

**Can China's policies address the problem of left-behind children?**

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Education, the University of Auckland, 2022*

## **Abstract**

As a result of migration of rural labour to cities, many children have been left behind in the rural villages by their migrant-worker parents. Many left-behind children (LBC) face problems such as a lack of family care, family separation, mental health issues, behavioural issues, low achievement in education, and so on. To cope with the problem of LBC, the Chinese government issued the “The Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas” (The 2016 Opinions) in 2016. This study explores The 2016 Opinions and the extent to which the policy has addressed the problems of LBC. It draws on the critical discourse problematization framework (CDPF), a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Bacchi’s “What’s the problem represented to be (WPR)?”, to analyse The 2016 Opinions and achieve the dual goals of policy analysis and criticism. The results suggest that the policy discourses in The 2016 Opinions are influenced by charity and social harmony discourses, with authoritarianism and neoliberalism affecting the expression of these discourses in policy. This thesis argues that, although the 2016 Opinions have improved compared to previous policies, these can only alleviate the current plight of LBC but cannot fundamentally resolve the phenomenon of LBC because the household registration system, which shapes the foundation of migrant workers lives and made family separation the normal life of LBC in rural areas, is not addressed. In other words, The 2016 Opinions merely treat the symptoms rather than addressing the root cause of the problem. To conclude, this study suggests that a shift towards a discourse of human rights and equality is needed in both policy and practice.

## **Acknowledgments**

After a year of hard work, I finally finished this thesis. It has been a difficult journey and I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has supported and helped me along the way.

Firstly, my sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr Marek Tesar. I am thankful for his detailed professional guidance and feedback over the period of the thesis writing. I am very grateful that he has been patient and positive about my writing. Thanks to him for his encouragement in keeping my self-confidence strong even in difficult times.

Next, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Wendy Choo. Her advice and help have greatly inspired my in-depth views on the topic of my thesis. She also gave me considerable support emotionally.

Special thanks to Sue Osborne who, as my proofreader, did a careful grammar check and reference completion check of my paper. Thanks for her excellent work.

As always, I am grateful to my parents, Mr Xiaoguang Xing and Ms Liping Zou for their encouragement and support over the time of my study.

Lastly, I would like to thank my boyfriend, Liu Jun, for always caring and accompanying me. You make me feel very happy and I am lucky to have you in my life.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

When I was a child because there was no suitable job for my parents to support my family in my home town, they went to another city about 1,000 kilometres away from home to do business and they had to leave me with my grandparents. From the time I was 8 years old and into adulthood, I only spent time with my parents once every year for New Year, usually no more than five days. My grandparents took good care of me, but I deeply missed my parents and felt this negatively impacted my well-being. In the first few years of our separation, my personality gradually changed from cheerful to being taciturn. When my mother noticed this change, she was upset and tried to correct it, but to no avail. In addition, the long-term lack of communication with my parents led to an estrangement between us, which seriously affected our relationship. When I was in my adolescence, I often quarrelled with my parents and the parent-child relationship was very tense. The experience had such a negative impact on me that I still struggle as an adult with how to communicate with my parents. He and Li (2018) argued that left-behind children (LBC) have disadvantages in their development and most LBCs face even worse conditions than I did. Indeed, my parents who work outside provided better living conditions and education for me but the negative effects of being left behind will probably stay with me. Because of my personal experience, I care deeply about LBCs and want to understand the challenges and problems they face.

### 1.1 Why left-behind children (LBC)?

In the past 40 years, China has undergone significant economic changes due to economic reform and opening up (*gai ge kai fang*). This economic policy transformed China from a planned economy to a socialist market economy and transformed China's semi-closed society into a fully open one, promoting the process of China's modernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation (Wang & Wu, 2016). During these decades of economic transformation, the trend of urbanisation in China prompted large-scale, rural-to-urban population migration and a large proportion of the

agricultural labour force flowed into cities and became migrant workers. In 2010, there were 153.35 million migrant workers in China, and in 2020, the number was 285.6 million, roughly doubling in the past decade (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013, 2021). The occupational and social living status of migrant workers can be described as marginal, transitional and unstable. Migrant workers are no longer engaged in agricultural production, but they as live a long time in the cities, they are marginal in the rural society. At the same time, due to the restrictions of the household registration system and their work skills, it is difficult for them to obtain stable and high-income work in cities, and thus it is also difficult to truly integrate into the urban society (Feng & Zhang, 2018). Therefore, migrant workers in urban and rural areas are at both ends of a marginalized status. Furthermore, many children of migrant workers receive compulsory education in their hometowns, forcing migrant workers to commute constantly between their hometowns and the cities where they work (Sun, 2011).

Additionally, most of them have to live on low incomes obtained through hard labour (Fu, 2006; Ren & Pan 2007). In 2020, about half of migrant workers worked in secondary industries, mostly concentrated in manufacturing (27.3%) and construction (18.3%) (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The others are in the tertiary sector, which includes retail, transportation, accommodation, catering and so on (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The average annual income of these migrant workers in 2020 was about 50,000 yuan (about NZ\$11,000 per year), only half of the national average for non-private sector workers in urban areas (China's National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The plight of migrant workers in cities also leads to the fact that settling in the city is extremely difficult to achieve for those rural labour. The low income of migrants mentioned above is one of the reasons. Low incomes determine the poor living conditions of migrant workers, and it is difficult for them to buy or rent large houses for the whole family. In cities with a population of around 5 million, such as Zhangjiakou, the average price of a house is 7,000 yuan

(about NZ\$1,500) per square meter<sup>1</sup>. Based on the salary mentioned earlier, it takes a migrant worker 10 years of net income to buy a 70-square-meter house. Under such circumstances, bringing children and elderly people from their hometowns to the city means that the family has to live in a small space. Moreover, the elderly and children have no means of income, and urban consumption is higher than rural consumption, so it is difficult for the whole family to move together. These migrant workers typically leave family members who are unable to contribute economically to the family in the countryside; these are mainly women, children, and the elderly. Such a phenomenon is typical today in some Chinese villages that are now predominantly composed of LBCs and the elderly. For example, in Hunan province, about 90% of the rural population under the age of 20 and over the age of 50 live permanently in the countryside, while only 60% of the population between the ages of 20 and 50 live permanently in the countryside (Hunan Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2018). That means about 40% of the youth population is out of their hometown for a long time.

The increasing number of migrant workers in China has led to a substantial growth of children impacted by family migration. As a result, the LBC population has continued to increase over the years. The number of LBCs (age 0-17) rose from 58.61 million in 2005 to an estimated 61.03 million in 2010, which represents a growth rate of 4.1%. A report by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF and UNFPA (2015), estimates there are 40.51 million rural LBCs, accounting for about one-sixth of the total number of children in China.

The experience of being separated from parents can have negative impacts on the development of children. The positive and nurturing parent-child relationships not only can reduce the occurrence of family emotional conflict and improve the development of family members' physical and mental health (Lanigan, 2009) but are also associated with better academic performance and fewer behavioural problems (Fuligni, 1998; Tseng, 2004). However, family communication, affective expression,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://m.creprice.cn/city/zjk.html>

and parental engagement have all suffered as a result of parental migration (Slinner & Steinhauer, 2000). This means that those LBCs who suffer from family separation are more likely to perform mental problems, behavioural problems and low academic achievement because children who are separated from their parents usually lack care, support and supervision (Ye & Pan, 2011). Both parents and children can be extremely stressed by this situation, and a broken parent-child relationship is likely to damage the child's self-esteem (Smith et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the news reports, about LBCs' low academic performance, mental problems and bad behaviours, can also serve as evidence that family separation hurts left-behind children (Liu, 2012). Gong and Yu (2014) adopted a qualitative research method and interviewed the LBCs and a teacher. They found that most of the LBC in the study showed difficult attachment behaviours towards their parents and were reluctant to let their parents leave for work. Tian Tian, a left-behind child in Si Chuan province, in order to relieve his anxiety at the prospect of another separation from his parents, pulled out part of his hair and this led to alopecia areata<sup>2</sup>. Without parental care and supervision, LBCs face emotional issues, including depression and low self-esteem (Zhang et al., 2019).

Wen and Lin (2012) pointed out that, to varying degrees, the developmental outcomes of rural children are associated with their psycho-social environment, including family socioeconomic status, socialising processes, peer and school support, and psychological traits. In their study conducted with LBCs, Wen and Lin (2012) presented evidence suggesting that LBCs are disadvantaged in terms of both health behaviour and school engagement. It is worth mentioning that depression is one of the most common psychological problems in LBCs and they may be more prone to depression than their peers in China (Liang et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Also, studies show that these disadvantages are not limited to LBC's personal psychology. Hu et al. (2014) and Su et al. (2013) reported that these children are prone to having

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/23/c\\_128743521.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/23/c_128743521.htm)

dysfunctional relationships with their schools, teachers, classmates, guardians, and parents.

In sum then, being left behind has some significant impacts on the well-being of LBCs. Their developmental performance is inferior in different aspects, including educational achievements (Duan & Zhou, 2005; Lu & Zhang, 2004), social development (Chen et al., 2009), psychological symptoms (Hu et al., 2014; Jia & Tian, 2010), and physical health (De Brauw & Mu, 2011; Lee, 2011).

## **1.2 Definition of LBC**

The term “left-behind children” first appeared in Chinese literature in 1994 (Ren, 2007). Yet, up until now, there is still no consensus on the definition of LBC among researchers in China in terms of what it means. For example, He and Li (2018) defined children aged 0-17 who have at least one parent who works outside the area as “left-behind children”, and those LBC registered in rural areas as “left-behind children in rural areas”. While Zhu and Bo (2020) follow the definition of left-behind children by the Chinese government, that is, minors under the age of 16 whose parents are both migrant workers or one of whom is a migrant worker and the other has no guardianship ability (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016). The difference between these two definitions mainly lies in the age and parental status of LBC. The former follows UNICEF's definition of rural LBC and UNICEF announced that there are 40.51 million rural LBCs (National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF and UNFPA, 2017). Under the latter definition, the number is only 6.92 million in 2018 (Zhu & Bo, 2020). This number is nearly five times lower than UNICEF data. The narrowing of the group of LBCs may lead to unequal treatment of children with only one parent working outside home areas because they are indeed separated from family members but are not covered by policy support.

As this study is based on *The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016* (hereinafter referred to as The 2016 Opinions), the definition of LBC in rural areas also adopts this policy, but the age limit is 6-15 years old which puts them in China's compulsory education stage. LBC in compulsory education accounts for the largest proportion (71.4%), accounting for more than two-thirds of the total. Therefore, in this study, LBC includes minors who have rural registered permanent residence, aged between 6-15 years old and whose parents are both migrant workers or one of whom is a migrant worker and the other has no guardianship ability.

A key reason for focusing on rural LBCs rather than urban LBCs in this study is to consider the disproportionate disadvantages the hukou system imposes on rural migrants and their families, especially rural LBCs, when they move to the cities for work. Although rural migrant workers may longtime residents of the city, they are excluded from the city welfare system due to the urban-rural divide and hukou system.(Cheng & Selden, 1994; Wu and Treiman 2004). Despite repeated government reforms to the hukou system, it still restricts migrant workers from moving (Chan, 2010). Urban administration systems and labour, social security, and public education systems that rely on the current household registration system for admission do not acknowledge these urban workers from the rural areas as "urban residents". For example, children of migrant workers are placed second to those students who have local hukou and once school enrollment reaches saturation they have to go to private schools with low conditions. Although the legal require local government to offer compulsory education for children of migrant workers (The State Council, 2014), the cost of living in cities is much higher than in rural areas which pose insurmountable challenges to some migrant families (Liu, 2017).

While it is not impossible for migrant workers to change their hukou, the criteria for obtaining a megacity local hukou exclude migrant workers with low income and education levels. Similar to obtaining a residency visa in New Zealand, rural migrants

can switch their hukou to Shanghai if they meet the criteria set by the Shanghai local government and earn sufficient (120) points, which according to academic qualifications, skills, salary, are point standards. An applicant who has a master's degree could get 100 points while a migrant worker who is likely to have a high school education gets a score of 0.

Therefore, this study is interested in examining how the policy represents the problem of LBC and explores whether The 2016 Opinions can address the LBC's problem.

### **1.3 The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016**

In the whole system of care and protection for LBC, policy undoubtedly plays a leading role, because it has the fundamental function of guiding and guaranteeing the operation of the active support system (Wang & Wu, 2016).

As news about LBC was consecutively reported, especially after the 2015 group suicide, the local social security and assistance system was widely criticized, and the Chinese government once again became the centre of a public outcry. In 2016, the Chinese government issued "The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas" (hereinafter referred to as The 2016 Opinions),

The 2016 Opinions comprise by far the most powerful national protection policy for LBC. In contrast to previous policies, where LBC and migrant children were grouped (Wang & Wu, 2016), The 2016 Opinions provided an independent policy that acknowledged the need for LBC to be treated as a separate, special group. Although migrant children and LBC are both children of migrant workers, the family states are different. While LBC refers to those separated from their parents and staying in their home towns, "migrant children" refers to those who live with migrant parents in another city but do not have local hukou. Different objective conditions lead to their

different needs. If they are discussed together, policy measures may not be targeted. For example, “On Implementing the Spirit of the Central Committee's Directive to Actively carry out the Work of Caring for Migrant and Left-behind Children” (The All-China Women’s Federation in China, 2007) calls for ensuring that migrant and left-behind children with special difficulties receive due social assistance. However, migrant children usually have problems accessing local schools where they moved, while LBCs are often traumatised due to family separation (Chen et al., 2015). Thus, treating LBC as an independent group may provide better policy solutions to the particular vulnerabilities of LBC.

#### **1.4 Aim of the Research**

Since 2004, China has issued policies on LBC, but after nearly 20 years of development and governance, the problem of LBC still exists. Xu (2020) argued that, under the existing governance system, the next generation of LBCs will still be left behind. At present, The 2016 Opinions mark the newest rules and regulations promulgated at the national level in China and are the key policy document for addressing the problems related to LBC. This study seeks to explore how the government recognises and treats the problem of LBC and whether the current policy could address the problem of LBC represented by the government. This research aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What’s the problem of left-behind children represented to be in The 2016 Opinions?
2. Can The 2016 Opinions address the problem of left-behind children?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to analyse the historical policies regarding LBC and explore what the problem of LBC is from the perspective of the government and what aspects it includes. The discourses that contribute to how the government represents the problem of LBC should be the main focus. Furthermore, the specific measurements of policy also need to be discussed as to whether these target the LBC’s problems.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

Most of the current studies (Wang & Wu, 2016; Wu, 2021) are from the perspective of the practicality of The 2016 Opinions, such as the implementation of policies by local governments and the improvement of specific policy measures. However, there is still a lack concerning the exploration of the nature of LBC's problems through The 2016 Opinions. At present, no research has combined critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) with The 2016 Opinions. Through the problems' representation, WPR problematizes the problem of how representation is created, which is basic to identifying the deep conceptual premises operating within problem representations (Bacchi, 2009, 2012). In this way, I could explore the impact of conceptual premises in The 2016 Opinions. Furthermore, CDA could challenge institutional discourses in The 2016 Opinions and the ideology hidden behind the policy could be revealed. This is helpful to analyse the impact of ideology on The 2016 Opinions.

