range of competing, complementary and divergent values and perspectives derived from parents, school, the media, consumption practices and their peer relations.”. Adults are losing the power to control and steer these diversified factors as a whole. Similarly, left-behind children in contemporary China have been caught in a significant social upheaval marked by globalization and industrialization and are confronted with changing living environments and cultural values. Discourses delivered by a single adult may not be able to sufficiently encompass the complex world that left-behind children face. As a result, it is easy for children to question the “truth” depicted by individual adults and thus to refuse to regard what the adults portray them as their “true selves”.

Considering how children exert agency in both the discursive context and in actual space provides a comprehensive picture of children’s participation in their identity formation. As this study has shown, there are structural and systemic mechanisms that govern children’s bodies, and there are also given discourses that rule in meanings of children’s social identities. In the Foucauldian sense, both constraints embody the exercise of disciplinary power, but in reality, children's agency may be “thin” in one constraint and “thick” in the other. For example, in face of the grading system, children can hardly change the way the campus space divides, categorizes, and manages their bodies. However, they are able to distance themselves from the

discourse that sets standards for “good” and “bad” students and to reinterpret their status with their own understanding of it. Children’s ability to distance themselves contributes to the making of the decentred subject since it “opens up a space between the subject and its present desires, beliefs, experiences and self-understanding” (Armstrong 2008), thereby allowing us to understand the Foucauldian subject as both embedded in and detached from power. Similarly, there are cases where children show “thick agency” in the actual world but “thin agency” in the discursive context. As previous studies have revealed, left-behind children can exert agency to cope with challenges and plights in the left-behind life, presenting a picture completely different from mainstream public discourse. However, they can neither find a substitute for the term “left-behind children” in adult discourse nor can they develop a new term to sum up their living conditions. Thus, they can only keep using “left-behind children” to signify themselves, even though they sense the term’s inaccuracy. Previous studies on children’s agency often emphasize the resilience or resistance realized by their practical actions. However, the present study demonstrates that children are also not passive receivers in the context of discourse. They can resist, to some extent, the adult discourse that tries to simplify their complex life experiences and fix their fluid identities.

9.4 Why do children’s voices matter?

Based on these children’s stories, I’d like to propose two reasons that illuminate why it is urgent and important to listen to children’s voices. One is to avoid the adverse

effects of adult authority on children, and to enable these children to participate in the “game of truth” in the modern educational institution. In many cases, including in Xing's confrontation with Principal Zhong, we find that children have a difficult time confronting the disciplinary practices of modern education in a world dominated by adult authority. It is therefore also hard for them to become legitimate subjects within the modern educational ideology by wielding disciplinary power over themselves. It is worth noting that considering disciplinary power as evil is also misleading. In an interview (Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, Gomez-Müller, & Gauthier, 1987, p129), Foucault explains,

“Power is not an evil. Power is strategic games..... Let us also take something that has been the object of criticism, often justified: the pedagogical institution. I don't see where evil is in the practice of someone who, in a given game of truth, knowing more than another, tells him what he must do, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates skills to him. The problem is rather to know how you are to avoid in these practices-where power cannot play and where it is not evil in itself-the effects of domination which will make a child subject to the arbitrary and useless authority of a teacher, or put a student under the power of an abusively authoritarian professor, and so forth.”

To Foucault, teachers' acts of domination on children and their exertion of traditional authority should be avoided, because they can disturb the process of knowledge

transmission (not only textbook knowledge but also knowledge about modern education as a whole). This study, especially the discussion in chapter 7, finds that the adult teachers I met generally view traditional authority and modern disciplinary techniques as complementary in managing children, but children can see where the two collide. In other words, the children, as the objects of the power, are usually more sensitive to different forms of power than the adults are. In this light, listening to children's voices can help identify where modern discipline in rural schools needs to be strengthened, so that the children can be better invited into the "game of truth" of modern education rather than excluded from it.

