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“Left-behind Children” Phenomenon in China: 
Case Study in Chongqing

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Abstract
This article examines the “left-behind children” phenomenon in Wuxi County, 
Chongqing, China. This research utilizes several interviews with government 
officials, NGOs, and the left-behind children through questionnaire and 
observations including official written reports. The activities on LBC were 
categorized into 4 models: care model, society support model, rural school 
education model, and policies support and empowerment model. Given 
the exploratory nature of this LBC model in Chongqing, we have several 
recommendations in further improving the plight and phenomenon of this 
group of population.

Keywords: left-behind children (LBC), China

JEL classification: H75, I38, P3, Z13

1. Preamble
With the advent of globalization, migration has become a worldwide 
phenomenon which has caused “Left-behind Children” (LBC) 
issues all over the world, especially in developing countries. For instance, 7 
per cent of Mexican children in 2002 have migrating fathers, yet multistage 
estimate suggests that 17 per cent of children born into two-parent homes 
are expected to experience a migrating father at least once during childhood 
(Rosalia Cortes, 2007). In Thailand, Bryant (2005) estimates that about half 
a million children aged up to 14 years are left behind. A case study based on 
1996’s data found that in certain rural areas of Bangladesh, a range of 18 to 
40 per cent of rural households have at least one migrant member working 
elsewhere (Yeoh and Lim, 2007). Moreover, there are approximately 9 
million Filipino children under the age of 18 who are left behind by one or 
both parents to work relatively or live permanently abroad (Reyes, 2008).
Since the “Reform and Opening up Policy” started in the 1970s in China, the acceleration of economic development and rapid urbanization has caused millions of peasant workers to migrate into cities. The rural population who migrated to urban cities has risen to 151 million by 2009 in China (NBS, 2009). However, the unique dual economic structure and related household registration system in China restrained rural labour’s settling down in city and hundreds of them had to move alone without their family. Thus there is a huge group of LBC left in the countryside, with their population estimated at 58 million in China representing 28.29 per cent of total population of rural children (All Women Federation, 2008). These statistics are still rising rapidly. The LBC are facing various problems in their life, such as in the aspects of education, security, personality, psychology, etc., which limits these LBC’s development. The issues of LBC do not only have a bad impact on society, but also create some serious risks on next generations of China.

In the last decade, the Chinese government has introduced policies, laws and regulations to provide better care for LBC in the countryside. This paper concentrates on Chongqing, being the youngest municipality located in southwest China with 32.57 million people in 2008 including 7.5 million out of residential areas (CRC, 2010). Chongqing has the highest rate (49.9 per cent) of LBC among rural children all over the country (Duan and Yang, 2008). Since 2008, Chongqing has put the left-behind children (LBC) into the Ten People’s Livelihood project, and explored series of ways to manage LBC, one of which is called “Chongqing’s model”.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Left-behind Children

LBC are defined as children with one or two parents who have moved elsewhere and were left behind at the place of household registration (Duan and Zhou, 2005). There were no heated controversies over the definition of LBC, but diverse scholars have various opinions about LBC’s age range. According to the “Convention on the Rights of the Child”, China, the term children is defined as “every human being below the age of eighteen years” (CRC, Article1). In All-China Women’s Federation’s survey in 2007, they defined the LBC as children seventeen years old or below (All-China Women’s Federation, 2008). Some others define the age range as between 7-18 years old (Lu, 2006; Zhang, 2010), whereas Duan and Zhou (2005), and Duan and Wu (2009) refer to their age as fourteen and below. In this paper, we define LBC as children of up to 16 years of age according to the definition of the Report of Chongqing Women’s Federation.

2.2. Dual Economy Theory

The dual economy models posited a relatively advanced sector and a relatively backward sector. These have alternatively been called capitalist and subsistence, formal and informal, modern and traditional, industry and agriculture, urban and rural, primary and secondary, and good jobs and bad jobs (Fields, 2007). The major economists of dual economy theory are Lewis, Rains, Fei, Jorgenson, Harris and Tobago. Lewis is the pioneer of the dual economy theory. In “Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour” 1954, he stated that the main sources of economic development proceeds are subsistence agriculture, casual labour, petty trade, domestic service, wives and daughters in the household, and the increase of population in the country. In most but not all of these sectors, if the country is overpopulated relative to its natural resources, the marginal productivity of labour is negligible, zero, or even negative. He noted that dual economy appeared in developing countries and it is the starting point of economic development. The Harris-Todaro model states that the rate of migration flow is determined by the difference between expected urban wages (not actual) and rural wages. It explains why peasants still decide to try to work in urban areas even through there are serious unemployment problem in urban areas (Zhang, 2008). The dual economy theory has further demonstrated that rural-urban migration in China is unavoidable, is the product of economic development, and a phenomenon of long-term rural urban migration.