### **1.6 Overview of the Study**

This thesis is presented in five chapters. Following the introduction (Chapter 1), a literature review chapter (Chapter 2) will present the current status of LBC and the hukou system as a barrier to migration. The following methodology chapter (Chapter 3) will provide the detailed research methodology choice of Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the critical discourse problematization framework (CDPF) to analyse The 2016 Opinions. Following these chapters, the findings chapter (Chapter 4) presents findings from the analysis of The 2016 Opinions. Finally, a discussion and conclusion chapter (Chapter 5) will provide answers to both of my research questions as well as a discussion concerning the direction of policy development.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This study aims to analyse the Left Behind Children (LBC) policies in China concerning how the LBC problem was presented in policies and whether the current policy could address LBC issues. This section provides a review and discussion of the literature relevant to this study. The discussion will outline the well-being of LBC in rural China from a multidimensional perspective and the most vulnerable group characteristics of left-behind children are summarised from relevant research. The second part will focus on parental migration because this has huge positive, and negative, effects on the well-being of LBCs. Finally, this chapter will discuss the inequality caused by the Household Registration Policy (Hukou) and the forced leaving behind of children.

### **2.2 The Well-being of the Left-behind Child in Rural China: Multidimensional Perspective**

The current measurement standard based on the poverty line (2,300 yuan, almost NZ \$ 510, per person per year in 2010 prices) can identify poor rural children, but it is increasingly difficult to reflect the real poverty situation by taking income as the only standard to measure poverty.

While absolute family income is important to understandings of child poverty, some researchers believe that it is inadequate and child poverty should be analysed from multidimensional perspectives alongside basic human rights and social services (Gao et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2015). Due to the instability of market transactions, the acquisition of non-monetary assets is not closely related to income level. A higher household income level does not necessarily lead to an increase in child welfare levels, which is particularly prominent in developing countries. Therefore, it is not reasonable to measure the poverty of children based on the single-dimensional income level of the family (Dieden & Gustafsson, 2003; Tan et al., 2017). Therefore, it is

extremely important to construct targeted multidimensional poverty indicators for the special situation of children.

Amartya Sen (1985) argued that, even if income is usually considered a direct cause of poverty, its essence and capability of deprivation, to a great extent, restricts people's lives, including education, health, medical treatment, living conditions, etc., so information from the perspective of multidimensional child poverty is more reasonable. Wang et al. (2015) summed up some common dimensional areas to take into account when considering child well-being:

- living conditions – material well-being, food/nutrition, housing/shelter, drinking water, sanitation, health, basic social services
- protection – risks, safety, peer and family relationships
- development – education, information
- participation – participation in society
- subjective well-being/emotional well-being (Wang et al., 2015, p. 110 ).

Child welfare was first proposed as a phenomenon in 1959 in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child. It refers to the social policies and programmes provided by the state or society to all children within the scope of the legislation to ensure their normal lives and as comprehensive and healthy development as possible. The economic situation of children's family and social environment plays a very important and direct role in children's development. Family financial difficulties and early material deprivation are not only detrimental to children's physical health – ultimately leading to problems such as malnutrition and stunting – but also inhibit long-term healthy socio-emotional, self-control and cognitive development by affecting family life and parenting styles (Hamoudi et al., 2015). The level of poverty and the availability of social services are important factors influencing the well-being of children (Sampson, 2003). Children of lower socioeconomic status often face multiple disadvantages because of the close links between their living environments. In the absence of effective policy interventions, harmful environments can adversely

affect children's well-being not only in the short term but also in the long term (Chen et al., 2015).

China's current policy defines “left-behind children” as minors under the age of 16 whose parents are both migrant workers or one of whom is a migrant worker and the other has no guardianship ability. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF and UNFPA (2017), in 2015, there are about 40.51 million rural LBCs, accounting for about 15.6% of the total number of all children in China. Among them, 13.66 million LBCs live in poverty-stricken, rural areas (832 counties in total), accounting for 30.9% of total rural children in these areas.

In the past 40 years, China’s poverty alleviation policies, which have mostly concentrated on the rural areas, have made significant progress (Sicular et al., 2020). According to the *Xinhua Net* (2021)<sup>3</sup>, in the process of the anti-poverty programme, five measures were taken in China, including promoting economic development to provide more employment opportunities; change of relocation; compensation for poverty alleviation by reducing the economic loss caused by ecological damage; improving the level of education in the poor areas – self-reliance cannot eliminate poverty, to give the lowest life guarantee. Nearly 1.6 trillion yuan (NZ \$355.4 billion) was spent during the period. At the end of 2020, the Chinese government announced that all 832 government-designated areas of poverty in China had been lifted out of extreme poverty under the current poverty standard. Based on official statistics, the national rural extreme poverty line is 2,300 yuan (almost NZ \$510 ) per person per year in 2010 prices. All citizens, including children, that fall below the national poverty standard are covered by alleviation policies (Gao & Wang, 2021; Robinson, 2016).

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[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/06/c\\_139862741.htm#:~:text=During%20its%20fight%20against%20poverty,in%20impoverished%20areas%2C%20and%20providing](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/06/c_139862741.htm#:~:text=During%20its%20fight%20against%20poverty,in%20impoverished%20areas%2C%20and%20providing)

However, the effect of the multidimensional poverty situation on rural children is still grim. Qi and Wu (2019) used 2014 data from China Family Panel Study (CFPS) and found that rural children suffered substantially more from multidimensional poverty than their urban peers. The incidence of multidimensional poverty and poverty indexes of LBC in rural areas are significantly higher than those of non-left-behind children in rural areas and LBCs suffer more serious multidimensional poverty in terms of health status, BMI index and household appliances, while left-behind children whose parents both go out have worse health status and BMI indexes than if only one parent goes out (Lv et al., 2018). Although the residents' income has steadily increased and the income poverty rate has gradually fallen in rural China, Shen and Li (2022) – through regression analysis – asserted that multidimensional poverty could be alleviated by the increase of rural residents' income to some extent – but its effect is very limited.

### **2.3 Why Focus on the Well-being of Left-behind Children?**

On the whole, LBCs in rural China are facing a variety of problems, most of them suffer from varying degrees of poverty, violent injuries, psychological and behavioural problems, educational inequality and so on. In terms of regions, the overall situation in western rural areas is the most serious. In terms of gender, girls are more likely to experience internal problems like emotional symptoms while boys may express external problems like behaviour problems (Hu et al., 2014). In terms of age, school-age children suffer more difficulties than preschool children. It is therefore important to consider the influencing factors affecting Chinese rural LBC's serious situation and performance.

A current study (Hu et al., 2018) indicated that poverty was significantly related to poly-victimisation (more than two forms of victimisation) among LBCs in rural China and that many of them are victims of violence, bullying and sexual abuse. A report released by the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (2016) pointed out that abuse exists commonly among LBCs in rural China, and 31.7% of

them experienced abuse, most of these from poor households (Joint research group of Peking University, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Capital University of Economics and Business., 2016). For overall assessment by Yang et al. (2020), 1 to 4-year-old LBCs were more likely to suffer from violent discipline, including being shouted at, called offensive names, shaken and hit. Meanwhile, in daily life, the primary caregivers of LBCs were more tend to use physical punishments to achieve their educational purpose or just punishment (Yang et al., 2020). For LBCs aged 6-16, Hu et al. (2018) collected data from 1,371 LBCs at school age (aged 6-16) and found that about 27.50% of LBCs suffered from at least one form of victimization, with 16.56% LBCs suffering from one form of victimization and 10.94% LBC tolerate two or more forms of victimization (Hu et al., 2018). Furthermore, Yan et al. (2018) found that there is a potential dose-response relationship between bullying, victimization and child sex abuse (CSA) among LBCs in rural areas, which means when LBCs were bullied in school, the risk of being sexually abused increases, especially in rural China. This relationship is differentiated by age, gender and family structure, with female LBC more significantly associated than female non-LBC; LBC who were bullied at middle school age have a higher risk of being sexually abused than those at high school age, and the bullying victims live in non-traditional family structure or have siblings have a higher chance of being sexually abused (Yan et al., 2018).

The vulnerability of rural LBCs is also reflected in their mental health and behaviour performance indicators. In terms of mental health, Hu et al. (2014) found that, compared with local and migrant children, LBCs had serious problems with emotional symptoms, behaviour, peer relationship, and prosocial behaviour. Furthermore, the prevalence and level of psychological distress varied at different ages. Man and Cao (2020) found that LBC students of primary school age were 1.7 times more likely to experience psychological distress than those of middle school age. However, in terms of interpersonal relationships, LBC in junior middle school have the weakest performance, only 29.84% of children thought “[my] interpersonal relationship is very

good” and chose “completely consistent”, which is much lower than 40.12% in primary school generally (Fan et al., 2020). It is worth mentioning that depression is one of the most common psychological problems in LBCs and they may be more prone to depression than their peers in China (Liang et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Research findings show that the negative impact of left-behind experiences could affect their mental health even when they become adults. For example, research on 4,540 college students found that college students who had left-behind experiences had a significant increase in depressive symptoms and anxiety, lower self-esteem, and poorer interpersonal relationships. In terms of behaviour performance, rural LBCs are more likely to have prominent problems involving bad living habits. Zhang and Li (2016), through field visits and in-depth interviews, found that the proportion of rural LBCs in primary school with harmful interests is high in terms of spare time. According to the survey (Zhang & Li, 2016), 30% of LBCs play video games and 28% watch TV as their daily entertainment. In the interviews in the above research, many LBCs put playing games or playing computers as their interests, with little imagination and ambition about the future (Zhang & Li, 2016). Furthermore, in an article by the Hubei Provincial People's Procuratorate (2017), Shao Wenhong, director of the Research Office of the Supreme People's Court, pointed out that in recent years, the number of juvenile crimes dealt with by courts at all levels in China has increased by about 13% annually on average, among which the crime rate of LBC accounts for about 70% of juvenile crimes, and this trend is still increasing year by year.

Schools play an important role in children's development. It should be noted that compulsory education in China does not include kindergarten. Less than half of left-behind pre-schoolers attend kindergartens (Zhu, 2015). Nevertheless, the classroom performance and academic standing of those who attend kindergarten were lower than other students (Shi, 2012). Shi (2012) identified that LBCs at pre-school age lacked knowledge about safety, self-defence, and personal hygiene. They also show problems with distraction, poorer development in acquiring scientific

knowledge, lower interest, motivation and ability in arts and activities, and lower levels of language skills (Shi, 2012).

#### **2.4 Parental Migration and LBC's Well-being**

Being left in rural areas by parents who work outside far away from home for a long time is the basic characteristic of LBC. Recent research by Wu (2021) argued that through the investigation and statistics of the family status and custody of LBCs in Fengning County, Huishui County, Zhongjiang County and Yingshang County found that three-quarters of LBC have two parents who work outside and more than one fifth of LBCs have a parent who works outside their home. The family separation of LBC also lasts longer. Fan et al. (2020) used 2016 data to conduct a sample survey of children from 24 counties in 12 provinces in rural China and found that among 13,776 students in compulsory education in rural areas and found that more than half of LBCs were left behind by more than a year.

Those LBCs do not themselves migrate but they are still deeply influenced by parental migration and separation of families. Family plays an important role in the development and educational growth of children because it is the main place where children develop socialisation patterns (Pan & Ye, 2017). Family division due to parents' migration usually leads to family dysfunction, which can have a significant impact on child development (Chen et al., 2015). Family communication, affective expression, and parental engagement all suffer as a result of parental migration, these are critical aspects of family functioning (Slinner & Steinhauer 2000). That is to say, neither the quantity nor the quality of parent-child communication can be guaranteed at this time. Children's loneliness is exacerbated by their lack of emotive expressions, which makes it harder for them to form direct and intimate emotional connections with their parents (Su et al., 2013).

Parents' absence is an important factor contributing to LBC's mental health problems. The relationships between LBCs and their parents were much poorer than those of

non-LBC, according to Jia and Tian (2010), which might lead to psychological difficulties. Children who were raised by grandparents who had strained relationships with their parents, or who talked infrequently with their parents were more likely to feel lonely. Rural LBCs who were left by both parents were found to have lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of loneliness than non-LBC (Hu et al., 2014). Research on Wuhan (Hu et al., 2014) found that LBCs had more emotional distress symptoms, weaker peer interactions, and fewer prosocial activities than their classmates. According to Zhang et al. (2019), rural LBCs could have fewer emotional problems, hyperactivity inattention, conduct problems and peer problems when their parents are absent for a long time. This has been interpreted to mean that for LBC, the longer both parents are absent, the more time they spend with alternative caregivers the more stable the relationship. However, research also mentioned that, rather than continue the previous family relationship, a new child–parent relationship always needs to be built whenever the migrant parent came home, which might become a new challenge to LBC (Zhang et al., 2019). Parent absence also affects LBC’s psychological outcomes. Hu et al. (2018) suggested that children who are left behind by migrant fathers show the best states of mind, with the least depressive symptoms while children who are left behind by migrant mothers show the worst states of mind, with the most depressive symptoms.

Parent migration also impacts LBC’s physical health. A study of children aged 2-12 years old in rural China found that households without migrant parents or other migrant members spent 4-5 hours more procuring, preparing, and cooking food than families with migrant members (De Brauw & Mu, 2011). This may have resulted in inferior quality and lower quantities of food consumed by LBC (De Brauw & Mu, 2011). For youngsters aged 7-12, being left alone by their parents raised their chances of becoming underweight. Father’s migration may bring an increase in violent discipline by mothers who stay at home. In Yang et al.’s (2020) research, more than 90% of LBC were cared for by mothers and they also found that LBCs were more likely to suffer physical punishment from their guardians. This has been interpreted to

mean that caregivers often have to take on household and childcare tasks alone, which can lead to great psychological stress and mental health problems for caregivers thus LBCs are predicted to be subject to harsh discipline, neglect and even abuse (Yang et al., 2020).

In terms of educational achievement, parental migration disturbs the education of children who are left behind, especially those who are younger. Left-behind pre-schoolers are less likely to attend kindergarten (Zhu, 2015), and they are also more likely to drop out after middle school (Lee, 2011). Hu et al. (2018) believed that dedication to study, test results in subject tests, and educational desire were all indicators of educational well-being. In this research, non-LBC perform better in dedication to studies and Chinese language tests while children who were left behind by their mother had the least investment in learning – children who were left behind by both mother and father got the lowest scores on Chinese language tests (Hu et al., 2018). Additionally, in terms of arithmetic test scores, English language test scores, or educational aspirations, these children in the research did not differ substantially, which means, in general, no differences were found between LBC and non-LBC in education achievements.