Second, from the children's self-articulation we can see that the public or mainstream discourse cannot capture the holistic picture of these children's life experiences, nor can it reduce them into objects to be endowed with centred identities. For instance, the discourse about the urban-rural duality cannot accurately reflect children's living experiences in the rural-urban transitional zones. Also, the popular narrative of these children's left-behind status also fails to capture children's complicated feelings about the visual presence of their migrant parents. Moreover, the development discourse that categorizes left-behind children as a marginalized group cannot account for the fact that left-behind children tend to see themselves as the majority in their own worlds. In the face of a multi-faceted reality and rapid social changes, children can always find information that goes against the prevailing types of knowledge and norms. As a result, although children's self-understanding is still conditioned by power, they can

learn from the real world and create a “strangeness” in their identities as designated by mainstream society. However, children’s expression of such “strangeness”, either in bodily actions or discourse, is often considered as what Johnson calls “noise” that is being disregarded (Salusinsky, 1987, p. 81). And this is mainly because our adult society still sees children as “adults-in-the-making” rather than as “subjects-in-the-making”, as all individuals are.

The “strangeness” of the socially given identity categories is not unique to the children I met. David Ip (2011), in his investigation of the transnational identity of the “1.5 generation” Chinese migrants in Australia, felt this strangeness too, because the informants had a hard time anchoring their national identities to either their place of origin or their host country. Likewise, Peng (2017) stated that when China’s migrant women returned from the city to their rural hometown, they found themselves becoming a “‘stranger’ in a ‘familiar’ landscape”. These returned women had difficulty accepting the label of “rural people” despite their rural origin because they also saw themselves as “‘urban’ salaried ‘workers’ with very different ‘tastes’ and ‘aspirations’” (p. 267). These studies demonstrate that adults can contribute “strangeness” to the mainstream discourse, established norms, and authorized knowledge as well, especially when they cannot see themselves as “beings” in a static world, but rather as “becomings” in a fast-changing world. In this sense, children’s voices should not be treated as “noise” that can be silenced or forbidden, but rather as opportunities to better understand their subjective living experiences.

9.5. Reflection on identity and subjectivity.

The aforementioned theoretical contributions are my response to the theories (e.g., Poststructuralism and New Sociology of Childhood) I adopted to frame my research design and research questions. However, as I was near the completion of my writing, I realized that what I had learned from these children's stories may provide a novel insight into the understanding of the relation of identity and subjectivity.

In general, identity has both a divisive and unifying effect, attempting to 'differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory' (Bamberg, 2010, p. 1). Social categories like gender and race are often seen as definite and invariable. In this sense, identity is associated with ways of pursuing the control of meaning; therefore, identity can present a fixed and unitary phenomenon. In contrast, subjectivity is a more inconsistent, conflicting and fluid process (Cockain, 2012, p. 10), because it is 'an effect of language, governed by lack (of control over meaning in the symbolic order)' (Woodward, 2000). Put another way, identity is often obtained within a closed system of meaning and discourse, while subjectivity is inclined to be open to the plurality of meaning within the language system.

In discussion of identity and subjectivity, Woodward (2000, p. 9) focuses more on

how identity makes one's subjectivity singular, stable and seemingly containing a 'core'. He stated that the identity categories ideologically function to 'curtail the plural possibilities of subjectivity inherent in the wider discursive field and to give individuals a singular sense of who they are and where they belong' (Woodward, 2000, p. 19). In other words, identification can transform the openness of subjectivity to the language system into closure, entailing subjects to feel that they have a 'true' self in a definite structure of meaning in language, thus producing themselves as 'knowing subjects'. While recognizing the possibility of being a subject without identification, Woodward (2000) did not discuss this situation in great detail. This study thus fills this gap by depicting the situation that socially given identities cannot limit the subjectivity of the children into a specific mode of representation.

