

REPRESENTATIONS OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN IN CHINESE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE NEWS MEDIA: A CORPUS-ASSISTED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Due to China's urbanisation and rapid development in the last forty years since its reform and opening policy, many people have migrated from rural to urban areas. Unfortunately, one of the by-products of this process is a phenomenon known in English as Left-behind children (in Chinese, 留守儿童 or *liúshǒuértóng*). Essentially, these are children under 18 who have stayed in their rural homes and were raised by their grandparents or other relatives when one or both of their parents migrate to urban areas for economic activities for half a year or longer (Cheng & Sun, 2015). Limited research has been conducted on the linguistic representations of left-behind children and how this particular group is presented to international society. To fill this gap, the present study applies a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach, specifically collocational network analysis and keyword analysis, to examine how the group of left-behind children is represented in Chinese English-language news media and also contributes to the growing literature on how Chinese minority groups are represented to the outside world.

The findings reveal that these media describe the Chinese government's efforts in handling the left-behind children problem but overlook the most critical reason that causes it: the strict Chinese Household Register or, in Chinese: *hùkǒu* (户口) system.

Keywords: Left-Behind Children; corpus-assisted discourse study; discourse analysis; media discourse; Chinese English-language news media

1. INTRODUCTION

For the last forty years, especially after implementing its reform and opening-up policy, China has witnessed rapid economic and social development; however, these have been accompanied by increasing social tensions due to the disparity between the rich and the poor. The three dimensions of rural problems (in Chinese: *sānnóngwèntí* or 三农问题)- issues concerning agriculture, rural areas, and peasantry have been heated topics among scholars and government (Wen, 2001). Among these rural problems, a unique social group is the left-behind children; as children are considered the key to China's future development, this group has attracted increasing academic attention (Khalid et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2022).

The term Left-behind Children (in Chinese: *liúshǒuértóng* or 留守儿童) refers to children who are 'raised in their home countries or their countries of habitual residence and have been left behind by adult migrants responsible for them' (UNICEF, 2018, p. 1) and a recent United Nations Children's Fund working paper identified the issue of left-behind children as worldwide (UNICEF, 2020).

However, due to the sheer size of the problem, China has frequently been highlighted in studies and subsequent media on the phenomenon (Du et al., 2023; Liang et al., 2017; S. Wang, 2023; Yan et al., 2022). UNICEF's annual reports from 2015 to 2020 used the same figure of 69 million left-behind children in China. However, this includes children in a wide variety of circumstances (e.g., being raised by a single parent, having both parents gone and being raised by grandparents, being left entirely on their own, being located in rural or urban centres, and being of varying ages) (Shen et al., 2009; L. Wang et al., 2015).

The problem of left-behind children is further complicated in China by several social and political norms, such as the widespread practice of multi-generational households, in which retired grandparents take care of their grandchildren even when the parents work nearby, a massive wave of rural-to-urban migration during the country's recent rapid development, and a political shift from the one-child policy to the promotion of multi-child families (Tong et al., 2019). Most significantly, the Chinese system that primarily fuels the issue of left-behind children is the Household Register, or in Chinese: *hùkǒu* (户口) (F. Wang et al., 2020). Rural migrant laborers are allowed to work in large cities under this strict social structure, but their social welfare and benefits are not the same as those of city residents. As a result, a split-family strategy has been adopted by millions of Chinese migrant workers, who divide their time between family and work-related activities (Gu, 2021).

The exact number of left-behind children and how they are classified are debatable in China, but the sheer volume of those affected is undeniable, and the risk to this especially vulnerable group is high (Mu & Hu, 2016). Studies on left-behind children typically emphasises the hukou and its intersection with the educational system (Morooka & Liang, 2009; Ren et al., 2020). At the same time, they also focus on the very real plight of migrant workers within China and their cramped housing that is still dependent on precarious work stability to illustrate left-behind children in China are of great concern to the outside world (Gleiss, 2016; Liu & Leung, 2021). Left-behind children are essentially depicted as the result of the governments' mechanisms failing to keep up with the country's rapid development, creating national prosperity and progress on the shoulders of those least equipped to shoulder that duty (Gu, 2021; Ye & Lu, 2011).

Most importantly, two tragedies of left-behind children in Guizhou, a largely rural province in China, have drawn nationwide attention to the problem of left-behind children in Chinese rural areas (Qi & Wu, 2020). In November 2012, in Bijie, Guizhou, five left-behind boys who were only around ten years old died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Their parents had worked in cities for a long time, and the five boys burned charcoal to seek warmth in a dumpster.

Also, in Bijie, three years later, four siblings aged between 5 and 13 and are also left behind by their parents committed suicide by drinking pesticides in their homes. These incidents caused broad concern in society and thus warranted focus from the Chinese central government. Gu (2021, p. 12) argues that many reasons are contributing to the tragedies of left-behind children in Bijie, such as 'lack of care support among kin or through public assistance, migrant labour as the main livelihoods in poor areas, and the absence of community and grassroots resources for child protection.' Nevertheless, domestic Chinese-language media did not hesitate to portray these left-behind childrens' tragedies as parental neglect and overlooked government responsibilities to deal with the problem of left-behind children (Gu, 2021).

The effect of parental migration on left-behind children has become a heated topic in academic research, particularly in psychological and sociological research (Chang et al., 2011; He et al., 2012; Robson et al., 2008; X. Sun et al., 2015). Research findings show that left-behind children

more easily encounter emotional, psychological, and social problems (H. Hu et al., 2014; S. Su et al., 2013). Left-behind children tended to suffer more from loneliness and depression than other children (He et al., 2012; S. Su et al., 2013). In addition to psychological problems, these children typically have more behavioural issues, such as skipping class, vandalism, stealing, and even dropping out of school, since their parents are not with them on a daily basis and their elderly caretakers are often unaware of their daily habits (Xu, 2016).

Limited research has studied the media representation of left-behind children in Chinese news media. Gu (2021) applied content analysis to examine how left-behind children are represented in Chinese-language media and governmental discourses. The findings show that, on the one hand, the Chinese government expresses concern over this particular group since it has implications for the country's future; on the other hand, governmental discourse blames the problem of left-behind children on the family instead of the socioeconomic circumstances and governmental policies which have led to the phenomenon. Xu (2016) analysed media discourse on the relationships between communication technology and left-behind children in China and found that the representations of mobile phones among Chinese migrant families lie on different dimensions, such as a tool to connect family members and a problem solver. Overall, little linguistic research has been done on the representation of left-behind children in media discourse and most of which applies qualitative discourse analysis to examine the representations of the group.