Many research studies (Su et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2020; Zhu, 2015) have indicated that LBC's development is significantly impacted by family movement, particularly parent-only migration. However, parental education level could relieve this tense situation. The findings of Zhang et al. (2019) show that paternal educational level was negatively correlated with the physical problems and behavioural outcomes of LBC. Mothers who accepted higher education may be better able to help their children with their schoolwork, reduce their children's stress and dissatisfaction at school, pay attention to their children's emotional needs, and maintain greater parent-child contact, all of these things could help LBC avoid psychological and behavioural issues. Furthermore, stable marital status, harmonious family, and good parent-child communication are all key protective factors for LBC's psychological development in

rural China (Guo et al., 2014). For example, one study claimed that children's cognitive and social development can be aided by fathers' regular and positive contact with them (McMunn et al., 2017). Parent-child communication serves as a protective factor against the negative effects of parent-child separation while also promoting pleasant feelings. According to a survey of 1165 rural children from China's Yulin area, LBCs who reported more frequent parent-child communication also reported high levels of school satisfaction and life satisfaction (Su et al., 2013). Poor communication with migrant parents, on the other hand, undermined parent-child connections, resulting in negative psychological vulnerability (Wei, 2009) and the alienation of children's affection for their parents (Dai et al., 2017).

### **2.5 Inequality under Household Registration Policy (Hukou) of China**

The "Household Registration Regulations of the People's Republic of China" (1958) divided urban and rural residential areas into "agricultural household registration" and "non-agricultural household registration", which laid the basic pattern of the current urban-rural dual structure of household registration in China. The dual structure of household registration strictly separated urban and rural residents' access to social welfare, housing and education, and the identity of residents is difficult to change (Liu, 2017). In different economic periods over the past 60 years, the urban-rural dual system has accumulated a huge gap between urban and rural interests. Under the planned economy system, the allocation of urban and rural resources is dominated by the government, which supplies the cities with deprivation similar to the countryside, and the government's financial input is more inclined to the cities (Wang, 2017). After the reform and opening up, free migration of the population between urban and rural areas has been relaxed, but the gap between urban and rural interests continues to be increased by the urban-rural dual system (Wang, 2017).

Indeed, the hukou system was originally designed to control rural-urban migration while pushing rural surplus labourers to the urban sector (Chen, 2019). It is a consensus that the main reason for the emergence of rural left-behind groups is the

household registration system under the urban-rural dual structure (*cheng xiang er yuan ti zhi*) of China and a series of other policies and systems derived from it, such as the education system, medical system, social welfare policy, etc., which form a strong institutional barrier to prevent migrant workers and their families from integrating into the city (Chen, 2019; Fang & Zhang, 2016; Wei, 2017). The term “migrant worker” in China refers to industrial and service workers with a rural hukou (Chan, 2010). Migrant workers have always been regarded as rural people on the legal level, although they may have been long-term residents of the city. Due to migrant workers’ status being permanent (unless their hukou identity is changed), they are not entitled to ordinary city benefits and rights (Chan, 2010; Feng & Zhang, 2016).

The social welfare enjoyed by Chinese urban residents is based on the fact that they have been registered as urban residents (Fan, 2015). The household registration system in big cities is gradually attached to a large number of social welfare benefits, which further makes the social welfare attached to the urban and rural household registration uneven, which directly leads to the inequality of the status of urban and rural residents – this inequality will be reflected in social security, public welfare, public services, infrastructure utilization and other aspects (Jiang & Gu, 2015). According to Feng and Zhang (2016), less than 50% of migrant workers in megacities (like Beijing and Shanghai) participated in medical insurance. As long as migrant workers do not have urban residency, they will be deprived of some of their rights and interests in employment, education and social security, and excluded from some welfare programmes such as housing subsidies and compulsory education for their children (Fan, 2015). An example from Yu (2017) stated that because the educational financial system in China is administered at different levels by local governments when a child leaves his domicile place, his educational expenses do not flow with him. After arriving at the migrant city, schools are reluctant to accept these migrant children because there is no hukou here and the local government does not allocate relevant education funds thus, a large proportion of farmers and workers have to choose that their children must stay in their rural hometown without parents.

The majority of migrants choose to relocate to areas with better business conditions, resulting in higher GDP growth (Chen & Rosenthal, 2008; Fang & Zhang, 2016). Big cities offer rich employment opportunities, better learning environments, better life opportunities for immigrants and their children, and are more friendly and supportive of the diverse needs of immigrants and are the priority choices for migrant workers (Fang & Zhang, 2016). Furthermore, since 1997, although hukou conversions in small towns with limited state-provided benefits have been made easier, this has had little impact because small towns do not attract rural migrants (Chan, 2010). From 2001 (when China liberalised the restrictions on household registration in small towns) to 2014, when The State Council issued the “Opinions on Further Promoting the Reform of Household Registration System”, China has gradually liberalised the control of urban household registration. Furthermore, despite the reform of the household registration system and the relaxation of hukou restrictions, the disparity produced by this half-century-old policy will take considerably longer to address. According to Gong et al. (2012), the previous hukou type continues to have an impact on migrant households’ human capital (education, training, and job experiences), as well as serving as a proxy for the amount of extended family assistance migrants might expect.

Although China has gradually liberalised the control of urban household registration, the local governments of big cities refuse to receive migrant workers by setting up barriers to settlement requirements. Big cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen continue to employ hukou to control in-migration (Fang & Zhang, 2016). In most small and medium-sized cities and small towns, as long as there is a legal stable residence (including rental) people can get local hukou while there are still high and low entry restrictions on the hukou in some big cities (Zou, 2020). The legal and stable employment and residence, education level, innovation and entrepreneurship, and tax years are the indicators: citizens who get enough points could settle down and get local hukou.

However, Zou (2020) also argued that the hukou policy based on the points has an obvious tendency of recruiting talent and has obvious selectivity rather than universal benefits because big cities generally combine hukou policy with talent introduction, and high-quality talents will have stronger competitiveness in settling down rather than migrant workers. For those unable to obtain a local hukou, a residence permit is a substitute for basic civil rights in education, health care, social security and employment (Zou, 2020) but this is limited. For example, the benefits enjoyed by migrants with residence permits in Wuhan account for 86.9% of the benefits of residents (P. Chen, 2018).

Although the hukou policy still has some barriers, Wang et al. (2021) still affirmed the positive impact of hukou policy relaxation on family education expenditure of LBC in rural areas, a small urban-rural education gap, and promotion of education equity. They point out that the smaller the urban household registration control, the more favourable the scale of migrant workers' investment in the education of their LBC, and the more inclined migrant workers are to increase the out-of-school expenses of LBC. According to Wang et al.'s (2021) theoretical analysis, in cities with looser household registration controls, the longer migrant workers work outside the home means their LBC must shoulder more housework and agricultural tasks and spend less time studying. Therefore, it is common for migrant parents to pay for out-of-school learning tutoring in order to improve their LBC's academic performance in a limited time. On the other hand, one serious fact should be noted: due to the restrictions of the hukou policy, most children are unable to migrate to cities with their parents, and thus rural parents can only compensate for missed learning time by increasing children's educational expenditure. Furthermore, Wei (2017) agreed that the stricter the hukou requirements, the closer the relationship between educational resources and hukou, and the higher the possibility of parent-child separation. Therefore, the restrictive hukou policy in big cities has failed

to reverse the trend of population migration to big cities but has only increased the number of rural children left behind.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to outline the methodologies that were utilised to analyse how Chinese education policies affect the well-being of left-behind children (LBC). The first part calls attention to the importance of reading policy as discourse, which important point should be the role of policy in “making” social problems. Then, the What’s the Problem Represented to be?” (WPR) framework has been introduced as a specific approach for analysing policy as discourse. The main topic of the third part is critical discourse analysis (CDA) and its key concepts. Next, the critical discourse problematization framework (CDPF) is the core of this methodology. This chapter also introduces the collection and analysis of data and the limitations of the research methodology are presented at the end.

### **3.2 Reading Policy as Discourse**

The understanding of policy analysis has been extended by post-structuralist and social-constructionist theories recently. Goodwin (2011) emphasised that discourses regulate world knowledge and the common understandings of events, in particular. While the turn to discourse in policy analysis has many strands, most of them depend on Foucault’s ideas of discourse to some extent (Goodwin, 2011). Under Foucault’s theories and post-structuralism influence, many policy analysts have endorsed and researched the description of policy as discourse (Bacchi, 2005, 2009; Ball, 1991, 2006; Marston, 2004; Shaw, 2010).

The concept of discourse is difficult because it means different things in different analyses (Bacchi, 2009). Halliday (1978) assumes that language in texts is multifunctional, which provides a clear linguistic category for analysing the relationship between discourse and social meaning. All actions, objects and practices that are socially meaningful are the starting point of the “policy as discourse” approach and the social and political struggles in particular socio-historical contexts

shape the interpretation of these meanings (Goodwin, 2011). This conceptualisation of discourse could analyse and understand how policy shapes the world, which is seen to be highly relevant in policy research. Policy as discourse analysis entails delving into the processes of meaning production, of “truths”. Policy as discourse analysis requires policy analysts to evaluate truth claims and investigate or create alternative methods of producing policy and practice when doing discourse analysis through breaking the normative nature of statements (Goodwin, 2011).

Shaw (2010) declared that, as problems are framed within policy proposals, present policy is not the response to pre-set social problems but defined social problems. Policy as discourse approaches recognises that different policymakers have varied perceptions of the problem, which may influence the suggested solutions. The role of policy in “making” social problems should be the important point of policy as discourse approaches (Goodwin, 2011). From the idea that problems are not *found* but are *created* by people (Bacchi, 2012), rather than take social problems as given, policy analysts focus on the meaning creation of policy design (Marston, 2004). Thus, problematisation should be the focus of policy analysts.

On the whole, the policy as discourse approach is relevant to those who seek to shape the LBC policy because it provides an approach, through recognized activities of different interest groups (left-behind, migrant workers, metropolitan leaders and so on), to identify and address social problems. Reading policy as discourse suggests researchers consider how LBC’s problems are framed by the policy. It also encourages policymakers to consider how to use different discourses to challenge the policy of LBC and promote policy about LBC development.

### **3.3 Framework: What is the Problem Represented to Be? (WPR)**

Although there is no unitary method for analysing “policy as discourse”, Bacchi (2008, 2009) has developed the WPR framework (What’s the Problem Represented to Be?) to analyse the discursive aspects of policy. She declared that policies do not

address problems but give shape to them by the policies' nature. In other words, the underlying implication of policies that claim to address problems is that there are pre-defined problems that need to be addressed. It follows that the centre of governing processes is in the ways issues are problematised (Bacchi, 2009). Therefore, Bacchi (2009) suggested that attention should focus on the shape and character of problematisation rather than the assumed problems. The goal of the WPR approach is to scrutinise the premises and effects of the problem representations these problematizations contain to problematise (interrogate) the problematisation in selected government policies (Bacchi, 2009).

This approach provides a conceptual checklist for guiding the analysis rather than focusing on providing pre-defined steps during the research process (Goodwin, 2011). Specifically, the WPR approach contains six questions to analyse how social problems are represented in policies at six levels, which is helpful to interrogate social problems. Six guiding questions are provided by WPR below (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2):

- (1) What is the problem represented to be?
- (2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?
- (3) How has this representation of the problem come about?
- (4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?
- (5) What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?
- (6) Where or how has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

The goal of the six questions is to assist in deeply understanding the bases and implications of problem representations and an undertaking to apply those questions to one's proposals (Bacchi, 2009). One thing that needs to be recognised is that deep-seated cultural assumptions may be embedded in any policy proposal which

may include silences and have unanticipated negative consequences.

In this research, WPR is a useful method because it allows the perspective of policy analysts arguing about the best way to address social problems to turn to deeper, conceptual underpinnings of issue representations (Goodwin, 2011). It is a good tool to explore the premises and effects of the LBC's problem representations from their social conditions and find how the problems of LBC are represented to be in policies. Furthermore, WPR also encourages an exploration of deep-seated cultural assumptions in policies, which could interrogate the problematisation in selected government policies. Third, the reason WPR is widely applied and was selected is the simplicity of this approach (Bacchi, 2009); thus she also suggests that, although the theoretical underpinnings of this approach are important, "without immersing oneself in complicated theory" (Bacchi, 2009, p. xxi).

### **3.4 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a social scientific theory and method for analyzing and critiquing language's role in the formation and maintenance of social practices (Farrelly, 2019). CDA regards language as social practice and discourse as the existence form of language as the reified social practice. An extensive problem or a problematic social practice could be indicated by the usage of language. Thus, CDA is more focused on analyzing the language used in society and using it as a way to address social problems rather than only describing language use. CDA is an analysis of the dialectical relationships between language and other elements of social practices (Fairclough, 2001). A CDA analysis may attempt to establish the relationship between language habits and non-linguistic elements of social practice, as well as the ways in which these language habits reveal or lead to social problems. In other words, by using language (or discourse) to express, signal, constitute, legitimize and so on, CDA aims to critically investigate social inequality.

Moreover, CDA takes a particular interest in the relation between language and

power. Official national discourse can be well reflected in policy documents, so policy discourse is politically motivated. CDA recognises that the prioritisation and presentation of policy problems reflect the relationships between power relations, multiple competitions and conflicts – in other words, “what is real” depends on what is “presented as real” by those in positions of power (Bacchi, 2009). This political discourse testifies to more or less overt relations of struggle and conflict (Farrelly, 2019). The analyst could also receive support from CDA to study problematic discourses and ideology from both micro and macro perspectives. Unlike traditional discourse analysis, CDA examines the intricate link between discourse and power to expose the hidden facts behind policies and the truth of disparities. Another advantage of CDA is that it allows discourse to be interpreted in a social and cultural context for analysis and analysed by individuals.

For a long time, scholars of CDA have been divided on the nature of ideology. On the one hand, ideology is seen as a neutral system of thought (e.g., van Dijk, 1998). In this view, ideology is neither *good* nor *bad*, but merely a way of conceptualising systems of thought. On the other hand, some scholars regard ideology as those systems of thought which help to exert social control (Farrelly, 2019). In this sense, ideologies are “constructions of practices from particular perspectives (and in that sense ‘one-sided’) which ‘iron out’ the contradictions, dilemmas, and antagonisms of practices in ways which accord with the interests and projects of domination” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 26). Therefore, CDA can reveal the details of ideologies, because ideologies are all expressed, shaped and transmitted through discourse.