First, this study uncovers that the legitimacy of the socially given identities does not take into account the 'insiders' views. As a result, it is quite easy for the insiders, namely the left-behind children, to be aware of the places where the socially assigned identities do not suit their real lives. Even worse, children's voices are often excluded or repressed by the socially given identities, making it unlikely for the children to actively internalize the identification encouraged by the mainstream discourses and institutions. For instance, in Chapter 6, I elaborate on how the children deny the negative images of the 'developing child' identity prescribed to them, though they may not fully reject the idea of development. Likewise, the children I met tended to view 'left-behind' as a common and normal status, which contradicts the vulnerable

and miserable image the mainstream discourse often depicts for such children. This suggests that the symbolic order implied by the socially assigned identities such as the 'developing child' does not attain the control of meaning in children's real lives. The children's subjectivity is thus still exposed to a plurality of meanings and values constituted by competing discourses, keeping distance from the identification that the adult society expects to take place.

Second, in addition to the gap between the identity categories and the children's views, the binary conception of the identity categories may not fit the rapidly changing social reality as well. The conceptual duality, shown in urban/rural, non-left-behind children/left-behind children or parental presence/parental absence, may have been convincing many decades ago. However, with China's intensified social changes and frequent mobility, it has been somehow deconstructed in real-life situations.

These concepts can no longer provide a polarized binary relation in which identity can be easily distinguished from what it is not. For instance, as indicated in Chapter 8, the emergence of rural-urban transitional zones promoted by China's new type of urbanization has rendered it very hard for the children to identify themselves as either rural or urban members in an absolute binary sense. In other words, mainstream discourse assertions of certain differences are not as tenable as they used to be; therefore, the subjects are less likely to engage in the corresponding differentiation/identification to fix the mode of subjectivity. The subjects have to seek alternative discourses, meanings and values to respond to the mismatch between

conceptual and actual differences. Whether or not they could make it in the process of seeking, subjectivity would not be applicable to one dominant discourse; rather it would involve varied ones, thereby representing multiple, fragmented and inconsistent features.

Based on these findings, I argue that the presentation of subjectivity can be seemingly stable and fixed, but it can also be represented as inconsistent, fluid and even contradictory. The representation of one's subjectivity may depend on whether the historical conditions of the milieu allow for a relatively single and monopolistic regime of power and knowledge to unite people's different ideas, values, beliefs and subjective experiences. As my research discloses, the rural areas and the schools I have visited are undergoing profound and rapid social changes, and most children experience frequent and diverse mobility. This has led to the identity categories based on a static duality losing the ability to recruit subjects into a singular or consistent meaning system, thereby failing to temporally mask or limit the ambivalence and inconsistency of subjectivity. Surely, it is also conceivable that when these children graduate, complete their transitional period and eventually enter a factory or a city high school where the discipline is stricter and the discourse system is more unitary, they can be more likely to engage in certain identifications (e.g., formation of class identity or student identity) and hence, make the representation of their subjectivity more definite and stable than it was in their previous stage of life. In brief, while subjectivity is a more inconsistent, conflicting and fluid process (Cockain, 2012, p.

10), its representation can be varied in different stages of the life course and different contexts of the external environment. The value of this study is to remind us of the possibility and importance of the former situation, namely the representation of subjectivity being more fluid, multiple and contradictory, or what I call the 'decentered subject'.

To face the 'decentered subjects', we might consider embracing Deleuzian thinking, as it opens up thoughts and practices through creative engagement that brings new dialogues, crosses boundaries and probes into issues in a dynamic, open and reflective way. Deleuze and Guattari believe that the goal of philosophy is to seek a critical practice or a 'complex act' (Patton, 2000, p. 12) that calls for the possibility to 'create openings that allow thought to escape from the constraints' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. viii). In this regard, Deleuzian thinking may help us unsettle conventional ways to understand the so-called left-behind children, inviting outsiders to understand their everyday life as a series of encounters that unfold possibilities in which we can envision 'new kinds of society and new people' (Patton, 2007). Such thinking, together with the thick field notes generated by ethnography, is destined to increase our courage to listen to the 'noise' (Bradbury, 1987, p 81) that continually disturbs the mainstream narratives and 'remain attentive to the unknown that is knocking on the door' (Rajchman, 2000, p. 7).