To fill this gap, the present study combines the qualitative method of Discourse Analysis (hereafter DA) with a quantitative research tool, Corpus Linguistics, to reveal how the group of left-behind children is represented in Chinese English-language news media. Given that both domestic English speakers and foreign non-Chinese English speakers make up the Chinese English-language news media's target audience, examining how left-behind children are depicted in those outlets can help us understand how this particular social group in China is portrayed to a global audience (Yu, 2019). In addition, Zhao (2013) argues that the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government oversee, review, and censor all Chinese news outlets, including those published in Chinese and English. For instance, China Daily, the largest newspaper in China that publishes in English, is well cognizant of its influence and function: 'with a combined print, online and mobile readership of more than 350 million, [China Daily] serves a vital role in telling the world about China, providing valuable insight into the world's second-largest economy. Consequently, it is quoted more often by overseas media than any other Chinese publication.' (China Daily, 2023).

However, there is no doubt which perspective the news outlet is oriented towards, given that the top right-hand corner of the home page and many of the sub-pages of China Daily are a link directly to "Xi's Moments," which is a page dedicated to news, videos, opinions, infographics, speeches, photographs, and books of Chinese President Xi Jinping (<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/xismoments>). In other words, the viewpoint presented by these Chinese English-language media is, at the very least, consistent with that of the Chinese government. Therefore, Chinese English-language publications like China Daily serve as a direct line to the President's voice. As a result, we argue that it would be crucial to look at how China's English-language media had discursively framed the discussion of left-behind children, perhaps as a kind of counter-narrative to academic research and non-governmental organisation media that had targeted the nation as the largest centre for left-behind Children. Overall, how left-behind children are portrayed in Chinese English-language media is framed in relation to the social phenomenon in contemporary China and how that is being communicated to a global audience.

2. CHINESE HUKOU SYSTEM

As mentioned in the previous section, China has experienced massive industrialisation in the past forty years, which has caused a massive internal migration from rural areas to urban areas for jobs and better salaries (S. Zhou & Cheung, 2017). The term "migrant workers" here refers to people who hold a hukou (Household Registration) in a rural area but work in an urban one (Thelle, 2010). China has employed this hukou system to give each citizen a household registration identity based on birthplace since 1958 (Chan, 2009). Further, the local government distinguishes every citizen by assigning them either an agricultural or non-agricultural hukou identity (Wing Chan & Buckingham, 2008), giving different regions different privileges, social benefits, and resource access (Kuang & Liu, 2012). Migrant workers are recognised as Chinese citizens; however, they are not treated equally to local urban residents since they do not hold a hukou in their work city. Among these unequal treatments, the major problem which has led to the existence of left-behind children is the educational rights policy in Chinese urban areas (Morooka & Liang, 2009). The admittance of migrant workers' children to Chinese urban public schools has been prohibited since parents must show their local urban hukou to access public schools. In addition, migrant workers are not eligible to apply for an urban hukou since a large city such as Beijing or Shanghai tends to develop a high entry barrier to its hukou based on capital and talent, essentially barring those who are not already wealthy or educated (L. Zhang & Tao, 2012). Since all children in China legally need to attend school, and migrant workers' children have been excluded from the urban educational system, most rural-to-urban migrant workers have no choice but to leave their children behind.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework in the present study combines corpus linguistics and discourse analysis, which is often referred to as "corpus-assisted discourse analysis" or "CADS" (Partington, 2010). Studies on CADS follow the tradition of Stubbs (1996) and Mautner (2009) and were recently developed by Paul Baker and Lancaster University based research groups (Baker, 2006, 2014; Baker et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2013; Baker & Levon, 2015). The CADS approach has been gaining increasing attention over the past ten years (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019).

CADS draws on different methodological traditions and theoretical assumptions about language analysis. Therefore, it is often referred to as an open-minded methodology (Taylor & Del Fante, 2020) since it can meet both the needs of qualitative and quantitative approaches in research practice. From the perspective of corpus linguistics, it can help researchers examine a large amount of data and provide a broader perspective. This perspective is particularly important when dealing with a pervasive discourse such as that of the new media; for example, Fairclough (1989, p. 54) explains that a 'single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader, and so forth.' From the discourse analysis perspective, CADS can provide theoretical and methodological contributions. Theoretically, it can help us understand how language works in society and the dialectical relationship between language and society. Methodologically speaking, discourse analysis can allow us to explain linguistic patterns in real language use. Therefore, the present study adopts CADS to examine the linguistic patterns and frequently occurring topics surrounding left-behind children in Chinese English news media.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study contributes to understanding media representations of left-behind children in Chinese English-language news media and examines how the group of left-behind children is contextualised within China's social-cultural context, including its neoliberal-authoritarian governance (C. Zhang, 2018). Therefore, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How is the group of **left-behind children** linguistically represented in Chinese English-language news media?
2. What are the most frequently mentioned topics about **left-behind children** in Chinese English-language news media?

5. DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

Factiva Archive news database was employed to build an English corpus of media representations of left-behind children between 2001 and 2021. 2001 was chosen because the first English-Language news reports on left-behind children appeared on 30th April 2001 in China Daily. The phrase left-behind children were used to search the database. Our data includes 689 articles comprising 564,642-word tokens. These 689 news reports are mainly from China Daily, Shanghai Daily, and Global Times, all originally published in English by Chinese reporters. In addition, all articles were checked manually during the data collection process to ensure they were relevant to the topic. A reference corpus was also needed for comparison to get a list of keywords, so we compiled a General Chinese English News Corpus (GCENC). The data for GCENC was retrieved without a specific news topic, and in this case, the phrase left-behind children was excluded from the search query to provide a clear potential contrast; the GCENC is eleven times larger than the left-behind children corpus and comprises 6,493,383-word tokens.

Despite the comprehensive nature of the dataset, some limitations should be noted. First, the corpus is limited to state-affiliated English-language media, which may influence the representation of left-behind children in ways that align with government narratives. Independent or foreign media sources were not included, which could have provided alternative perspectives. Second, the keyword search method, while effective, may have excluded relevant discussions of left-behind children that did not explicitly use the term. Additionally, the manual checking process, although thorough, is subject to human judgment, which might introduce a degree of subjectivity. Finally, while the reference corpus (GCENC) provides a useful contrast, its composition lacks topic specificity, which may affect the precision of the keyword analysis. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings, particularly in discussions of media discourse and generalizability beyond state-affiliated English news sources.