As mentioned earlier, critical discourse analysis is committed to the investigation of the interrelationship among language, ideology and power by analysing discourses with linguistic methods and relating them to their relevant social and historical environment. Ideology is a key concept in the field of critical discourse analysis. One significant aspect that critical discourse analysis concerns are the effect of ideology,

which is the influential role texts play in imputing, maintaining and changing ideology (Farrelly, 2019). Discursive practices can have important ideological results since they “help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and positions people” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). What is more, “political discourse is eminently ideological” (Van Dijk, 2008, p. 208), it is surely necessary for linguists to reveal ideology hidden in political discourse.

According to the above, critical discourse analysis focuses on the discursive strategies that legitimise controls, or the discursive strategies that naturalise the ways in which the world is represented, the ways in which the social identities are set up, and the relationships among these identities are constructed (Fairclough, 2001). Policy discourse does mediate the relationships of power and privilege in our social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge. CDA is a useful tool for describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which the discourse about LBC is constructed and represented by the social world. CDA also reveals questions about the relationships between the power relations evidenced in social structures and that of the LBC. Furthermore, the social meaning of policy should also be investigated, because as a discourse, the policy will profoundly influence LBCs’ lives. However, using CDA or WPR as methods alone would be flawed because they involve a single policy analysis or criticism. Therefore, I will introduce a combined framework next.

### **3.5 The Critical Discourse Problematization Framework (CDPF)**

Critical Discourse Problematization Framework (CDPF) is a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Bacchi’s WPR. The purpose of this innovative framework is to provide a more comprehensive approach to “achieve the dual objectives of policy analysis and critique” (Van Aswegen, 2019, p. 186).

CDPF involves three theoretical foundations: critical theory; the notion of discourse;

and problematisation. From the perspective of Fairclough and Wodak (1997), the critical approach is distinctive in its view of the relationship between language and society, and the relationship between analysis and the practices analysed. Specifically, it means criticism in CDA has two meanings. First, criticism is an exploration of the dialectical relationship between discourse and society (Fairclough, 2001). On the one hand, the dialectical relationship is reflected in the discourse which shows social reality. And on the other hand, it is reflected in social changes caused by discursive changes to some extent. In modern society, discourse is not only an important means to reflect social reality, but also has the power to dominate it. Therefore, the exploration of this dialectical relationship constitutes the primary content of critical discourse analysis. Secondly, “criticism” is a social practice that leads to social change (Fairclough, 2001). Criticism aims at both discourse and social practice. It focuses on reconstructing the organisational form of society. All critical discourse studies take social problems as their starting point. And through the analysis of discourse, CDA tries to find a way to address social problems.

The notion of discourse is generally regarded as the essential component of the policy. As Fairclough (2001) said, discourse is a social practice. Discourse exists and operates in the social environment. Only in society can discourse fulfil its communicative mission, so there is an interaction between discourse and society (Fairclough, 2001). Discourse is also a social process. The use of language is not arbitrary but is subject to the rules formulated in people’s social practice (Fairclough, 2001). In other words, the use of discourse must comply with social convention, which makes discourse a social practice. No matter what form the language is in (spoken or written), it is a social practice. For example, although people try to avoid the influences of social convention sometimes in private or family parties, their language still abides by the rules of social customs in order to maintain good relations. Furthermore, discourse is a social conditioning process for it is always associated with politics (Fairclough, 2001). In some political situations, language is used as a powerful weapon. For example, political parties have disputes on specific

concepts such as democracy, freedom and socialism. Language is an abstract term here over which different parties struggle and argue. However, the relationship between discourse and society is not a one-one equal relationship. Discourse is based on ideologies which are shaped by dominant groups with power. The dominant groups use discourse to express their intentions when they want to manage the behaviour of others.

Problematization is distinguished by Bacchi (2009) from nouns and verbs; the former refers to the way policymakers present or presenting a “problem” to be addressed; the latter means the process of questioning the “problem representation” itself. Due to problematizations based on the premise that policies play a significant role in shaping or framing the problem, the main goal of studying problematizations is to dismantle fixed essences and explore the framing process (Bacchi, 2012). The problematisation here is through interrogating the “truths” that are taken for granted, to discover the thinking that results in policy issues (Van Aswegen, 2019). Furthermore, problematisation recognises that “all policies by their nature carry implicit representations of problems that bring with them implications for how people are treated within society and how we are conditioned to understand the social world and ourselves as citizens” (Van Aswegen, 2019, p. 188). CDPF provides an innovative perspective for reassessing the nature of policy and inferring underlying problems in social structures. CDPF offers a comprehensive, symbiotic framework for critical analysis of policy.

The CDPF is a particularly useful hybrid to analyse the policy of LBC, combining complementary CDA and WPR approaches to achieve the dual objectives of policy analysis and criticism. CDA could not address policy problematisation on its own while the WPR approach could identify and problematise policy constructions and explore policy problematisation of the LBC. This combined approach provides a comprehensive, symbiotic framework for critical analysis of policy.

### 3.6 Data collection

I am an offshore student currently in China and I have to say that my whole study and life are continuously affected by COVID-19, and I am constantly in a state of worry and anxiety. As an overseas student, although Gmail and ZOOM are very good tools, I cannot communicate with my tutor face to face – only using online communication makes me feel very upset. After deciding on my thesis topic selection, I had thought about collecting new data for this research, but I had to give up this idea due to the serious epidemic in China. China has imposed strict controls over COVID-19, and if a COVID-19 patient is found in an area, the block or even the city will be placed in lockdown. The longest lockdown I've ever experienced was more than one month, I could not even leave my house. Many villages in China are more closed and do not even accept local villagers who come back from other places. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for me, as I live in the city, to conduct research on the LBC in rural China. Thus, secondary data analysis is the only choice for me. Next, I will introduce the background information about “The Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas” issued by The State Council in 2016 (hereinafter referred to as “The 2016 Opinions”).

While the government vigorously promotes policies on LBCs, injuries to these children are frequently exposed by the media, the most typical of which is the poisoning death of four LBCs in Bijie, Guizhou province in June 2015, which once again aroused widespread social attention. It highlights the weakness of policy implementation and the protection of the LBC in reality, and also indirectly reflects the lack of binding force and protection of the policy. In February 2016, the Opinions were issued and clearly required: improving the care service system for LBC in rural areas, including strengthening the responsibility of the family guardianship subject, insisting on government-led, universal care; establishing and improving rescue and protection mechanisms for LBC in rural areas, including compulsory reporting mechanisms, emergency response mechanisms, assessment and support mechanisms, and guardianship and intervention mechanisms; the intention was to gradually reduce

the problem of children being left behind at the source and provide more help and support to migrant worker families. Strengthening measures to ensure the care and protection of the children left behind in rural areas, including strengthening organisational leadership, strengthening capacity building, strengthening incentives and accountability, and publicity and guidance.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this policy is the first policy that treats LBC as a separate group at the national policy level. The 2016 Opinions constitute by far the most specific and targeted document in the care and protection policies for LBCs in rural areas. It has positive significance in promoting the institutionalisation, standardisation and institutionalisation of the care and protection of rural LBC and is a sign of deepening the policy on these children (Wang & Wu, 2016). The second reason I chose to analyse this policy is that it represents the highest level of government opinion on LBC and may provide useful insights into the hidden relations between discourse and ideology.

After analysing The 2016 Opinions, I then decided on the stories that can exemplify the effects of its policy representation and I use the *faction* method to illustrate this evidence. Factionalisation tells facts in the form of stories while allowing for assumptions and discussion (Bruce, 2019). I embrace storying as a way to bring the difficulties faced by migrant families and LBC to real life and explore the barriers of policy.

Stories are not chosen randomly; they are chosen with purpose. The first criterion is that the story should provide as much background information as possible, such as details about the protagonist's family. This is very useful for my subsequent analysis and evidence search because the background information is very clear. The second criterion is that the story should discuss the impact of the policy on LBC, or that I can infer the impact from the background of the story.

The first story was found in an article in *Sixth Tone* which is an online magazine owned by the Shanghai United Media Group ([www.sixthtone.com](http://www.sixthtone.com)). The article is titled: “China's Left-behind Kids Repeat Their Parents’ Tragic Choices”. It contains four characters and I chose Fang's story because she worked in Shanghai and left her child in her home town. It provides a piece of useful background information for me to infer the hukou system as a cause of family separation. The second story comes from *The People's Daily* which is the largest official newspaper group in China. The article is titled: “Help Left-behind Children Grow up Healthily”. This story relates to The 2016 Opinions and illustrates the specific measures of Care and Protection Systems for LBC in rural areas.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

This study uses the CDPF framework to analyse selected data. CDPF is a combination of CDA and WPR and thus could achieve the dual objectives of policy analysis and critique (Van Aswegen, 2019).

This study draws from three theoretical foundations in terms of critical theory, the notion of discourse, and problematisation in which CDPF is involved. Initially, critical theory was used to analyse “how does the Chinese government frame the problem of left-behind children” over a long period of time because it can be used as evidence to understand how the representation of the problem in The 2016 Opinions came about. Additionally, it also could discover the changes and development of the Chinese government's views on LBC.

The analysis of The 2016 Opinions followed the six questions presented by WPR. Identifying the problem representations for The 2016 Opinions is the first step; the next phase is the notion of discourse and problematisation to consider how such proposals can be made – what meanings and deep conceptual premises needed to be in place for such proposals to emerge which may reveal inherent power relations. I came up with several codes on the ideologies that affect the policy of LBC such as

socialist collectivism and Confucianism.

Table 1 consists of the implied problem from the policy. Due to space constraints, I have provided only one example solution to illustrate how I identified each problem representation. It is worth noting that, at times, the same problem representation was reflected in different solutions.

After identifying problem representations for The 2016 Opinions, the next step is to consider how such proposals can be made, and what meanings and deep conceptual premises needed to be in place for such proposals to emerge, which as suggested earlier, may reveal inherent power relations.

**Table 1** *Problem Representations of the LBC Problem Identified in The 2016 Opinions*

The 2016 Opinions	
Solution examples identified from the policy document	Problem representations
Strengthen the primary responsibility of family guardianship. Parents shall fulfil their duty of guardianship and upbringing of their minor children in accordance with the law.	<b>LBC problem</b> ... is a problem resulting from within children's family
People's governments at the county level should strengthen overall planning, coordination, supervision and inspection, formulate feasible policies and measures for the care and protection of rural left-behind children based on local conditions, conscientiously organise and carry out care and protection actions, and ensure that the care and protection work covers all rural left-behind children within their administrative areas.	...is the responsibility of local government
Support and guide primary and secondary schools in strengthening mental health education, promote the positive and healthy development of students' psychology and personality and identify and correct psychological problems and bad behaviours as soon as possible.	...may be the result of social and emotional needs/trauma
Strengthen campus safety management, do a good job in the rule of law publicity and safety education, help children strengthen their awareness of preventing illegal infringement, and master the safety knowledge of preventing	...results from unmet needs /...indicates additional needs

accidental injuries.	
Help left-behind children in rural areas strengthen emotional contact and family communication with their parents through telephone, video and other means.	results from poor relationships in the family and can be tackled by focusing on family communication
It is an important responsibility of governments at all levels and the common responsibility of families and the whole society to strengthen the care and protection of children left behind in rural areas and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minors.	...is multifaceted and needs a holistic response
Local governments should vigorously develop county economies and implement a series of policies and measures of The State Council to support rural migrant workers in returning to their home towns to start businesses and find jobs.	...can be addressed via economic development
Doing a good job in the care and protection of rural left-behind children is related to the healthy growth of minors, family happiness and social harmony, and the overall situation of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects.	...is a threat to family happiness and social harmony
Enrich campus cultural life, guide boarding students to actively participate in sports, art, social practice and other activities, and enhance the attractiveness of school education.	... can be tackled by focusing on on-campus culture
Encourage the active participation of social forces. We will accelerate the incubation and	...is the responsibility of society and other people

development of professional social work service organisations, public welfare and charity social organisations, and voluntary service organisations.	
If a left-behind child in rural areas is suspected of being a victim of domestic violence, accidental injury or illegal infringement during work, it shall immediately be reported to the public security organ.	...can be prevented

Analysis of the problematisation of LBC in the last stage is helpful to contextualise the impact these policies have on the children. I use the first and second stories to illustrate the impact of different urban residency conditions on LBC, and the third story to illustrate the impact of the care service system on LBC.

### 3.8 Limitation of Research Methodology

First of all, when using second-hand data for research, it is necessary to evaluate and rearrange the data, which is time-consuming to some extent. And part of the data does not contain specific information required by the research but only some general words. Second, policy comments based on policy as discourse analysis tend to focus on revealing the meaning behind the content, not the process itself, which leads to the difficulty of detecting the steps involved in identifying the dominant discourse and revealing the representation of the problem.

This chapter outlines the methodologies that were utilised in this study. Subsequently, through the analysis of historical policies and current policies, this paper summarises how the government framed the problem of LBC and how the problems of these children are presented in the policy; then analyses the ideology in the policy, mainly

socialist collectivism and Confucianism.

## Chapter 4. Results

This chapter mainly discusses the findings of the study. This chapter first focuses on the group suicide event of left-behind children (LBC) in 2015 and discusses the response of the media, the public and the government to this event, which is also the trigger for the promulgating of The 2016 Opinions. The next step is to analyse the historical policies before 2016 and discuss how the government framed the problem of these children at various stages. The third part is to understand how LBCs are represented in The 2016 Opinions and the influence of ideology according to the WPR and CDPF framework. Understanding the policy problematisation of LBC can help us contextualise the impact policies have on these children, which will be explored through three stories in the next chapter.

### 4.1 Addressing the “problem” of LBC through policy initiatives: a brief history

In this section, I will discuss the Chinese government’s policies and measures on LBC before the 2015 group suicide, from the emergence of policies to development and reform, including the main objectives and contents of the policies at each stage.

#### 4.1.1 1996-2003

After reform and opening (*gai ge kai fang*), the number of rural migrant workers in cities increased dramatically, and the problem of rural-urban migration has become increasingly prominent. In the past 40 years, millions of rural residents have migrated to major cities (such as Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing) to work in labour-intensive jobs with long hours and low wages (Goodburn, 2020). The state has begun to pay greater attention to rural-urban migration in terms of its policies, but the problem of LBC was not brought into the policy horizon.

The state’s policy intervention on migrant workers' children begins not with LBC, but with migrant children. Migrant children are those who live with their migrant parents but do not have a local hukou (Chen et al., 2015). The main reason why they are

called migrant children is that their parents moved to the current community in search of work and took their children with them, unlike the LBCs – who are also children of migrant workers but do not live with migrant parents and have been left behind in the rural areas. With a large number of migrant workers entering cities, the education of their children has gradually become an urgent and important problem to be solved (Wang & Wu, 2016). There is a Chinese Confucian tradition that parents should provide their children with the best education by using as many resources as possible (Spring, 2009). This may be more pronounced among migrant workers, who often hope their children can achieve socio-economic advancement through education. As a result, migrant workers tend to bring their children together to the cities (Goodburn, 2020; Spring, 2009). This became a policy problem because<sup>4</sup> children must be enrolled in the school near their registered residence. As a result, the school needs of migrant children came to the government's attention, while LBCs who are left in rural areas but attending school are ignored.