Appendix 1.

The key profile information of the 14 participants.

Name	Gender	Class	Living Arrangement	Family SES (Reported by teachers)	Father Occupation	Mother Occupation	Exam ranking	Birthplace/ Previous experience of moving (City to City)/Age of returning 'home' of returnees.
Sun	M	9.5	Half-boarding	Below average	Garbage collection and doing precarious jobs	Cleaner	2/129	Born in L town in 2004 and grew up in L town.
Yue Yue	M	9.5	Non-boarding (living outside school)	Average	Garbage collection and driving passengers at night	Housewife	8/129	Born in Guangdong in 2004; Move to L town in 2016.
Shu Hao	M	9.3	Non-boarding (living at school)	Above average	Running a small garbage site	Housewife	48/129	Born in Beijing in 2005; Move to L town in 2015.
Xin Yi	F	9.3	Half-boarding	Average	Garbage collection	Manual labour	35/129	Born in Beijing in 2005; Move to L town in 2015.
Xiao Pang	M	9.5	Full-boarding	Above average	Section chief of a rubber factory	Worker in the same rubber factory	21/129	Born in Shanghai and move to G county in 2005.
Yong Na	F	9.5	Non-boarding (staying in a teacher's home)	Above average	Running a small business	Running a small business	33/129	Born in Anhui in 2004; Move to Beijing in 2005; Move to L town in 2017.
Zhong Yi	M	9.4-9.5	Full-boarding	Below average	Garbage collection and doing precarious jobs	Cleaner	10/129	Born in L town in 2004; Move to Beijing in 2006; Move to L town in 2018.
Xing	M	9.5	Half-boarding	Average	Pick truck driver	Providing housekeeping services	5/129	Born in Beijing in 2003; Move to L town in 2008.

Ah Lang	M	9.4	Half-boarding	Above average	Running a community store	Manual labour	125/129	Born in Beijing in 2004; Move to L Town in 2007; Move to Beijing in 2009; Move to L town in 2018.
Ah Peng	M	9.3	Half-boarding	Above average	Running a garbage recycling factory	Running a garbage recycling factory	73/129	Born in Beijing in 2003; Move to L town in 2013.
Ah Ye	F	9.5	Non-boarding (Living at school)	Above average	Working at an Electric company	Supermarket cashier	24/129	Born in L town in 2005; Move to Z City (in Henan province) in 2013; Move to L town in 2014.
Ah Cheng	M	9.4	Full-boarding	Above average	Running a hardware store	Running a hardware store	96/129	Born in Beijing in 2003; Move to L town in 2018.
Bei Bei	F	9.5	Full-boarding	Below average	Doing precarious jobs	Waitress	17/129	Born in Shanghai in 2002; Move to Beijing in 2002; Move to L town in 2014
Shuai	M	9.4-9.5-9.4	Full-boarding	Below Average	Doing precarious jobs	Waitress	109/129	Born in Shanghai in 2002; Move to Beijing in 2002; Move to L town in 2014

Note: 1) Even though the family SES was reported by teachers, it was found highly consistent with children's self-reports of their family situation. 2) The right column marks the differences in children's birthplaces, moving trajectories, and the ages of "returning home" for those born in citie

Appendix 2.



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Understanding Left-Behind Children in Rural China: An Ethnographical Study

I _____ hereby consent to participate in the captioned research conducted by _____.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the attached information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefit and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without penalty of any kind.