Once the corpora were compiled, we used the corpus analytical tool #Lancsbox (Brezina et al., 2018) to examine the data. First, we investigated collocates and formed a collocational network by applying the GraphColl function. Next, we compared the left-behind children corpus with GCENC. Keyword analysis served to identify the corpus's focus, as it can 'direct the researchers to important concepts in texts that may highlight the existence of types of discourse or ideology' (Baker, 2004, p. 347). Although corpus tools can provide statistically significant information from many texts, they require human interpretation to interpret the facts found through discourses and respond to the research questions.

To that end, a list of keywords was produced by comparing the reference corpus via LancsBox for an overall picture of the corpus. After determining the keyword list, the top 50 keywords in the left-behind children corpus were classified into different sub semantic categories using a USAS semantic tagger available online (<http://ucrel-api.lancaster.ac.uk/usas/tagger.html>). Besides, the results showed that a keyword might be classified into multiple sub-semantic categories because these keywords' contexts were not considered. We then uploaded the left-behind children corpus to the Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009) to determine which semantic categories these keywords belong based on the occurrence of each keyword in that sub-semantic category. At last, we adopted the log-likelihood (LL) score and keyness to cross-reference, aiming to decide the relative strength of each semantic category. The term keyness describes specific terms that appear more frequently in a focus

corpus than in a reference corpus in a text, which can help understand the text's aboutness. The log-likelihood (LL) values are used to rank semantic categories. We then combine these two measurements to determine the relative strength of each semantic grouping.

6. FINDINGS

Collocation Network Analysis

A collocational network visualises collocational relationships, using lines to indicate collocational word frequency. The collocational network for this study was generated through #Lancsbox through the GraphColl function. GraphColl identified the collocates of Left-behind children and the second-order collocates. In addition, the Mutual Information (MI) statistic was applied to identify significant collocates, as Durrant and Doherty (2010) argue that a collocation should have a six or above MI score to be considered significant. In addition, the minimum frequency of collocates follows Baker (2004), who argues that a minimum frequency of collocates is eight. Therefore, the present study set the MI score at six and the collocation frequency at eight.

Figure 1 shows the collocational network of left-behind children. As noted below, numerical tokens (e.g., 61, 58, 60) are the most frequent collocations, which indicates quantities attributed to left-behind children in China. Other collocations form and appear in a negative context to describe left-behind problems in contemporary China (e.g., orphans and problems)

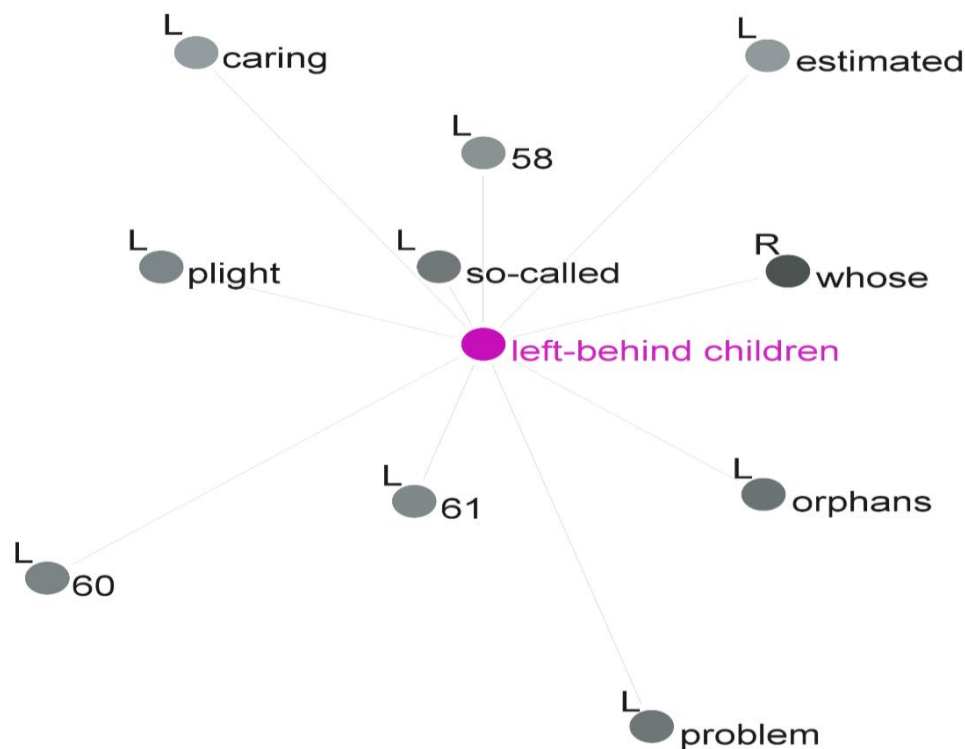


Figure 1 Collocational Network of Left-behind Children in Chinese English-language

News Corpus

According to a report published by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2019, p. 2), there are 69 million left-behind children in China. Numbers such as 58, 60, and 61 indicate the fluctuating quantities attributed to left-behind children in China over the 20

years of the data and are quantifiers in the millions. In addition, these numbers are much smaller than the report from UNICEF. For example:

- 1) According to All China's Women's Federation, China had about **61 million** left-behind children in 2016.
- 2) Data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs shows China has **60 million** such children in 2017.
- 3) **58 million** children in rural homes live under the care of their grandparents or relatives in 2020.

It can be found from the above three examples that the number of left-behind children experienced a decline between 2016 and 2020, dropping by almost three million. This reduction reflects the successful policies to reduce the number of left-behind children in China. Prior to 2016, the government did not take any action on this matter; in fact, it was not until 4th February 2016 that the Chinese government released the "Opinions of the State Council on strengthening care and protection of rural left-behind children" (hereafter "Opinions") (国务院关于加强农村留守儿童关爱保护工作的意见) (State Council of the PRC, 2016). This was the first time the Chinese government officially introduced left-behind children to the public and showed a policy response to address the problem (J. Wang, 2018). The approach was welcome, as it clarifies family, society, and the government's responsibilities for the left-behind children problem. Therefore, different governmental departments worked together to research and collect perspectives from other parts of society, leading to the "Opinions" being issued in February 2016, which enabled different measures to protect the rights of left-behind children. Therefore, we can see a decline in the number of left-behind children between 2016 and 2020 since the Chinese government started to take actions to deal with the left-behind children problem.