The policy from 1996 to 2003 mainly focused on migrant children but also covers LBC. However, it was a mere extension of the problem of migrant workers and thus, a derivative policy of the migrant workers' policy. Policies on LBC usually fall under the government's migrant worker support policies. For example, “[a]rranging for children of rural migrant workers to enter schools through multiple ways and ensure the right of children of migrant workers to receive compulsory education” as a means of improving the services for rural migrant workers in “Improving Employment, Management and Services for Rural Migrant Workers in Cities” (The State Council of China, 2003). This policy states that the local government of migrant workers' hometowns should unconditionally accept the students who returned to their hometown after migrating with their parents and become LBC again. The position of policy is from the perspective of migrant workers, the solution to the problem of children's schooling is to serve the needs of migrant parents so that they do not have to worry about their children's access to school.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2021-10/29/content\\_5647617.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2021-10/29/content_5647617.htm)

Policy at this stage did not treat LBCs as a separate group from migrant children or seek to address the specific challenges they face. The State Council of China released a policy entitled “The Decision to Further Strengthen Rural Education” in 2003. The policy points out that local governments should give priority to the management of public schools and ensure that children of rural migrant workers receive compulsory education (The State Council of China, 2003). The aim of this policy is to develop rural education, ensure that farmers and their children have access to good education, and achieve educational equity and social justice. The background of this policy is that China makes compulsory education universal in rural areas to achieve the goal of *Education For All*. Education For All is a global movement led by UNESCO, aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, youth, and adults by 2015. In the policy, LBCs are included in children of migrant workers, rather than differentiated from migrant children, nor are policy targets set in response to the difficulties faced by LBCs.

Policy concerns about LBC are affiliated with support for migrant workers and challenges of rural education, that is, a problem with equal access to education. The policy emphasised that the right of children of rural migrant workers to receive compulsory education should be guaranteed. The starting point of the policies is to ensure migrant workers have no worries about their children when they migrate. At that time, migrant parents were most anxious about the schooling and education of their children. Furthermore, rather than an independent group with unique needs, LBCs are regarded as children of migrant workers and the main target of policies is still migrant children, not the children left behind. Although LBCs were not officially included in the national policy horizon during this period, individual news media and researchers began to pay attention to them. For example, Reporter Li (2002) published in the *Guangming Daily* noted that the phenomenon of LBCs dropping out of school is serious, and their psychological and physiological development is unbalanced. Zhang (2002) released a call for “family love” for LBCs, the theme of which is that

LBCs lack family warmth and hope their migrant parents would care more about them.

#### **4.1.2 2004-2009**

As the *People's Daily*, *China Education Daily* and other news media began to pay more attention to the problem of LBC, the education field took the lead in studying their problems. For example, in 2004, the Ministry of Education held a special seminar to discuss the problem of LBC, and the magazine *Education Research* published a survey report on the “Problem of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas” the Central Institute of Education Sciences. According to this survey report (Wu et al., 2004), there are three problems with LBC:

- Guardians paid too little attention to the education of left-behind children, resulting in their poor academic performance;
- Lack of family affection led to poor life satisfaction;
- The lack of a complete family that can provide family education contributed to LBC’s psychological problems.

Thus, the report represented family separation as the direct cause of the problems of LBC. The report further attributed these three problems to the household registration system that separates urban and rural areas, migrant parents putting more emphasis on income rather than the education of their children and a lack of mental health education in the school curricula (Wu, 2004).

Thereafter, various departments introduced an assortment of policies to address these problems (see Table 2). The No. 1 policy document issued in March 2006 required the government of the home province of the migrant workers to address the education problems that LBC faced and this policy document marked the first time the government responded to and intervened in the problem of LBC at the policy level (Wang & Wu, 2016). In the same year, policy documents Nos. 2, 3 and 4 were issued (see Table 2). No. 3 focuses on building “parents’ schools” to teach parents or

guardians of LBC correct parenting concepts, carrying out a series of parent-child activities that can improve participants' moral literacy. The main ideas in No. 4 are the establishment of a residence permit system, improving the assistance system for LBC and promoting medical and healthcare services. In contrast to No. 2 and No. 3, policy document No. 4 was jointly issued by various government departments, including women's federations, education departments, civil affairs departments, judicial departments, agriculture departments, health departments and so on. While some laws and regulations are intertextual between these policies, only the No. 4 document presents a clear view of sectoral collaboration. However, the linkage and coordination relationship between various departments was not specified, leading to problems such as limited cooperation between the administration and poor coordination in specific work (Wang & Wu, 2016).

**Table 2** *National Policy Documents on LBC from 2004 to 2016*

No.	Time	Main Department	The filename
1	2006.03.27	CPC Central Committee and State Council	Some opinions on solving the problem of migrant workers 关于解决农民工问题的若干意见
2	2006.05.17	The Ministry of Education	Opinions on the Implementation of several Opinions of The State Council on Solving the Problems of Migrant Workers in The Education System 关于教育系统贯彻落实《国务院关于解决农民工问题的若干意见》的实施意见(已失效)
3	2006.07.17	The All-China Women's Federation	Opinions on Vigorously Developing action to Care for Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 关于大力开展关爱农村留守儿童行动的意见
4	2007.07.20	Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee's other 6 ministries	Notice on Implementing the Spirit of the Central Committee's Directive and Actively Carrying out the Work of Caring for Left-behind Migrant Children in Rural Areas 关于贯彻落实中央指示精神积极开展关爱农村留守流动儿童工作的通知
5	2011.11.21	The All-China Women's Federation's other 4 ministries	Notice on The Pilot Work of The Care And Care Service System for Rural Left-behind Migrant Children 关于开展全国农村留守流动儿童关爱服务体系试点工作的通知
6	2013.01.04	The Ministry of Education	Opinions on Strengthening care and Education for Left-behind Children in Rural Areas

		other 5 ministries	during compulsory Education
			关于加强义务教育阶段农村留守儿童关爱和教育工作的意见
7	2013.09.03	The Ministry of Education and other 4 ministries	Opinions on Preventing Sexual Assault on Children and Adolescents 关于做好预防少年儿童遭受性侵工作的意见
8	2014.09.12	CPC Central Committee and State Council	Opinions on Further Serving Migrant Workers 关于进一步做好为农民工服务工作的意见
9	2016.02.04	CPC Central Committee and State Council	Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 关于加强农村留守儿童关爱保护工作的意见

The solutions proposed by the No. 2, No. 3 and No. 4 documents are summarised in Table 3 (see Table 3). There are six aspects in which the policy documents attempted to address the problem of LBC: School education, Family education, Care and Protection System for LBC in Rural Areas, Moral Literacy, Policy and Health care service. School education refers to developing vocational education and boarding schools and support from teachers, while family education refers to establishing parenting-related schools to popularise knowledge of family education. Under the Care and Protection System for LBC in Rural Areas, local governments were tasked to formulate action plans to strengthen the protection and rights protection of LBC. Moral literacy, which aims to improve the moral literacy of parents or guardians, revolves around carrying out a public campaign and propagating ideas like “children first”, “respect and support for children” and “teach children for the country”. In terms of policy, reforming the household registration system and cracking down on criminal activities that infringe on the legitimate rights of LBC are the key points. Health care service refers to providing basic health care and improving the health status of left-behind migrant children.

**Table 3** *Summation of Solutions Proposed by the No. 2, No. 3 and No. 4 Documents*

<b>School Education</b>	Develop vocational education and carry out skills training. (No. 2) Strengthen support for private schools for migrant workers' children and strengthen the teaching staff. (No. 2)	Building boarding schools in rural areas. (Nos. 2, 4)	Local and school-based courses on survival education, safety and legal education, mental health education, etc. (No. 2, No. 4)	Teachers and schools help left-behind children in need. (No. 4)
<b>Family Education</b>	Establish and develop parent schools and popularize family education knowledge. (No. 3)			
<b>Care and Protection System for LBC in Rural Areas</b>	Local governments should formulate action plans. (No. 3)			
<b>Moral Literacy</b>	Carry out themed activities. (No. 3)	Extensive publicity of the concepts of “children first”, “respect and support for		

		children”, “to teach children for the country, moral education” and publicity of policies related to child protection. (No. 3)		
<b>Policy</b>	Women’s federations should promote the introduction of policies and regulations to address the problem of left-behind children in rural areas. (No. 3)	Reform the household registration system. (No. 4)	Actively prevent and severely crackdown on illegal and criminal activities that infringe on the legitimate rights and interests of left-behind children in rural areas. (No. 4)	
<b>Health care service</b>	Provide basic health care and improve the health status of left-behind migrant children. (No. 4)			

At this stage, the government sees the LBC problem from more perspectives rather than just support for migrant parents or migrant parents' concerns about their children's education. While the household registration system and school curricula play a part in contributing to the problem of LBCs, the view of Chinese academia is that the direct cause of low academic performance and psychological problems LBCs face is family separation (Wu, 2004). This view is recognised by the government and reflected in the policy solutions proposed, which is also reflected in how the government framed the problem of LBC. That is, the problem of LBC is framed as children's learning and psychological problems caused by family separation, which requires the joint intervention of the government, schools, and parents.

### **4.1.3 2010-2015**

In 2013, No. 5 and No. 6 documents were issued successively. Both are focused on building the Care and Protection System for LBCs in rural areas. The main task of the Care and Protection System is to establish a care service team comprising government staff, professionals, and volunteers to provide guidance and help to LBCs and their families in education and life. The No. 6 document also suggested that family separation is at the root of LBC's problems:

In recent years ... the number of migrant workers in cities is increasing. Some couples go out to work at the same time, leaving their children in their hometowns, resulting in a large number of left-behind children. Due to being separated from their parents for a long time, left-behind children face some prominent problems in family care, life, family education and safety, which must be effectively resolved to do a good job in education and care for left-behind children.

The policy response was to develop family education, publicize the important role of family education in the development of LBC, and promote the connection between family education, school education and social education (Ministry of Education, 2013).

In September of the same year, the No. 7 document requires that sexual assault prevention be included in the focus of family education and guidance services for girls, especially left-behind girls in rural areas. Background information in the No. 7 document points out that "left-behind children are prone to safety problems due to a lack of parental supervision" (Ministry of Education, 2013). It became a necessity in policy that parents are required to arrange more time to communicate with their children and fulfil their guardianship responsibilities. Parents are also recommended to learn the necessary information about sex and sexual assault prevention and explain it to their children.

The No. 8 document released in 2014 further emphasises the development of the

Care and Protection System, especially in areas such as preschool education and providing financial support for compulsory education and security. One of the key points of the system is to promote the connection between school, family and community (The State Council of China, 2014).

At this stage of policy development, we can see that the government has added its attention to the safety of LBC, which is likely due to the deaths of these children reported by the media. For example, in 2012, five left-behind children in Bijie died from suffocation while lighting fire lit in a rubbish bin to keep themselves warm<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the Care and Protection System for LBC in rural areas was one of the six aspects that the government focused on in the previous stage (see Table 3), in which the government clearly takes the lead (Wang & Wu, 2016).

In contrast to earlier stages of policy development, the policy documents from 2010 to 2015 treated LBC as an independent group that needs extra care from the whole society. They acknowledged that the problem of LBC is not only related to their education or mental health but also their safety. However, from the government's perspective, the direct cause of the problems of LBC is still the family, so family education was emphasised in the measures. Furthermore, the policy in this phase seems to reflect that government considers itself as being responsible for LBC and thus government employees are the leading and main staff within the Care and Protection System.

#### ***4.1.4 Summary***

As can be seen from the historical policies of LBC, the government's understanding of the problems of these children has been deepened, from the initial single issue of schooling to various aspects, including mental health, sanitation, education, safety and so on. The government's emphasis on LBC has also changed from being collectively referred to as children of migrant workers with migrant children at the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20121124/c24guizhou/>

beginning to being recognized as an independent, LBC group. Policies and measures have also changed from the education policy mainly under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and local government to the cooperation of multiple departments, gradually forming the embryonic form of care and service system for LBC. Additionally, it is worth noting that the government seems to believe that family separation is at the root of the problem.

#### **4.2 The Growing “Problem” of LBC: the 2015 Group Suicide**

As LBCs are getting more and more attention, public media frequently reported how their rights and interests have been harmed. There were reports about school bullying and violence. One headline by the China News Network<sup>6</sup> reads: “Left-behind Children Who are Bullied and Walk 11 hours to Xiamen to Complain to Parents”. Another headline from the *China Youth Daily*<sup>7</sup> screamed: “The Child was Beaten to Death by 11 Children”<sup>8</sup>. The *Peng Pai* paper released a report about the poverty and sexual abuse of LBC, entitled “More than 90% of Left-behind Children in a State-level Poverty-stricken County in Anhui, Girls are Frequently Sexually Assaulted”<sup>9</sup>.

However, it was the mass suicide of four LBCs from one family in 2015 that shocked society and aroused widespread discussion about their well-being. On June 10, 2015, a notice was released on the website of the Qixingguan District government in Bijie, Guizhou Province, which said: “At around 23:30 on June 9, four children were suspected of pesticide poisoning at home and died after rescue efforts”.

The group suicide quickly attracted media and public attention. On the same day, the *Pengpai* paper published a report on its Weibo and followed up with some details. The four children who committed suicide included one boy and three girls. Their

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/life/news/2009/03-25/1616538.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> [http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2014-07/16/nw.D110000zgqnb\\_20140716\\_2-09.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2014-07/16/nw.D110000zgqnb_20140716_2-09.htm)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1361862](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1361862)

father worked in another city, while their mother had left the family three years prior to the suicide. Their paternal grandparents had passed on earlier while the maternal grandparents had been unable to take care of the four children due to their own poor health. Left behind to survive on their own without any living expenses, the four children had dropped out of school a month earlier. The only food they had at home was corn planted the year before by their father.<sup>10</sup> Later, the *People's Daily*, *Yangzi Evening News*, *Toutiao News* and other media officials forwarded the report on Weibo. *Tencent News* changed the headline to "Left-behind children in Guizhou were so poor that they only lived on cornflour before committing suicide by drinking pesticide at home".<sup>11</sup>

As public opinion continued to foment, the media not only reported the deaths of the four LBCs, but also the living situations of other LBCs in Bijie's Labour Village. The Labor Village belongs to Bazhai Town in the northeast of Bijie City. In this small village of more than 100 families, almost all the young people have left the village for work, leaving only a group of children and the elderly behind in their home town. Sixty-six children attend the village's only primary school, while the others have to walk five kilometres to the town every day to study. Because their migrant parents are not at home and they have many siblings, much older LBCs have to stay home to look after their younger siblings when they are not in school. A group of photos entitled "Visiting the dilapidated houses without electric lights for left-behind children in Labor Village in Bijie"<sup>12</sup> published by *China News* attracted the attention of netizens. The photographs of low, old and dilapidated mud houses and leaky windows had a significant visual impact on Chinese cyber citizens. The *Beijing Evening News* also reported on the status of LBC in Bijie. It found that as a result of rural-urban migration, many rural villages only have LBC and elders and noted that some families were so poor that two families of eight people lived in one mud house

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1340413](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1340413)

<sup>11</sup> [https://news.qq.com/a/20150610/041387.htm?pgv\\_ref=aio2015&ptlang=2052](https://news.qq.com/a/20150610/041387.htm?pgv_ref=aio2015&ptlang=2052)

<sup>12</sup> <http://house.people.com.cn/n/2015/0612/c164220-27145836.html>

with just two beds.<sup>13</sup>

Many cyber citizens discussed the reasons behind group suicide. Some said that the children were too poor, and the suicide is “heartbreaking” while others discussed who should bear the responsibility for the group suicide. Many blamed the parents and the local government. They criticised the children’s parents for bearing, but not taking, the responsibility to raise the children and are thus “unworthy to be parents”.