Name of participant: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Name of Parent or Guardian (if applicable): _____

Signature of Parent or Guardian (if applicable): _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

参与研究同意书

研究标题：理解中国农村留守儿童，一项民族志研究

本人_____同意参与由_____开展的上述研究。

本人知悉此研究所得的资料可能被用作日后的研究及发表，但本人的隐私权将得以保留，即本人的个人资料不会被公开。

研究人员已经向本人清楚解释列在所附资料卡上的研究程序，本人明了当中设计的利益和风险；本人自愿参与研究项目。

本人知悉本人有权就程序的任何部分剔除疑问，并有权随时退出而不受任何惩处。

参与者姓名_____

参与者签署_____

家长或监护人（如适用）姓名_____

家长或监护人（如适用）签署_____

研究人员姓名_____

研究人员签署_____

日期_____

Informed Consent Letter (For Children)

Hello, my friends,

I am Zhou Qiushi, a doctoral student from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. I am come here because I am interested in finding out what your everyday life is like living in this place, dealing with your family members, friends, teachers, and your parents who may not be around all the time.

I am interested in talking to and knowing more about you because I have lived in rural places before and now that rural places have changed so much, I wonder if your life has been affected by these changes, along with the ways you relate to all the adults, including your parents, teachers, grandparents, relatives who often lecture on how you should behave and live your life. Therefore, I hope you can tell me freely your thoughts and the way you feel about things to help me to understand how the lives of young children are like now in rural China.

For this reason, I would like to observe and talk to you if you allow me to. We can also do things together and chat whenever you like. The conversations do not have

to be lengthy (no more than 40 minutes), and you can decide when and where to talk, either face-to-face, or using We-chat, E-mails, mobile phone or even in writing. In addition, I would also like to teach you to use a camera to record what you do daily by taking photos of places and people you like or interesting, or vice versa because sometimes it is easier to say things about yourself through pictures you take.

Please note that whatever you tell or show to me will be only used only for academic purposes and no one will find out your identity or background so that you will not be harmed in any way. Also, you have full right to say no to me and are free to withdraw from any activity you feel uncomfortable at any time.

If you would like to become a part of my research, please help me by completing the consent form attached. Please feel free to contact me whenever you have any question. My contact number is 1878244 , and E-mail address is 1804 @ .

Thank you very much for joining my project.

The researcher: Zhou Qiushi

A Ph.D. Student, The Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

知情同意书 (儿童)

朋友，你好！

我叫周秋实，是香港理工大学的博士生。我来这里是因为我有兴趣了解你在这里的日常生活是什么样子的，你是如何与你的家人、朋友、老师交流的。

我很有兴趣与你交谈，知道更多关于你的情况。我以前在农村居住过,但现在农村已经改变了这么多,我想知道你的生活受到这些变化的影响,特别是对你和身边成年人的关系的影响,比如那些经常告诉你该如何行为、如何生活的父母,老师,爷爷奶奶或亲戚。因此，我希望你能自由地告诉我你对事物的想法和感受，帮助我了解现在中国农村儿童的生活的样子。

如果您允许的话，我想和您交流。我们可以一起做事情，聊天。我们的对话不必很长(不超过 40 分钟)，你也可以决定何时何地交谈。无论是面对面交谈，还是使用微信、电子邮件、手机，甚至是书面形式都可以。此外，我还想教你用相机来记录你每天做的事情，通过拍摄记录你（不）喜欢的地方和你（不）喜欢的人或有趣的人，因为有时通过你拍的照片更容易描述你自己。

请不必担心，无论你告诉我或给我看什么，都只会用于学术目的，没有人会发现你的身份或背景，所以你不会受到任何伤害。此外，你有充分的权利对我不，并自由地退出任何你觉得不舒服的活动。

如果你同意成为我的研究伙伴，请填写下面的同意书。我的手机号码是 1878244，我的 QQ 是 46029 ，如果你想成为我研究的一部分，请填写附件的同意书。

如果你有任何问题的话，请不要犹豫，立即同我联络。我的联络电话是 1878244，电邮是 1804 @ .

非常感谢你加入我的项目。感谢你的理解和同意！

研究者：周秋实。

香港理工大学应用社会科学系博士研究生。

Appendix 3.



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Understanding Left-Behind Children in Rural China: An Ethnographical Study

I _____ hereby consent to my child _____ to participate in the captioned research conducted by.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and published. However, my right

to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the attached information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefit and risks

involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without penalty of any kind.