- 4) The fragility of family life worsens the **plight** of **left-behind children**.

The word **plight** collocates with left-behind children 22 times, emphasising the left-behind children's hardship. Example 4 asserts that the absence of family life exacerbates the tragedy of left-behind children. Migrant parents who leave their children in rural areas are often stereotyped as irresponsible parents who cannot fulfil their normative roles (Peng, 2018). As discussed earlier, several factors, such as the lack of support from public assistance and the absence of governmental regulations, contributed to the two tragedies in Guizhou (Murphy, 2020). However, the media framed the issue as a lack of parental negligence instead of contemporary China's social-economic situation (Gu, 2021). This discourse pattern risks oversimplifying the matter as one of individual or familial responsibility when much larger socioeconomic forces are at play.

This pattern of implicit blame is also seen in the following familial collocation:

- 5) Lacking care from parents, "**left-behind children**" are "**orphans** with parents".

It is striking that the token orphans collocate 37 times with left-behind children, considering that it is typically a term reserved for children whose parents are deceased, making the idea of "orphans with parents" a kind of oxymoronic criticism of those parents. Using it in this fashion thus constructs a particular implicit argument in the English-language news media: the parents are not merely absentee for socioeconomic reasons (though likely to provide financial support to their family) but wholly absent in all conceivable kinds of care. The left-behind children, like actual orphans, are victims here, and the parents are the cause of this victimisation because they are not fulfilling their social duty. In this way, the economic impetus for caregivers to seek out increased income in large cities as a wider phenomenon is absolved from blame, and the blame instead goes to parents who are missing in action, presumed dead.

When "caring" is collocated, as it is 11 times, it tends to indicate that professionals and not parents are the carers, as in the following:

- 6) Professional social workers to play a bigger role in **caring** for and protecting **"left-behind" children** in rural regions, or those whose parents work far away from their hometowns.
- 7) Professionals are becoming forces in **caring** for and protecting **left-behind children** in rural areas and are playing a positive role in helping the children develop.

This construction of "caring" corresponds to the governmental "Opinion" in 2016, in which the society, rural villagers' committees, social organisations, and professional social workers should take responsibility for offering care to the left-behind children. Ultimately, 34 collocations reveal that this is a "problem" in need of a solution, as in these examples:

- 8) Solving the **left-behind children problem** should be linked to the protection of migrant workers' rights and interests in urban areas.
- 9) The development of entrepreneurship in rural areas will not only help boost the local economy but will also foster a better solution to the **problem of left-behind children**.

Apart from the measures stated in the governmental documents, examples 8 and 9 propose that the solution to the left-behind children issue is to address the local economy in rural areas and how that forces migrant workers to work away from home, indicating that from this angle the problem is more significant than within the family itself. Therefore, entrepreneurship in the local area should be developed to help solve the problem of left-behind children since, in that way, there would be more work opportunities for left-behind children's parents.

Keyword Analysis

Table 1. Top 50 Keywords in Corpus

Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word
1	CHINA	18	WORKERS	35	CITY
2	RURAL	19	POVERTY	36	SERVICES
3	LEFT-BEHIND	20	CHINESE	37	CARE
4	CHILDREN	21	SCHOOLS	38	CULTURAL
5	STUDENTS	22	PUBLIC	39	PROJECT
6	AREAS	23	BEIJING	40	FAMILIES
7	PARENTS	24	LOCAL	41	IMPROVE
8	PROVINCE	25	VILLAGE	42	PROVIDE
9	DEVELOPMENT	26	HUMAN	43	ONLINE
10	EDUCATION	27	URBAN	44	EFFORTS
11	MILLION	28	PROGRAM	45	CENTRAL
12	RIGHTS	29	PROTECTION	46	ECONOMIC
13	YUAN	30	NATIONAL	47	ETHNIC
14	MIGRANT	31	COUNTY	48	UNIVERSITY
15	SOCIAL	32	TEACHERS	49	GRANDPARENTS

16	CITIES	33	PRIMARY	50	FOUNDATION
17	GOVERNMENT	34	SYSTEM		

After examining the direct collocates of left-behind children, we compared the left-behind children corpus with the reference corpus, aiming to obtain a group of keywords that are significantly different between the articles that focus on left-behind children and the general corpus. Table 1 shows the top 50 keywords that were obtained through the comparison. These 50 keywords are ranked by their keyness. After creating a keyword list, the top 50 keywords from the corpus of left-behind children were categorised into several sub-categories using the online USAS semantic tagger (<http://ucrel-api.lancaster.ac.uk/usas/tagger.html>). Furthermore, because the contexts of these phrases were not considered, the results demonstrated that a keyword might be categorised into multiple sub-semantic groups. Then, using the frequency of each keyword inside each sub-semantic category, we uploaded the corpus of left-behind children to the Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009) to determine which semantic categories these keywords belong to. The semantic categories in Table 2 are displayed alongside the associated keywords. Additionally, these 50 terms overlap and add to the picture of left-behind children in Chinese English-Language News media.

Table 2. Semantic Categories and their keywords

Semantic Categories	Keywords
General and abstract terms	development; project; improve; provide; foundation
Government and Public	government
Money and commerce in industry	yuan; poverty; economic; workers
Movement, location, travel, and transport	local; urban; national; system; central; province; city: cities; rural; areas; migrant; village; county
Numbers and measurement	million
Education	teachers; primary; university; students; schools; education; program
Social actors, states and processes	rights; social; public; human; protection; services; children; parents; families; ethnic; grandparents; cultural
Psychological actions, states and processes	efforts; care
Science and technology	online
Names and grammar	China; Chinese; Beijing; left-behind

Finally, we used the LL score and keyness to cross-reference to assess the relative strength of each semantic category. Keywords are those that, in a text, appear more frequently in a focus corpus than in a reference corpus and can help readers grasp the subject matter of the text. LL values are used to order semantic categories. Then, by adding these two measurements, the relative strength of each semantic category is determined. These ten semantic categories are ranked in Table 3.