For the local government, the public reaction was even fiercer, because three years before, five LBCs in Bijie, all between the ages of 9 to 13, had suffocated while lighting a fire in a rubbish bin to keep themselves warm during a cold, rainy night.<sup>14</sup> Their fathers were brothers and had left the children behind with their visually handicapped grandmother to work in Shenzhen. The boys left home for more than 10 days, but no one, including the principals, noticed nor reported that they were missing. Wang Zhenyao, a social welfare expert at Beijing Normal University, said on state broadcaster China Central Television that the children’s deaths reflected systemic flaws in children’s services which lack shelters, social workers and volunteers, as well as poor communication channels with those in need, “[t]here is still a void in China,” he said (*New York Times*, 2012).

Because of a similar case that happened three years ago, after the 2015 suicide, the local social security and assistance system was widely criticised, and the Chinese government once again became the centre of a public outcry. The Guizhou provincial government denied the claim that it was poverty that caused the children to commit suicide and presented evidence of the aid funds from the government to highlight the financial assistance given to the family (*Peng Pai*, 2015). However, the public outcry led Premier Li Keqiang to demand accountability for the local government’s inaction and for the relevant ministries to take action to prevent such a tragedy from

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.takefoto.cn/viewnews-438716.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20121124/c24guizhou/>

happening again:

We will improve the care and protective system. We will establish mechanisms for mandatory reporting, intervention and support, and resolutely crack down on all kinds of illegal acts that infringe on left-behind children. We will increase the construction of boarding schools. We will reduce the number of left-behind children at the source by granting urban residency to migrant workers and supporting them to return to their hometowns to start businesses and find jobs<sup>15</sup>.

In 2016, The Chinese government issued “The Opinions of The State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas” (*The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas*, 2016), whose core content is in line with Premier Li’s speech at the meeting. In order to respond to the challenges that families face caring for LBC, a Care and Protection system comprising four responsible subjects was proposed: the families of LBC are responsible as the major guardian/s and the local governments and residents’ committees are responsible for developing feasible policies and ensuring their enforcement, schools and teachers are responsible for educating parents and children, and social forces (including social welfare organisations, professional social workers, and volunteers) are responsible for mobilising social resources (Wang, 2018).

### **4.3 The 2016 Opinions and Responsible Subjects for Care and Protection System of LBC in China**

This section describes the findings from the analysis of The 2016 Opinions and presents how China attempted to address the LBC problem. As mentioned in the previous section, the policy proposed four subjects of responsibility within the Care and Protection system for LBC: the family of LBC, schools and teachers, the whole of society and local government and residents’ committees. Accordingly, this section’s structure follows the roles attributed to these four responsible subjects and I

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/27/content\\_5036696.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/27/content_5036696.htm)

utilise the four responsibility subjects as subheadings.

#### ***4.3.1 Disciplining Rural Migrant-Worker Families***

Some policy initiatives attempted to normalise urban middle-class parenting and family practices as a standard to educate rural migrant-worker families. These slogans are usually often empty and formalistic because they ignore the socio-economic realities migrant-worker families face in their everyday lives.

The 2016 Opinions require strengthening the primary responsibility of migrant-worker families and fulfilling their obligations of guardianship and bringing up children in accordance with the law. The 2016 Opinions suggested that:

- Migrant workers shall, as far as possible, take their minor children with them to live together or have one parent stay at home to take care of them.
- If they are not qualified for the time being, they shall entrust a relative or other adult with guardianship to take care of them. Children under the age of 16 shall not be separated from their guardianship and live alone.
- Migrant workers should keep in touch with their left-behind minor children and meet them more often, learn about their life, study and psychological status in a timely manner, and give them more affection and care (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016).

Migrant parents are required to take their children along as much as possible or try to find a qualified guardian for the children. This indicates that the policy tries to push migrant-worker families to create a relatively intact family environment for LBC, from which the children can obtain psychological satisfaction and life support. The authorities imposed on rural migrant-worker families a set of hegemonic, urban, middle-class parenting ideals that privilege the parent-child bond (Gu, 2021). Through issuing these instructions, the authorities cast themselves as mentors and educators to migrant parents or guardians with the role of guiding them on how to

raise their children. Meanwhile, these guidelines ignore structural constraints (i.e., the hukou system), such as the fact that migration to work is a livelihood strategy due to the lack of work opportunities back home, strict hukou conditions that make family migration to urban impossible and the challenges of the older generation in raising grandchildren. As a result, while guardians will be assigned, children will still be left behind.

In fact, the state requirements for the migrant worker's family reflect neoliberal ideology. Neoliberal ideology suggests that: (1) the state should favour individual (and family) responsibility to avoid welfare dependency; (2) families should have a self-sufficient function and promote sustained economic development; and (3) moralising about "family values" is worth advocating because family is supposed to be "a haven in a heartless world" in a market economy (Brecher, 2012). Moreover, "the normal family" as a dominant ideology is embedded in this neoliberal discourse of family responsibility:

To fulfil the primary responsibility of family guardianship, guardians should fulfil their duties in accordance with the law and give priority to children's interests in family development ... and ensure that children left behind in rural areas receive proper guardianship, affection and warmth from their families. (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016)

The ideology of a "normal family" requires family members to live together and be child-centred, nurturing and educating, and ultimately produce "successful children." (Gu, 2021). Putting children's interests as a "priority" is a response to the discourse of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism can also be seen in China's welfare stance (Gu, 2021). First, China's welfare system belongs to "welfare residualism" (Gao et al., 2010) in which the family is regarded as the main welfare provider to support individuals while the state plays a residual role (Shang & Wu, 2003). Second, the system shows fragmentation

and unequal access because what individuals deserve depends on their hukou location, employment status and job sector, and so on (Gu, 2021). According to Duckett (2020), China's deepening market-oriented economic reforms have pushed many populations to the private market and led to China's social provision programmes becoming increasingly regressive, benefiting privileged social groups. Indeed, a strong anti-welfare, the neoliberal stance can also be seen in The 2016 Opinions:

If the guardian leaves the left-behind children in rural areas unsupervised and cared for, which leads to their risk and does not change after education; or refuses to perform the duty of guardianship for more than six months, resulting in the destitution of a left-behind child in rural areas; or commit domestic violence, maltreatment or abandonment of left-behind children in rural areas, causing serious damage to their physical and mental health, the persons or units concerned, such as their close relatives, village [neighbourhood] committees or county civil affairs departments, shall apply to the people's court to revoke the guardian qualification and appoint a new guardian (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016).

As seen here, the policy, through supervision of rural migrant-worker families, proposes punitive measures for parents and guardians who do not comply with normative parenting ideals, including the threat that they will be deprived of guardianship role and could not be physically involved in their children's lives. These policies are based on an individualised and moral definition of the problem and betray a strong, anti-welfare, neoliberal stance (Gu, 2021).

In summary, The 2016 Opinions emphasised the responsibility for migrant-worker families toward LBC and proposed punitive measures for parents and guardians who do not perform against normative parenting ideals, rather than addressing structural constraints that forced migrant-worker families to be separated in the first place, such as the unequal distribution of job opportunities and strict hukou conditions. In The

2016 Opinions, migrant-worker families play paradoxical roles: they were pushed by structural constraints to leave their children behind, but the neoliberal social welfare system requires them to be the main welfare providers of children left behind, take punitive measures to discipline their “unnatural” family behaviour.

#### ***4.3.2 Supporting LBC’s education through curriculum and home-school partnerships***

Confucianism emphasises that individuals are the foundation of social stability and national prosperity. People should realize their ideals through self-improvement and actively pay attention to themselves rather than passively blaming others for the shortcomings of society (Miao, 2021). Therefore, The 2016 Opinions set out the responsibility of schools on education from two aspects. On the one hand, it sets expectations for schools and teachers to teach students knowledge about mental health and safety so that they can help themselves. On the other hand, it suggests that schools should provide educational contexts for the parents and guardians of LBC to help improve their parenting practices.

The 2016 Opinions recommends that schools offer courses related to mental health and safety awareness:

- Support and guide primary and secondary schools to strengthen mental health education, promote the positive and healthy development of students' psychology and personality, and identify and correct psychological problems and bad behaviours as soon as possible.
- In conjunction with the public security organs, guide and assist primary and secondary schools to improve civil air defence, physical defence and technical defence measures, strengthen campus safety management, promote the rule of law and safety education, and help children enhance their awareness of preventing illegal infringement and master the safety knowledge of preventing accidental injuries (The

Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016).

The curriculum includes extra types of knowledge that help LBCs learn to live safely and healthily in society. These initiatives specify forms of additional knowledge that should be specifically taught to LBCs in schools. The fact that the 2016 Opinions recommended schools and teachers to “identify and correct psychological problems and bad behaviours as soon as possible” seems to suggest that the government expected LBCs to adapt to the state of being left behind and that this life state is not in need of change.

In addition, The 2016 Opinions emphasise the need to provide LBCs with different and non-traditional forms of knowledge, such as public safety and mental health education, to ensure their health and safety. While there might have been good intentions, this profiling of LBCs could put them in a tough spot, and lower school and teachers’ expectations regarding their capability. It may lead to assumptions that LBCs’ subjective lack of awareness of self-improvement has led them to develop psychological and behavioural problems while ignoring the objective environment and facts that led to their condition in the first place.

Home–school partnerships are another focus of The 2016 Opinions for schools’ responsibility on education. Schools and teachers are suggested to provide educational contexts for the migrant parents or guardians of LBC to help improve parenting. The policy solutions proposed in The 2016 Opinions seem to reflect a scientific discourse:

- Primary and secondary schools to implement the holistic management for rural left-behind children’s education, using the telephone, home visits, parent meetings and other ways to strengthen communication with parents and entrusted guardians. Schools should also develop a thorough understanding of rural left-behind children’s living situations, help the guardian(s) master the living situation of rural left-behind children and

development the guardians' sense of responsibility and ability to manage the education of LBC.

- Help left-behind children in rural areas strengthen their emotional contact and family communication with their parents through telephone, video and other means (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016).

The idea of home-school cooperation suggests that the government sees sharing of knowledge between teachers and families as vital in building an active learning support system for LBC. However, this policy seems to assume that parents and guardians are not “scientific” enough and need help to “establish a scientific approach to educational management” (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016). In order to improve parent-child relationships and migrant parents' educational management ability, the solution is for schools to provide extra help and information to migrant parents. The support works both ways, with schools educating and mentoring migrant parents, while the schools receive information about the living and mental status of LBCs from the parents through home visits or parent meetings, thus affecting the educational environment of the school.

Overall, the responsibility of schools is reflected in increasing supportive “non-traditional” curricula and establishing home-school partnerships to ensure that LBCs can be safe, healthy and educated. However, it does not yet use the language necessary to move away from scientific discourse. The 2016 Opinions attempt to adapt LBCs to their current life state by changing LBCs and their parents; the good thing is that communication is a two-way street.

#### ***4.3.3 The role of society in supporting LBC***

At the beginning of The 2016 Opinions, the government first stated the

characteristics of LBC, which laid a foundation for building their image of them, and the importance of protecting the children's legitimate rights and interests:

- Some left-behind children are separated from their parents for a long time, lack affection, care and effective supervision, suffer from mental health problems or even extreme behaviours, and suffer accidental injuries or even illegal infringement. These problems seriously affect the healthy growth of children. LBCs in rural areas, like other children, are the future and hope of the country and need the common care of the whole society.
- It is an important responsibility of governments at all levels and the common responsibility of families and the whole society to strengthen the care and protection of children left behind in rural areas and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minors.
- Social organisations, professional social workers, volunteers and other aspects play an active role, focusing on solving the difficulties and problems of rural LBC in the process of life, custody and growth, forming a good atmosphere for the whole society to care for these children.

Zou Ming, then vice-minister of Civil Affairs, at a regular State Council policy briefing on February 19, 2016, affirmed that LBCs have the right to enjoy all equality and fairness, but also pointed out that they are special, and need extra help from various members of society:

Rural left-behind children like other children have the right to enjoy the achievements of reform and opening [*gai ge kai fang*] including compulsory education, health, social security and other basic public services, but some of the rural left-behind children due to long-term separation from parents ... need the whole society to give special care.

The content of the policy and the speech noted that LBCs “lack affection, care” and “effective supervision” of parents so they are vulnerable to “illegal infringement” and need their “legitimate rights” protected. Some of them have “mental health problems”

and “extreme behaviours” so “care for the whole society” is advocated.

The charity discourse and Confucianism run through The 2016 Opinions and Zou’s speech. While the policy and the speech could be interpreted as a recognition of the rights of LBC, it then translated the basic rights of LBC that the government is obligated to provide into “special care” for a group of pathetic children that society as a whole should offer. The charity discourse of “special care” emphasised the tragic situation (i.e., long-term separation from parents) of LBC to mobilise a spirit of generosity among other people and thus appeal to the social conscience of citizens to provide services for these children. In this kind of charity discourse, LBCs are not considered the equals of their benefactor. Rather, they are positioned as objects of pity, expected to be grateful for what others have done for them.

Confucianism considers helping others “in need” to be a manifestation of good moral character and encourages it. The 2016 Opinions encourage social organisations, professional social workers, volunteers and other aspects to play an active role in helping the children. This could be traced back to benevolence in Confucian thought based on morality or “ren”: which also means charity, compassion, and humaneness. Caring is an important part of all these behaviours and is considered one of the good behaviours of human beings. In normative Confucian discourse, LBC are vulnerable and deserve sympathy and care from others.