Name of participant: _____

Signature of participant: _____

Name of Parent or Guardian (if applicable): _____

Signature of Parent or Guardian (if applicable): _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

参与研究同意书

研究标题：理解中国农村留守儿童，一项民族志研究

本人_____同意我的孩子_____参与由_____开展的上述研究。

本人知悉此研究所得的资料可能被用作日后的研究及发表，但本人的隐私权将得以保留，即本人的个人资料不会被公开。

研究人员已经向本人清楚解释列在所附资料卡上的研究程序，本人明了当中设计的利益和风险；本人自愿参与研究项目。

本人知悉有权就程序的任何部分剔除疑问，并有权随时退出而不受任何惩处。

参与者姓名_____

参与者签署_____

家长或监护人（如适用）姓名_____

家长或监护人（如适用）签署_____

研究人员姓名_____

研究人员签署_____

日期_____

Informed Consent Letter (For Adults)

My name is Zhou Qiushi, a full-time student currently completing a PhD degree at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. I come to here to conduct research on how the “left-behind” children live in rural China because despite they have been frequently reported and discussed, how they live their lives without their parents remains controversial, especially when children were not given the opportunity to express the way they see their own situation. I hope to learn from your child and develop insights for formulating more appropriate policies giving “left-behind” children better social support while completing my PhD thesis.

For this reason, I intend to work with the Li Xiang School with permission from the president to do observation and talk to your child about their studies and life in school, how they interact with friends, teachers and families in their daily lives. In addition, I would also like to teach your child to take photos showing how they relate themselves to the places and people they love and enjoy or vice versa as a way to express themselves other than using spoken or written words.

In any case, each meeting I intend to have with your child will be brief and will not last for more than 40 minutes. I would like to keep a record of the conversations if

you and your child agree with this arrangement. Please note that all the information I collect will be strictly kept as confidential and protected to minimize the risks any harm or inconvenience. Their identity will also be hidden with the use of pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity and their faces will not be revealed in any of my writings. Your child will have full rights to refuse to involve in my research and he/she is free to withdraw from any activities at any time should he/she feel uncomfortable.

If you are happy to allow your child to be a part of this study, please kindly sign the consent form attached. Please feel free to contact me when you have any further question. My contact phone number is 1878244 , and E-mail address is 1804 @ .

The Researcher: Zhou Qiushi

A Ph.D. Student, The Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

知情同意书（成人）

您好，我叫周秋实，是香港理工大学的全职博士研究生。我来这里想是研究“留守儿童”如何在农村生活。尽管“留守儿童”经常被报道和讨论,但他们如何在没有父母陪伴下生活仍然是有争议的,特别是当孩子们没有机会表达他们如何看待自己的情况。我希望在完成博士论文的同时，能够向您的孩子学习，为制定更合适“留守儿童”的、能给他们更好社会支持的政策，发表有洞察力的见解。

因此，我打算在学校领导许可下，与理想中学合作，观察并与您的孩子谈论他们在学校的学习和生活，以及他们在日常生活中与朋友、老师和家人的互动。此外，我还想教您的孩子拍照片，通过非口头或书面用语的方式，去展示他们与喜欢（或不喜欢）的地方和人的关系。

无论如何，我与您的孩子进行的每次会见都会很简短，最长不会超过40分钟。如果你和你的孩子同意这个安排，我想把谈话记录下来用作研究。但请不用担心，我所收集的所有资料将被严格保密，并受到保护，以尽量减少任何伤害或不便的风险。他们的身份也会用假名隐藏起来，以保持他们的匿名性。他们的脸也不会在我的任何作品中出现。

您的孩子将完全有权拒绝参与我的研究，如果他/她感到不舒服，他/她可以随时退出任何活动。如果您愿意让您的孩子参与本研究，请在附件的同意书上签字。如果您有任何问题，请随时与我联系。我的手机号码是1878244 ； 邮箱地址是1804 @ .

非常感谢您的理解和同意！

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