Table 3 The Relative Strength of Ten Semantic categories

Rank	Semantic Categories	Keywords
1	Social actors, states and processes	rights; social; public; human; protection; services; children; parents; families; ethnic; grandparents; cultural
2	Names and grammar	China; Chinese; Beijing; left-behind
3	Movement, location, travel, and transport	local; urban; national; system; central; province; city; cities; rural; areas; migrant; village; county
4	Education	teachers; primary; university; students; schools; education; program
5	Money and commerce in industry	yuan; poverty; economic; workers
6	General and abstract terms	development; project; improve; provide; foundation
7	Psychological actions, states and processes	efforts; care
8	Numbers and measurement	million
9	Government and Public	government
10	Science and technology	online

Table 3 shows the relative strength of ten semantic categories and suggests how Chinese English-language news media prefer to frame the group of left-behind children. It can be seen that these news media prefer to focus on the social actors and processes which have strong connections with left-behind children. In addition, some characteristics of the problem of left-behind children have been highlighted in the movement, location travel, and transport category. The following sections will discuss the use of these semantic categories.

Based on Chinese law, regulations, and current situations in Chinese rural areas, the "Opinions" in 2016 proposed four lines of defence to assign the responsibilities and roles of left-behind children's families, governments, schools, and society to contribute to the care of left-behind children (State Council of the PRC, 2016). Different kinds of guidelines are suggested, and various regulations are implemented. Therefore "four lines of defence" of respect for those left-behind are constructed. The first line of defence is families. The "Opinion" highlights the responsibilities of parents of left-behind children, suggesting that they shall fulfill the children's primary guardianship. The first line has been reflected in the previous section. The second line of defence is the local government, which suggests that local government, especially county, town and village communities, shall perform the territorial responsibilities. The third line of defence is school, indicating that primary and secondary schools should take care of the left-behind children, especially from a schooling and guardianship perspective. The fourth line of defence includes different societal attitudes, such as residents' committees, social organisations, and professional social workers, suggesting these social forces shall offer care to the left-behind children.

The top one semantic category of these 50 keywords corresponds to the first and fourth line of defence which is family, since this semantic category consists of these tokens which describe family members, such as parents, families, and grandparents, and social forces, such as social, public and protection.

- 10) 80 percent of all its 1,500 students being 'left-behind' children- referring to youngsters in rural areas whose **parents** work in cities.
- 11) Most of them were **left-behind children** whose **parents** have migrated to big cities in search of higher pay, and most are look after by grandparents in their rural home.
- 12) His **grandparents**, who raised him, could only provide meals and wash his clothes.

Chinese rural-urban migration differs from the type of international migration in emerging nations such as Mexico (Ye & Lu, 2011). Split family formations, however, are thought to be a common aspect of migration. In China, when parents migrate, there are four different ways to care for the children who are left behind.: 1) children with one parent staying behind; 2) children moving with other relatives; 3) grandparents are with their grandchildren; 4) children living on their own. Children accompanied by one stay-at-home parent or by their grandparents are thought to be the two most typical varieties (Ye & Murray, 2005).

Along with parental migration, the disappearance of family cultivation is the most significant change. In rural Chinese communities, most grandparents argue that caring for children merely entails providing them with clothing and food, and some of these grandparents occasionally even spill their grandchildren. Grandparents' lack of concern for children's daily diets is also a result of their poor financial resources and the Chinese culture's conventional method of childcare (Ye & Lu, 2011). Grandparents may focus more on agricultural labour during the busy farming season rather than caring for their grandchildren. Ye and Lu (2011) also argue that during the farming season, more than 22 percent of children who are left behind cannot get their meals on time because their caregivers are too busy with farming duties. Therefore, left-behind children cannot be guaranteed their fundamental rights. At the same time, grandparents who choose to live out their lives in their later years are left to care for their grandchildren alone. These elderly adults must perform demanding farm work and childcare and be susceptible to illness. Additionally, they are unperturbed by their circumstances because they think that migration can assist their family financially. Examples 10 to 12 show that left-behind children are generally raised by their grandparents in rural areas. While these grandparents try to take care of these left-behind children, they are mainly concerned about their accommodations and often lack attention to their interests and psychological states. Therefore, the generation gap will lead to poor academic performance and incomplete personality development.

- 13) The local community would like to join hands with people from different walks of life in terms of **corporate social responsibility** and give a hand to those children in need.

The fourth line of defence in the governmental document is social forces which regulate social forces should create a caring environment for left-behind children. It is argued that social support is one of the most important factors associated with Children's psychological development (Shaobing Su et al., 2017). In other words, someone who feels loved, respected, and a part of a social network is said to have social support (Cobb, 1976). According to earlier research, children who are left behind suffer from a lack of social support, particularly emotional support, as compared to children who are not left behind (Luo et al., 2009). Social support, however, has been asserted to significantly impact the psychological behaviour of left-behind children (X. Hu et al., 2008). X. Hu et al. (2008) also argue that when their parents are away, the social support of friends, neighbours, teachers, and other social communities is crucial for the psychological development of children who are left behind. As a result, Chinese English-language news outlets emphasise the significance of social power when discussing help for children who are left behind. The word social is the most significantly important keyword in this category. The Span in the GraphColl Function was also set at L1 and R1 to examine the direct collocations of the term social. The most significant

linguistic pattern among all collocations is corporate social responsibility, which suggests that the Chinese government calls on the whole society to protect the rights of left-behind children, as indicated in Example 13.

The second line of defence is the government which corresponds to the semantic category of government and public. In this category, Chinese English-language news media mainly describe different levels of government's support towards the group of left-behind children.

- 14) The Chinese **central government** has invested **61.8 billion yuan (\$10.1 billion)** improving schoolhouses and educational facilities in rural areas over the past four years.
- 15) Care services for "left-behind" youths are now operational in provinces including Anhui, Sichuan, and Jiangxi, while the Gansu **provincial government** has invested **20 million yuan** this year to build 1,000 children's homes.
- 16) The **local government** promises to spend **60 million yuan** each year to help left-behind children whose parents work far away from home.

Examples 11-13 show that different levels of the Chinese government (e.g., central; provincial; local) have invested a large amount of money in improving the economic conditions of left-behind children, which corresponds to the second line of defence that regulates government should improve and supervise the issue of left-behind children. Meanwhile, Chinese English-language news media present a positive image of the Chinese government, which is putting efforts into handling the left-behind children problem.

The third line of defence is school, indicating that primary and secondary schools should take care of the left-behind children, especially from a schooling and guardianship perspective, which corresponds to the semantic category of Education.