Consequently, The 2016 Opinions opined that LBC needs the “care of [the] whole society” and help from social organisations, professional social workers and volunteers. Confucianism and the charity discourse contribute to the government’s appeal. The charity discourse emphasised the image of children in need of help. This is due to the more well-off (i.e., adults) feeling a moral duty to give help to those pathetic LBCs but the person receiving help may be considered incompetent. The Confucian understanding of “ren”, and care also promotes these children as a group in need of compassion and care from others. Furthermore, the charity discourse

violates the right of LBC to enjoy all equality and fairness. The access to human rights of LBC is dressed up as “special” donations by the charity discourse.

#### ***4.3.4 The role of local government and residents’ committees: social harmony and the problem of LBC***

The phrase “harmonious society” was proposed as a core political concept of China’s development in the Third Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee in 2004, in which Hu Jintao called for building a society of democracy and the rule of law, fairness and justice, integrity and fraternity, full of vitality, stability and order, and harmony between man and nature. In 2005, President Hu Jintao again stressed that provincial officials and senior cadres should “improve capacity to build a harmonious socialist society” (Delury, 2008). “Harmonious society” is the value of socialism with Chinese characteristics reassigned by the Chinese government to the Confucian concept of harmony and the social harmony discourse has a prominent role in shaping public debate and government ideology (Delury, 2008). Building a harmonious society is the primary task of the Chinese government (Woo, 2009).

The discourse of social harmony is used to rationalise the government’s focus on LBC in The 2016 Opinions:

- Some left-behind children ... suffer from mental health problems or even extreme behaviours and suffer accidental injuries or even illegal infringement. These problems have seriously affected the healthy growth of children and social harmony and stability, attracting great attention from all sides and arousing a strong public response.
- Doing a good job in the care and protection of rural left-behind children is related to the healthy growth of minors, family happiness and social harmony, and the overall situation of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural

Areas 2016).

The social harmony discourse in the policy suggests that the government is coping with, and correcting, the unbalanced situation and the unfairness LBC face because the problem of these children has “seriously affected” social harmony and stability. The discourse of social harmony was initially introduced by the Chinese government to alleviate the contradictions and conflicts caused by inequality (Miao, 2021). He argued that these contradictions and conflicts lead to social instability, which threatens the government’s grip on power. Going back to the 2015 group suicide, many blamed the local government for not being responsible and the Chinese government became the centre of a public outcry. The reports on the living environments of LBC in Bijie remind people of the economic gaps and widening inequalities between rural and urban areas so the government sees LBC as a threat to social harmony.

Overall, social harmony discourse, on the one hand, expresses the importance the Chinese government attaches to the problem of LBC and a positive attitude towards problem-solving. By linking the issue of these children with the government task of building a harmonious society, policymakers can demonstrate the Chinese government’s focus on the LBC group and effectively alleviate the anxiety that migrant worker families may have and negative perceptions of the government. On the other hand, shows the government’s attempt to gloss over potentially unequal economic and social realities. For people who form the rural masses or urban poor, “harmony: sounds like a government’s socialist commitment to their welfare (Woo, 2006) but, actually, it is a tool for the government to shape public debate and ideology to respond to unequal economic and social realities (Miao, 2021). The neoliberal social welfare system in China requires parents to be the main welfare providers of LBC while the government uses a social harmony discourse to make migrant parents think that the government will support their welfare to maintain social stability and gloss over potentially unequal economic and social realities.

#### **4.4 The Effect of The 2016 Opinions on Solving the Left-behind Children's Problems**

Thus, The 2016 Opinions identify four responsible subjects to construct the Care and Protection System of LBC. However, the focus of The 2016 Opinions is on helping LBC by treating the symptoms rather than addressing the root cause of the LBC problem (explained later). National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF and UNFPA (2015) claimed that there are 40.51 million rural LBCs, accounting for about one-sixth of the total number of children in China. However, a report released by the Department of Civil Affairs claimed that after a “touch bottom investigation” (*modi paicha*), China only has 9.02 million rural LBCs (MCA, 2016). This number is three times lower than the previous data. A far narrower definition of LBC is the main reason for the sharp decline in number. The Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs has two key requirements for defining LBC: (1) both parents work outside the home, or one partner works outside the home and the other is “unable to fulfil the duties of guardianship”; (2) the age of LBC is defined as no more than 16 years old, rather than 18 years old as per the legal definition of adulthood in Chinese law (MCA, 2016). The academic community has also expressed distrust of the number of LBCs announced by the government and recent research (Gu, 2021; Yang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019) still commonly uses 2015 data as background information or research evidence.

Zou Ming, then vice-minister of Civil Affairs, at a regular State Council policy briefing on February 19, 2016, claimed that The 2016 Opinions would address the phenomenon of LBC from the source:

The implementation of The 2016 Opinions is because the party central committee and state council attach great importance to the protection work of the rural left-behind children. It is the first to systematically clear minors' protection policy measures and working mechanism of the documents of the State Council, which improve the system of protection of minors. The 2016 Opinions strengthened measures for Care and Protection System for left-behind children in rural areas and put forward

the long-term goal of gradually reducing the phenomenon of left-behind children from the source<sup>17</sup>.

However, if the government wants to address the problem of LBC from the source, it must prevent family separation, which is bound to involve reform of the household registration policy. Although Zou Ming claimed that The 2016 Opinions will help to address the root cause of LBC's problems, the policy document did not actually offer any form of systemic change. There is only one policy about the hukou system in The 2016 Opinions:

Local governments should work hard to grant urban residency to rural migrant workers and create better conditions for them to take care of their minor children. Those who meet the requirements for settling down in an urban city should advance the settlement of themselves and their family members in an orderly manner (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016).

Although the policy briefly mentioned the need to support migrant workers to settle their families down in cities, in reality, there are many obstacles (this will be explained later by narrative).

In the next section, I present two stories to illustrate the effects of the 2016 Opinions and the limitations of the policy in addressing the LBC problem. Shuai Shuai's story illustrates the limitations of the Care and Protection Systems and Fang Tiantian's story explains how the hukou system causes family separation and thus the creation of LBC.

#### ***4.4.1 Story 1: Shuai Shuai***

Li Xin county<sup>16</sup> in the northwest of Hui Province was once a state-level, poverty-stricken county. Nearly half of the 1.75 million population are migrant workers, resulting in a big number of rural LBCs. By the first quarter of 2021, more than 20,000 children were left behind in rural areas. Now the Care and Protection

<sup>16</sup> <http://society.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0709/c1008-32152954.html>

System for LBC has been fully implemented. Lixin county has set up a “children’s home”, where LBCs can read books and play games. The home holds regular lectures on popular science and offers one-on-one help to the children, including help in life and study, psychological counselling and so on. At present, Li Xin County has established and continuously improves the basic information database of rural LBC, as also the care and protection of rural LBC. It even incorporated children-in-distress relief funds into the county’s budget.

Shuai Shuai is one of the LBC in Li Xin county. He has a sister who is a year older than him. Because the elderly grandfather has been sick and bedridden for a long time, the siblings share the responsibility of taking care of the family in addition to doing housework. They are all introverted and do not do well in school. Staff involved in the Care and Protection System first provided them with financial assistance when they learned of the situation, while professional social workers and volunteers regularly visited them for psychological counselling and encouraged Shuai Shuai to put his burden down. Every quarter, staff members and other volunteers visit Shuai Shuai's home, offering money and school supplies such as backpacks.

In 2020, social workers and volunteers worked together to raise money to renovate Shuai Shuai's home, equipping it with new toilets, water pipes, walls and gates. Seeing the changes in the family home, the two children were very happy, and they expressed that they were more eager to learn. “There are many social workers and volunteers who care about me and my family. Life becomes more colourful and I understand my responsibility.” Shuai is full of confidence. Now, both siblings are in high school in the county, and their grades have been improving.

The Care and Protection System for LBC in Li Xin County mainly offers the children one-to-one assistance to support the challenges they face in life and study. This kind of help can accurately identify LBCs and provide them with targeted solutions. For example, the Care and Protection System staff saw that Shuai Shuai’s family was

struggling financially and helped him apply for a grant. At the same time, the story also shows that the Care and Protection System staff visit the families of LBCs regularly to collect information and provide new support. However, this kind of support may be limited by the number of Care and Protection System staff, though volunteers have been recruited. Given that there are at least 20,000 LBCs in Li Xin County, it is unclear the extent to which the Care and Protection System may be able to truly help them one on one. At the same time, it is difficult to measure staff attitudes and what level of assistance is up to par.

Furthermore, the Care and Protection System Staff also have to meet the emotional and psychological needs of LBCs through interpersonal communication. Shuai Shuai became lively because he felt the care and attention of the Care and Protection System staff. This seems to indicate that the staff try to act in a parental role and assume parental responsibilities to a certain extent. However, the role of parents is difficult to be truly replaced by others. And if the staff changes, how will those children who already have a deep emotional connection with the former staff bear the blow? This may make LBC relive the feelings and experiences of being left behind again.

The publicity for available welfare grants is also insufficient. Shuaishuai's family did not know they were eligible to apply for the grant at first, probably due to the grandpa's lack of information, but it also shows that the government does not publicise the policies well enough, and people who need them often do not have access to this information. This indicates that it is necessary to further strengthen policy publicity on the construction of a care and protection system for LBCs, especially for their parents and direct guardians.

It is obvious that identifying the problems and how to help LBC is from a Care and Protection System staff point of view. The staff thought it was care and protection to bring school supplies at the start of the school year and repair Shuaishuai's house to build a good environment. The whole story does not show Shuaishuai's real thoughts,

and, as a 12-year-old left-behind child, the requirements of repairing the house could hardly have come from him. This reflects that some staff naturally believe that LBCs in rural areas are passive objects of care and protection, rather than autonomous groups with independent thoughts and complete individuals with the ability to respond to external challenges and address problems by exerting their own strength. In other words, these staff ignore the self-adaptive and self-psychology of LBC, so staffs cannot be concerned that the children are constantly growing and developing individuals. It is negative to ignore the main initiative of rural LBC when building the care and protection system.

#### ***4.4.2 Story 2: Fang Tiantian***

Fang Tiantian<sup>17</sup> describes her life as “typical” of a child from her part of Guizhou. Fang was a left-behind child in rural China when she was young. During that time, moving to find work in the cities seemed the only way to get out of poverty for people who live in poverty-stricken Guizhou Province. Her parents had to leave her with her elderly grandparents in a small village in southwestern China. After dropping out of school, the 16-year-old Fang Tiantian moved to Shanghai and worked at a beauty salon. In her early 20s, Fang returned to Guizhou to get married and give birth, but she and her husband returned to Shanghai for work again once her daughter had turned 2, leaving their young child behind in Guizhou, over 2,000 kilometres away.

When the suicide referred to earlier was reported in 2015, that evening she called her daughter as soon as she finished work, to check she was OK. At the time, Fang did not want to stay with her daughter in Guizhou and could not take her to Shanghai, because the biggest barrier is the gap in institutions and policies between the two cities.

Economic reasons are the most compelling reasons why migrant workers choose to leave home. Given the dramatic disparity in development levels between China’s

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006704/chinas-left-behind-kids-repeat-their-parents-tragic-choices#>

regions, migrants are often reluctant to return to their home regions, as is Fang. The per capita GDP of Shanghai where Fang works is three times higher than Guizhou's and this disparity in urban economic development is directly reflected in wage income. There are few jobs and low incomes in Guizhou's villages, and most of them are in agriculture or breeding. According to the Guizhou government, the monthly minimum wage in 2021 is 1,790 yuan (about NZ \$398 per month). Compared with Guizhou, Shanghai has more job opportunities and higher income and the monthly minimum wage in 2021 is 2,590 yuan (about NZ \$576 per month). According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Shanghai's per capita disposable income is around 78,000 yuan (NZ \$17,333) in 2021, while Guizhou's is around 24,000 yuan (NZ \$5,333). Going back to her hometown with her husband meant they might not be able to find a job or a job that paid too little to support their family. Although China is trying to narrow the gap between rich and poor, the basic urban-rural dual system makes this difficult.

If Fang wants to bring her daughter to Shanghai for compulsory education, she needs to meet the admission requirements. However, Fang's daughter may not be eligible for public school, though the admission criteria for 2021 are already looser than before. According to the regulations of the Shanghai government, the admission requirements for schools in 2021 are as follows:

1. School-age children should have a valid Shanghai Residence Permit or Residence Registration Certificate.
2. One parent of the school-age child has a valid Shanghai Residence Permit.

Although the policy only has two rules, Shanghai's schools will also refer to their parents' residence permit score as an additional criterion. If parents' score reaches 120 points, children can register for public schools, otherwise, they will probably have to go to a private school.

On April 25, 2016, the Shanghai Municipality issued several "Opinions to

Shanghai Municipal People's Government on Further Promoting the Reform of Shanghai's Household Registration System", guaranteeing that the permanent population of Shanghai will not exceed 25 million by 2020. Different public services will be provided to residents according to different points. According to the policy, citizens who have registered for residence in Shanghai for at least half a year and meet one of the requirements of legal and stable employment, legal and stable residence and continuous study in Shanghai can apply for residence permits. Table 4 shows the basic score of residence permits. There are also some extra points (such as venture capital and government recognition) and some minus points (such as criminal offences) that are not taken into account because this analysis wants to consider whether migrant workers meet the minimum requirements.

**Table 4** *Basic Score of Shanghai Residence Permit*

Age	
The maximum score is 30	Holders aged between 56 and 60 will get 5 points; One year younger, 2 more points
Education background	
The maximum score is 110	Junior college (higher vocational) education, 50 points
	Undergraduate, 60 points
	Undergraduate with bachelor's degree, 90 points
	Master's degree, 100 points
	A doctoral degree, 110 points
Professional technical Certificate	
The maximum score is 140	Skills National Vocational qualification Level 5, 15 points
	Skills National Vocational qualification Level 4, 30 points
	Skills National Vocational qualification Level 3, 60 points
	Skills National Vocational qualification Level 2, 100 points
	Skills National Vocational qualification Level 1, 140 points

According to Fang's actual situation, she has worked in Shanghai for many years and has a stable job and income, so she could qualify for the Shanghai residence permit, but this does not mean that her child is eligible to enrol in kindergarten. Fang only has a junior high school education and as a beautician in Shanghai, she does not have the knowledge of relevant professional skills. This means that, in terms of basic scores, she got zero for her educational background and professional skills, and only 30 for her age. The 120 points of residence permit will keep them out of public schools. However, private schools are not suitable for her either. Private schools in Shanghai set their tuition fees, ranging from 3,000 to 20,000 yuan per month (NZ \$ 667-4,445), which does not include meals, activities, clothes and so on. Even going to a minimum-fee private school was a heavy financial pressure for Fang.