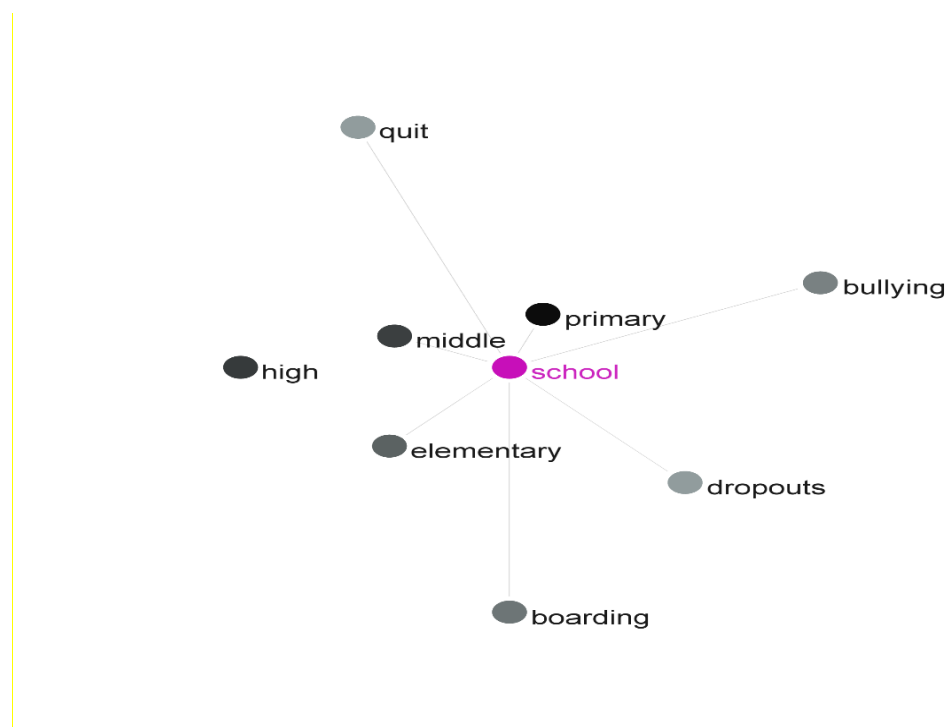


Figure 2 Collocational Network of School in Chinese English-language News Corpus

According to the "Opinions," the third line of defence is school. We apply the GraphColl function in #LancsBox to examine the direct collocations of school. Different from generating the collocations of left-behind children, which set the Span at five left and five right, the Span in the

GraphColl was set at one left and one right since we would like to see words that directly co-exist with the school. Then the collocational network of the school is presented in figure 2. The colour of words like primary, middle and high are much darker than other collocated words, suggesting that they are more frequently collocated with the school. This corresponds to descriptions of the third line of defence that primary and secondary school should play a direct role in caring for the left-behind children. Children spend most of their time in school. Therefore, schools are necessary to offer care and support to left-behind children.

It can be concluded from the above three semantic categories that Chinese English-language news media report the left-behind are based on the government's official documents, which indicates that the viewpoints of Chinese publications are consistent with that of the Chinese government. The following sections will discuss other semantic categories to see how Chinese English-language newspapers frame left-behind children.

Semantic categories of movement, location, travel, transport, and money and commerce in the industry discuss some key terms surrounding the problem of left-behind children. The phrase migrant workers is discussed in the following sections since it strongly connects with left-behind children.

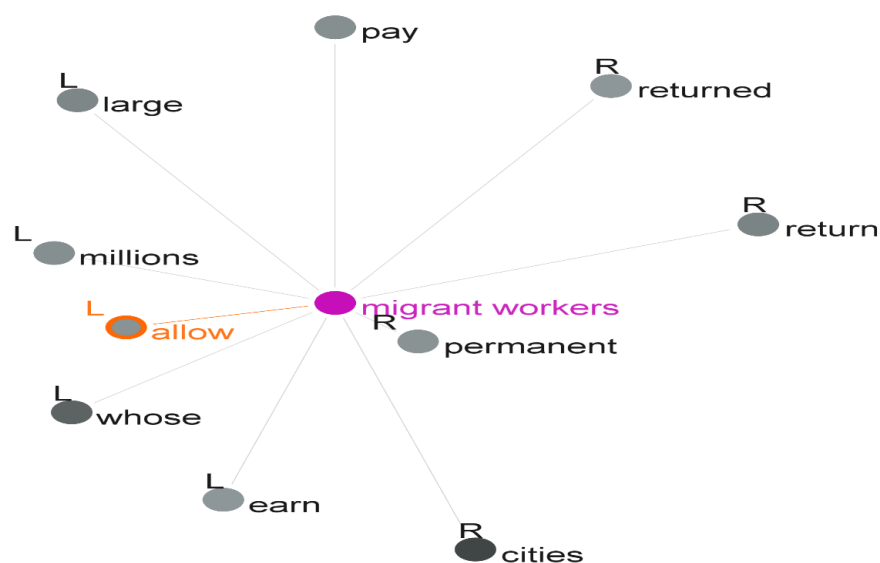


Figure 3 Collocational Network of Migrant Workers in Chinese English-Language Newspaper Corpus

- 17) "Only when city authorities **allow migrant workers** to become permanent urban residents and enjoy all social welfare services can the problems of left-behind children be truly solved", a professor said.
- 18) Few **migrant workers** are granted hukou, or permanent resident status, in the cities in which they work, which means they and their children are always at a disadvantage compared with their urban counterparts.

- 19) "Solving the problem of the left-behind children should be linked to the protection of **migrant workers'** rights and interests in urban areas." A professor from Nankai University said.

Figure 3 shows the collocational Network of Migrant Workers in Chinese English-Language News Corpus and discusses the critical issue of solving the left-behind children problem is to protect their parents' rights in urban areas. Furthermore, it can be seen from figure 3 that the phrase migrant workers usually collocate with allow, permanent, and cities. Therefore, the critical problem behind the left-behind children is that the Chinese hukou system cannot give equal rights to migrant workers working in urban areas. Examples 14, 15, and 16 indicate that the Chinese hukou system directly leads to the existence of left-behind children since their migrant parents cannot enjoy the same social benefits as their urban counterparts. In addition, quoted words from experts make sentences more convincing. Migrants cannot enjoy the same rights of local health services and public education for their children compared to those citizens with non-agricultural hukou (Tong et al., 2019). Thus, migrant workers cannot provide a stable and decent environment for their children in cities and must leave their children in rural areas.

Keywords in the Semantic category of General and abstract terms describe governments' efforts in dealing with the problem of left-behind children.