If Fang wants her child to go to a public school, what criteria does she need to meet? The first is the Shanghai residence permit score of 120 points and that is not all. In addition, due to the limited number of places in the public kindergarten, after meeting the registration conditions, there is also the order of admission conditions:

1. Local household registration in this district + real estate; Local household registration in the city but not in this district + real estate.
2. Local household registration not in the city + Shanghai Residence Permit score 120 points + real estate.
3. Local household registration in this district + lease contract.
4. Local household registration in the city but not in this district + lease contract.
5. Non-resident registration + lease contract.

It is worth noting that the Shanghai residence permit is not a Shanghai household registration, that is to say, if parents and children only have a Shanghai residence permit, they are at the bottom of the list and they are easily excluded from public schools. Even though the policy requirement for kindergarten only has two rules,

some additional conditions have been laid down. The entry order also reflects the unfair treatment of migrant workers who do not have enough income to afford to buy a house in Shanghai (the average price is 51,000 square metres, equivalent to NZ \$11,000) and their points are not enough to register for a Shanghai hukou.

If Fang wants her daughter to come to Shanghai with her, her daughter's admission to the school must be the first consideration. However, according to our analysis, the hukou system has become the main obstacle. Even if her daughter can enrol in the compulsory stage, according to the policy, only when the score reaches 120 points can she take the high school entrance examination or college entrance examination in Shanghai. Therefore, her daughter would either have to leave her hometown from the very beginning or go back to Guizhou to continue her high school education after she graduated from junior high school in Shanghai because she could not take the entrance examination in Shanghai.

Fang's story illustrates the binding and add-on relationship between household registration and educational welfare, which creates inequality in education. According to China's latest revision of the compulsory Education Law, chapter 12 of the second provision: local people's governments at all levels should ensure that school-age children and adolescents in the domicile of the school nearby qualify for enrolment. Therefore, China's compulsory education is based on the household registration system of the compulsory education system. Although the relevant policies issued throughout the country have eased the conditions for migrant children to enter school, the problem is still serious, especially in China's densely populated megacities with large numbers of migrants.

From the perspective of the top-level design of the household registration system reform, the reduction of the household registration conditions is implemented in a gradient manner according to the size of the city. According to the National New Urbanization Plan (2014-2020), the population size of megacities with an urban

population of 5 million or more should be strictly controlled. That is to say, the larger the size of the city, the higher the requirements for household registration for legal and stable residence, employment and social security payment period. As a result, some megacities, which most need to eliminate discrimination in the provision of public service for non-registered populations, are confused in their efforts.

Furthermore, the local government has a certain gap with the central government in household registration policy reform in the path and goal of household registration policy reform. Some megacities like Shanghai with higher household registration welfare still pay more attention to the educational background, vocational skills and other conditions of the household registration population. For example, talents with master's degrees could be given 90 points but for migrant workers with lower education, the points are 0. This means that, in terms of lowering the conditions of settling down hukou, local governments prefer talents with higher human capital or technical ability to promote urban economic development. However, many migrant workers with low education are not welcomed by the local government, nor do they have preferential conditions to encourage migrant workers to settle down.

In general, household registration hinders LBCs because they cannot easily migrate with their parents. In the final analysis, too many urban benefits are attached to household registration, including social security, education, housing and other social welfare provisions. Local governments allocate social resources and services based on the household registration system and points rating, which creates inequality.

#### ***4.4.3 Conclusion: What “problem” does the 2016 Opinions address?***

The review of the historical policies on LBC reflects the government's view that family separation is the root cause of LBC's problems. In other words, the presupposition of these policies seems to be that the LBC problem arises from the lack of a complete family structure and despite there being some recognition of the known impacts of unmet needs, The 2016 Opinions do not seem to have shifted too

far from the original. The first paragraph of The 2016 Opinions briefly described the government's perceptions of the source of the LBC problem:

- Rural labour force ..., out of the home, ..., resulting in a large number of rural left-behind children.
- Rural labour force ... but leads to long-term separation of some children from their parents, lack of family love and effective supervision, mental health problems and even extreme behaviours, accidental injuries and even illegal infringement. These problems seriously affect children's healthy growth and social harmony and stability (The Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas 2016).

After sorting out the policy structure, the policymakers seem to attribute primarily the psychological and behavioural problems and underlying injustices of LBC to the separation of parents and children – namely family factors. It seems to suggest that as soon as parents return to their children, their psychological and behavioural problems can be resolved, and the underlying inequities are ameliorated. For example, when speaking to reporters at the 2018 National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Liu Limin, the former vice-minister of Education noted that the biggest problem LBCs face is a lack of parent's "affection" and "care"<sup>18</sup>. Earlier in 2017, Tie Feiyan, a deputy to the National People's Congress, made a similar point when telling reporters about her research on LBC. She thinks the biggest problem for these children is their lack of "family ties" and their desire for love and warmth<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, many studies confirm that being left behind and separated from parents can have a significant impact on the development of children (Goodburn, 2020; Smith et al., 2004; Xu & Xie, 2015; Ye & Pan, 2011). Thus, there is no doubt that family separation is the root cause of LBC's problems.

Furthermore, as mentioned in section 4.3.1, The 2016 Opinions ignore structural

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/10/c\\_137029034.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/10/c_137029034.htm)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2017/03-03/8164146.shtml>

constraints, namely the hukou system. The hukou system, based on an authoritarian citizenship system, is the state's approach toward labour management and control, which could be interpreted as authoritarianism (Gu, 2021). Although migrant workers may be long-term urban residents, the hukou system still excludes limits their social and economic rights in host cities. The urban development strategy of taking advantage of the supply of cheap migrant workers while limiting their appeal in cities is called "incomplete urbanization" (Chan, 2010). Through actions and policies carried out by the repressive state apparatus like local police and state bureaucracies, this system legitimises the institutionalised denial of the civil and social rights of rural migrants (Gu, 2021). This "low liberal and low welfare model" (Qin, 2008) promote China's cost-effective trajectory of "incomplete urbanization" in terms of public supply (Chan, 2010). However, this constitutes the political-economic condition for the rural migrants' families to cope with the strategy of splitting households – they de--specialised and re-spatialise their family's productive and reproductive activities (Gu, 2021), which leads to the emergence of a large number of family separations in rural areas. On the whole, the government acknowledges that family separation is the cause of many problems that hinder the development of LBC, but the policy does not include a deeper analysis of what causes family separation. This can be seen as the government's evasion.

Shuai Shuai's story shows that Care and Protection System in The 2016 Opinions can only mitigate the harm LBCs experience. It makes very little contribution to the fundamental reduction of the number of such children due to examples such as Shuai Shuai's parents not only not going back to their home town but also not taking Shuai Shuai to the city where they work. On the other hand, Fang's story shows how the hukou policy became the policy of family separation through The 2016 Opinions mentioned that local governments should encourage migrant workers to settle in cities. Under the existing governance system, the next generation of LBCs will still be left behind (Xu, 2020). This means that if the hukou system is not changed, LBC will continue to appear, generation after generation.

## Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion

My interest in LBC stems from my childhood experience of being left behind by my migrant parents. I lived with my grandparents from the age of 8 until I graduated from college and could only get together with my parents for a few days during the Spring Festival. During my school years, only some of my teachers, as my only outside support, gave me extra help and concern in the classroom. After I became a postgraduate student, I came into contact with the term “vulnerable groups”, which includes LBC. When exploring the research topic, I learned that the Chinese government had issued relevant policies and built a Care and Protection System to support LBCs in rural areas. Compared to my childhood, this is a new development. These experiences have prompted me to research what this policy considers the problems of left-behind children to be, and what the policy means for LBC.

In 2016, The Chinese government issued “The Opinions of The State Council on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas” (The 2016 Opinions), which aims to establish a Care and Protection System for LBC in rural areas, safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of these children, and enhance the awareness of the whole society to care for and protect children, so that children could grow up in a better and safer environment and reduce the negative impacts of the phenomenon of LBC. My thesis has aimed to answer the following two research questions:

1. What’s the problem of left-behind children represented to be in The 2016 Opinions?
2. Can The 2016 Opinions address the problem of left-behind children?

This chapter begins by tackling Research Question 1 and an analysis of what the problem of LBC is and how the Chinese government frames the problem of LBC. Then, the root causes of LBC’s problems are discussed. In order to answer Research Question 2, I discuss the policy support and barriers to addressing the problem of

LBC and the hukou system that is ignored by the policy. In the final section, some policy recommendations are proposed to alleviate the difficulties faced by LBCs at the present stage, reduce the number of LBCs and, fundamentally eliminate the LBC phenomenon.

### **5.1 What's the Problem of LBC Represented to be in The 2016 Opinions?**

This section addresses Research Question 1: What's the problem of LBC represented to be in The 2016 Opinions? To answer this question, I discuss how the Chinese government frames the problem of LBC. Then, the family separation as the root cause of LBC's problems and a further reason for the neglect, hukou policies, are discussed.

Through a historical analysis of policies for left-behind children, the thesis found that the problems of LBC mainly fall into two categories. The first category is that problems belong to LBCs themselves, such as mental health problems and bad behaviours. The second category is the negative consequences of the immediate social environment and objective conditions on LBC, such as poverty, unequal education, lack of affection and safety problems. Both categories of problems are described by the policy as LBC problems.

The most fundamental characteristic of LBCs is that they are left behind in the rural areas by their migrant parents, so family separation is their most basic problem. When historical policies introduce the background information of LBC, the most common sentence is: *Due to long-term separation from their parents, left-behind children usually have ... problems and are likely suffer from...* This seems to mean that the government has combined the various forms of problems that LBC present with the label of "left-behind" children and formed a logical, causal link. In other words, the government believes that family separation is the root cause of LBC's problems, and the presupposition of The 2016 Opinions seems to be that the children's problems arise from the lack of a complete family structure. Additionally, many studies confirm that being left behind and separated from parents can have a significant impact on the

development of LBC (Goodburn, 2020; Smith et al., 2004; Xu & Xie, 2015; Ye & Pan, 2011). Thus, this causal link is valid to a certain extent, but it can only explain the first type of problem of LBCs themselves (i.e., their mental health problems and bad behaviours) and cannot explain the second type of problem of these children which are caused by objective factors, such as poverty.

Authoritarianism can provide a deeper understanding of this causal logic link but the government did not explore this further. Authoritarianism in this thesis refers to the hukou system which is based on an authoritarian citizenship system, and is the state's approach toward labour management and control (Gu, 2021). The hukou system legitimises the institutionalised denial of the civil and social rights of rural migrants through actions and policies carried out by the repressive state apparatus like local police and state bureaucracies (Gu, 2021). The cities take advantage of and capitalize on, cheap rural migrant labourers while simultaneously limiting their claims to rights in cities by denying them a local hukou. This constitutes the political-economic condition that forces the rural migrants' families to cope by using the strategy of splitting up the household. This coping strategy de-spatialises and re-spatialises their family's productive and reproductive activities (Gu, 2021) and leads to the emergence of a large number of family separations in rural areas. That is to say, structural constraints posed by the authoritarian citizenship system, namely the hukou system, have led to family separation in rural areas.

However, in The 2016 Opinions, the problem of LBC is only represented as being premised on an incomplete family structure. The government did not explore further to uncover the root causes. This thesis argues that authoritarianism, as exemplified in the household registration system, is the cause of family separation.

## **5.2 Can The 2016 Opinions Address the Problem of LBC?**

Overall, The 2016 Opinions have been improved than before. Compared with the previous policies, the policy on LBC started with provisions only in the field of

education but now it covers education, family, psychology and safety fields. In addition, The 2016 Opinions supplemented more support and detailed resolutions for the Care and Protection System for LBCs in rural areas. However, these initiatives, including the Care and Protection System, focus on helping LBCs by treating the symptoms rather than addressing the root causes of the problem. They can only alleviate the current plight of LBC but cannot fundamentally resolve the phenomenon of LBC.

Despite the fact that authoritarianism, epitomised in the household registration system, has shaped the life foundations of migrant workers and made family separation the normal life for LBCs in rural areas, the neoliberal Chinese welfare system still requires migrant families to be the main supporters of the welfare of LBC. On the one hand, The 2016 Opinions mainly focus on four themes to support these children. First, the family of LBC is the primary subject of responsibility; second, the policies focus on building up home-school partnerships and setting up a relayed curriculum; third, they call on the whole society to care for LBC; and fourth, building a harmonious society is one of the tasks of the government. Furthermore, the Care and Protection System could take one-to-one practical measures to help LBC.

Additionally, despite The 2016 Opinions acknowledging that the well-being of LBCs is their right and that the state is obligated to LBCs, rather than strengthening the welfare system and removing the restrictions of the hukou system, the government used charity discourses to appeal to social forces to support left-behind children and in the process, have presented LBC as “special” and needy. The basic human rights of LBC, including equal access to education and equal access to social welfare, are transformed into *additional donations* by the charity discourse, under which some basic human rights of LBC are not protected in The 2016 Opinions. When the discourse based on human rights is applied to policies, the relevant rights of LBC can be recognised and protected on the legal level.

Although the discourse of a harmonious society may make the government seem committed to the welfare of rural families and their LBC, it is in fact, an effort by the government to smooth over the rising dissent and social conflicts that arise with widening social disparities and inequalities. Media attention regarding LBCs is also mostly limited to reporting and discussing symptoms, such as their poor living conditions, bullying on campus, and lack of supervision, rather than the root causes of these symptoms. The government also pays more attention to picking low-lying fruits to address the problem of LBCs like building a Care and Protection System to provide extra help and support to LBCs who have shown symptoms, which is an easier task than tackling the restrictions inherent in the hukou system because it reveals disparities and causes disharmony. The policy seems to be the right remedy, but in fact, these only alleviate the symptoms; they do not work on the root causes.

### **5.3 Conclusion and Looking Forward**

This section discusses the responsibility of the government and the priorities for future policy development for LBC in a proactive and forward-looking manner.

First, reflection on the avoidance of responsibility is needed. The government should take responsibility for addressing the problem of LBC, instead of putting pressure on migrant families or individuals. The government should pay attention to the obstacles within the hukou system to migrant families and LBCs. Furthermore, the concept of harmony should not be used as a tool to legitimise social and economic inequalities. Second, it is suggested that policymakers should consider the influence of neoliberal ideology and reduce the use of charity and social harmony discourses, more discourses around human rights and equality could be used in future policy.

Third, the development direction of future policy suggests strengthening the evaluation function of policy and promoting the establishment of a specific LBC protection law. At present, the authority and binding force of China's left-behind children policy are insufficient, because the title of the policy shows that it is a

guiding form of “opinion” advocacy, which can only be an administrative call and requirement at the government level. For example, when the household registration requirements of supercities are established, they still choose not to consider LBCs and their families. If the government is concerned with LBC, the authority of the protection work of LBC will increase, and the main responsibility of each executive body will be strengthened in order to further address the social problems of LBC. Moreover, an increase in stipulation clauses in the implementation of the LBC policy will enhance the evaluation standard function of this policy. Standardised regulations could make policies concerning left-behind children better implemented.

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