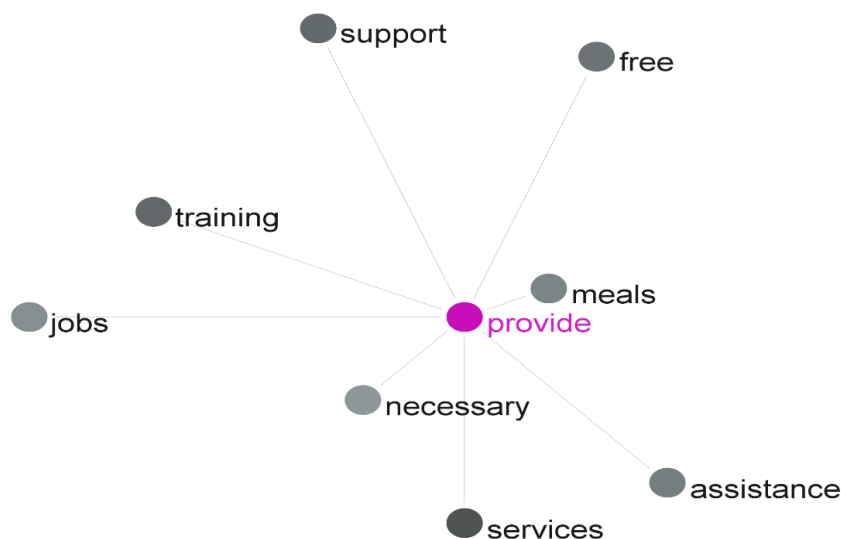


Figure 3 Collocational Network of Provide in Chinese English-language News Media Corpus

- 20) The central government has earmarked 16 billion yuan to **provide meals** for impoverished students in rural areas.
- 21) The situation is now changing thanks to government moves to **provide jobs** in the countryside.

Take the word provide, for instance; the Span was set at one left and one right to examine the direct collocations of the word. The visualisations can be seen in figure 3. In addition, based on their co-texts and meanings in context, these collocations can be divided into two groups: 1) provide support for the left-behind children; 2) provide support for their migrant parents. Example 17 shows that the government provides free meals for rural students. Some studies argue that left-behind children

aged 2-17 are likely to experience health problems and poorer nutrition than children with their parents (Jia et al., 2010; Li et al., 2015; X. Sun et al., 2015). Therefore, governments set a free lunch program for children in rural areas to provide sufficient nutrition for the new generation. Example 18 shows that government offers local job opportunities to migrant parents so that they can work in their homes and look after their children, which aims to solve the primary problem that leads to the existence of the left-behind children group.

Two words- efforts and care in the semantic category of psychological actions, states, and processes are applied to appraise governments' measures to handle the left-behind children. Take the word efforts, for instance; figure 4 illustrates the collocational network of efforts.

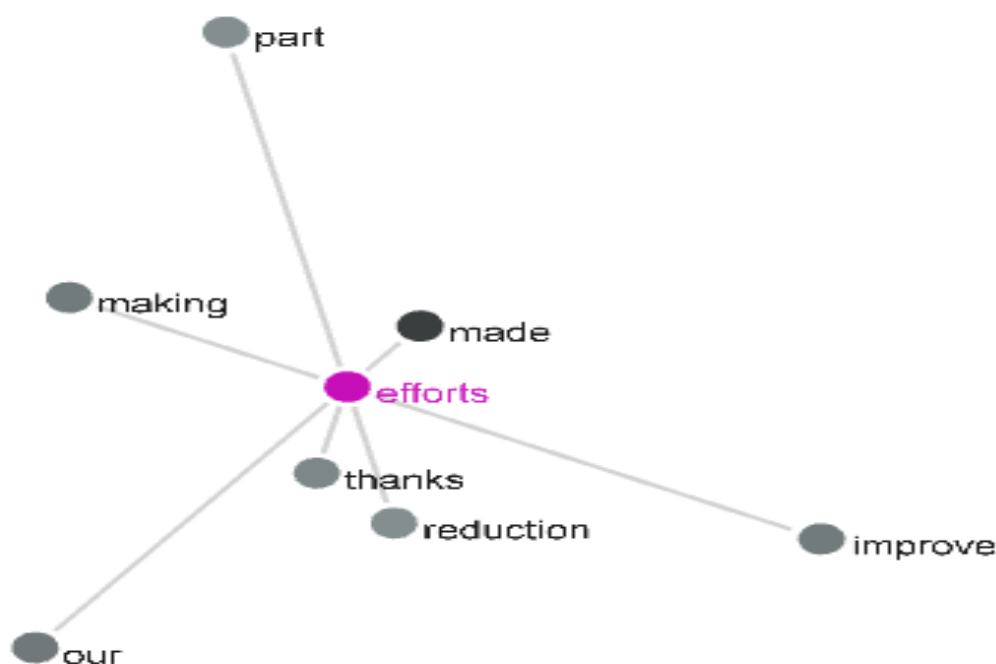


Figure 4 Collocational Network of efforts in Chinese English-language News Corpus

- 22) **Thanks** to the continuous **efforts** of **local governments**, basic social welfare has been providing to these left-behind children.
- 23) To improve left-behind children's living conditions, **efforts** have been **made** by the government to provide them social security and proper education.

Examples 19 and 20 indicate that the Chinese English language news media praise the government's efforts in dealing with the left-behind children problem by providing social welfare.

Only one keyword million belongs to the semantic category of Numbers and measurement. The word million is mainly used to describe the Chinese Government's financial assistance to the left-behind children and the exact number of left-behind children in China.

- 24) Local authorities in Zhenxiong county, located in a mountainous area of Southwest China's Yunnan Province, to invest **2.7 million yuan (\$ 0.4 million)** in renovating a local school that is home to 189 boarding students.
- 25) The city government of Bijie allocated about **60 million yuan** every year since 2012 to help children left by their parents.

Examples 20 and 21 use numerical discourses to describe the government's financial assistance to left-behind children. Porter (1995) argues that the language of mathematics is utilised when

knowledge claims call for confidence and credibility and to satisfy people's objective judgments. As a result, readers may assume that basic numerical discourse is grounded in reality and that real-world issues exist when they meet it. As shown in the above examples, terms such as **2.7 million yuan** and **60 million yuan** can convince the readers of the Chinese government's massive financial support towards the left-behind children.

Only one word- online belongs to the last semantic category- Science and technology. The collocational network of the word online is presented in figure 4, which indicates that Chinese English-language news media mainly frame the technology from two perspectives: 1) the side effects of online games and technology on the left-behind children; 2) the Chinese government applies online technology to support left-behind children.

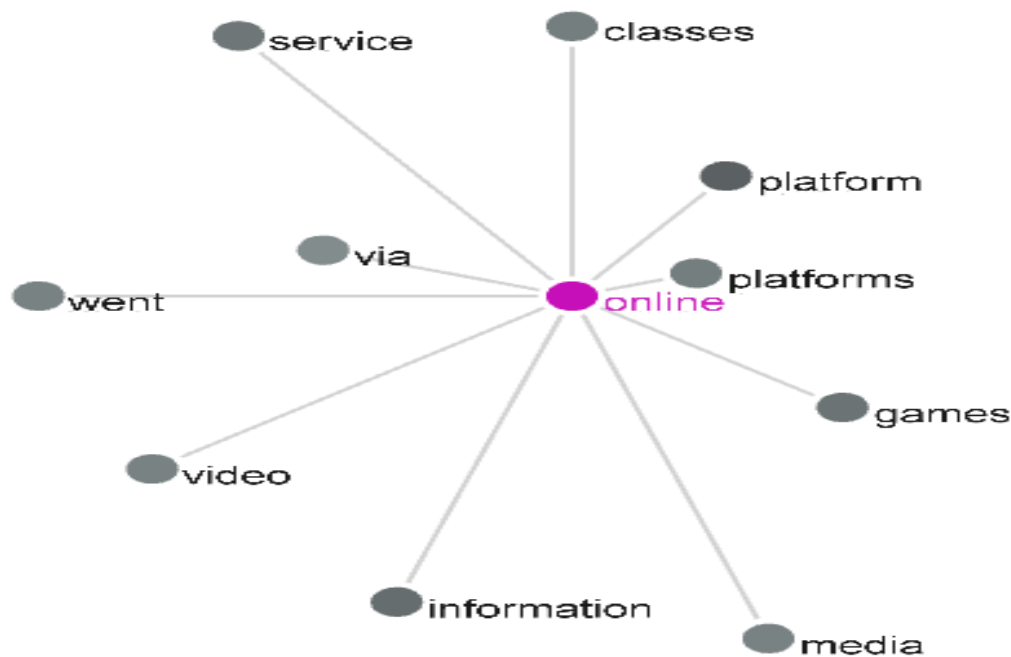


Figure 5 Collocational Network of Online in Chinese English-language News Corpus

- 26) “I make meals for him every day, but I cannot educate him as he often plays **online games** with his friends. I knew his grades in school were bad, but I could not help him”, said one left-behind children’s grandmother.
- 27) Chinese government launched a project to take advantage of internet services to provide **online classes** across the nation, aiming to offer educational assistance to primary and middle schools in remote areas of China.

Example 22 indicates that the game addiction of left-behind children is under no supervision. Callan et al. (2015) argue that online gaming can compensate for psychological requirements that go unsatisfied owing to relative deprivation. In other words, online gaming allows players to create new identities and statuses while temporarily hiding their true identities. Therefore, left-behind children seek new identities online to hide their social statuses. In addition, the above example also highlights the grandparent caretaking in the left-behind children phenomenon. Jia and Tian (2010) and Gao et al. (2010) both argue that grandparents' inadequate knowledge prohibits them from offering adequate assistance to left-behind children. That is to say, these grandparents’ caregiving

is restricted to material welfare and awareness of vulnerable health. On the other hand, example 23 shows that the Chinese government applies new technology to provide education help to left-behind children, aiming to improve the educational quality of left-behind children. From the above examples, it can be seen that Chinese English-language publications continually frame the government's efforts in handling the left-behind children problem.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study uses corpus-assisted discourse analysis to examine how Chinese English-language news media construct the image of left-behind children. The findings show that media reports frequently highlight the government's efforts to address the issue, portraying left-behind children as facing significant social challenges. However, these reports rarely discuss the deeper structural causes, particularly the restrictions imposed by the hukou system. This selective representation reflects a broader pattern in state-influenced media, where social problems are acknowledged but framed in ways that emphasize government intervention while minimizing systemic inequalities.

This framing connects to the concept of neoliberal governance, which focuses on policy management and intervention rather than addressing the root causes of social problems. The media's portrayal reinforces the image of a capable and responsible government, shaping both domestic and international perceptions of China. International audiences may interpret these representations as evidence of effective governance, while the structural constraints behind the issue remain less visible. The study contributes to discussions on media discourse, government framing strategies, and the role of news narratives in shaping public understanding of social issues.

The above findings of the presentations of left-behind children reflect the nature of Chinese English-language publications. These media play a role in Chinese journalism but are also different from traditional Chinese-language media since most Chinese English news media readers are non-Chinese or educated Chinese people (Yu, 2021). The Chinese government is famous for its strict regulations and monitoring of media content through an ownership and licensing system: individuals cannot get access to produce media content. Also, news media tends to meet the government's structural needs instead of enlightening the public (Yang, 2003). Most recently, the Chinese government adopted a "media going global" and "tell China's stories well" policy to increase overseas China's discursive power (Jacob, 2020; W. Sun, 2015). In the present study, by building up an image of the Chinese government which tries hard to solve the problem of left-behind children, the Chinese government wants to increase its discursive power to the global audience and reshape a responsible image of China that tends to care for its citizens. Moreover, Chinese English-language news media strictly follow the government's four guidelines to report the left-behind children problem and how the Chinese government deals with left-behind children problem.

In the Chinese context of rural-urban migration and the problem of left-behind children, the advancement of Chinese urbanisation is at the price of rural communities and families, which caused millions of incomplete families in modern China. In other words, Chinese huge economic achievement in the past 40 years is achieved at a high social cost. The problem of left-behind children has brought the rural family issue into consideration. The rural-urban migration has split families and overlooked the development of children. When these children grow up, their future becomes problematic. Therefore, based on the governmental guidelines, the left-behind children have been given special care from four lines of defence (M. Zhou et al., 2014), which has eased the overall problem. However, millions of migrant families and their children are still disadvantaged as second-class citizens due to the strict Chinese hukou system. In other words, the Chinese hukou system categorises Chinese citizens into different categories and unequally distributes social

resources based on their categories. At the same time, these rural families have sacrificed for the post-reform economic miracle, and their children are the nation's future. Therefore, social equality for migrant workers and their children in urban cities is still a concern for Chinese policy makers and should be addressed via an open discussion of the contributions of the unique and strict hukou system.

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