



# Sociological Imagination of Educational Inequality: A Case Study of the Educational Conditions of “Left-Behind Children” and the Younger Generation of Migrants in China

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## Abstract

Forty years of China’s reform and opening-up has fueled large-scale migration, which produced a huge floating population of children who switch between the state of being ‘left-behind’ and being ‘migrant’. They have now grown up to become a new generation of domestic migrants in Chinese cities, facing difficulties in attending school and high dropout rate due to household registration system, reduced social mobility, and alienation from cultural traditions. Data analysis and social surveys show that their all-round development have been hindered by multiple factors, such as unequal distribution of educational resources, restricted migration, unbalanced distribution of social dividends, little social mobility, and the rupture of the traditional rural education system. Although this phenomenon has long been studied by the academic community, most of the previous works placed emphasis on analyzing survey data and describing the general trends, while little attention has been paid to synthesizing the underlying causes and the insidious consequences. The focus of this paper is to explore how the development of left-behind and migrant children is conditioned by multiple factors such as social structures, institutional arrangements, intergenerational changes, cultural shifts and educational systems. Building on the latest official data and literature, this work is empirically based on years of social observation, case study, and in-depth interviews. The aim is to identify the shortcomings in the education and policy system, while furthering the current understanding of the gains and losses of individuals, families and the nation in the process of China’s rapid rise.

## Keywords

Sociological imagination, Left-behind children, New generation of migrants, Educational inequality, Multidimensional analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Migrant workers are a new type of labor force that has emerged since China’s reform and opening up in the late 1980s. They are the cornerstone of the “Made in China” mass production and an important part of industrial workers in the past four decades. They are participants in, builders of, and contributors to the modernization and urbanization. Every prosperous city, thoroughfare, production line and construction site has benefited from their hard

work and wisdom. In 2009 and 2010, Chinese industrial workers were selected as a representative group of “People of the Year” by *Time* magazine for two consecutive years. They also appeared on *SmartMoney* magazine and were labelled as “one of the most powerful forces in the world economy” (Xu, 2012).

Regrettably, the migrant workers in cities have also endured heavy emotional losses that they and the whole society feel together. Their children, who often stay behind in the countryside, are called left-behind children in China. They live in a suboptimal environment that separates them from their parents, deprives them of the warmth of parental care, and exposes them to risks of malnutrition, dropout and unsafe living conditions. The problems of their school performance, psychological well-being, and socio-emotional development have raised wide concerns, while the externalized distortion in some children’s nature, mind, intellect, and virtue reported by mass media has been even more disturbing. This phenomenon lays bare the shortcoming in the current education system and the abandonment of educational ethics, casting a shadow on the nation’s rapid economic rise.

## 2. Definitions of Left-Behind Children and Migrant Children

According to the definition by the United Nations Children’s Fund, left-behind children refer to children who are left behind in their hometowns while one or both parents migrate. Among them, rural and urban left-behind children refer to children whose registered residence is rural and urban respectively (NBSC, UNICEF China, & UNFPA China, 2015). Migrant children, on the other hand, refer to children who are constantly on the move with their migrant parents as their workplaces change. Due to children’s fluid transitions between the state of being left-behind and being a migrant, there is discrepancy between different sources of population data.

In 2016, the official data jointly disclosed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Security showed that 9.02 million rural left-behind children were counted nationwide. Among them, 8.05 million were looked after by grandparents, accounting for 89.3% of the total; 0.36 million were left unsupervised, accounting for 4% of the total; and 0.31 million has one migrant parent and another parent without guardianship ability, accounting for 3.4% of the total. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the most important reasons behind the dramatic drop in the number of left-behind children from 61.02 million in 2010 to 9.02 million in 2016 include the reform of the household registration system, more local school enrollment of migrant children, and the trend for parents to return to hometown to start businesses (MCAC, 2016). Another reason is the change in definition of left-behind children (Wang, 2016). Children who have one parent going out to work and the other undertaking parenting responsibilities will no longer be recognized as left-behind children (MCAC, 2016). In 2018, the statistics released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs showed that there were more than 6.97 million left-behind children in rural areas across the country, a decrease of 22.7% compared with the 2016 national investigation data, while the age limit in the definition has also been adjusted from 18 to 16 years old (MCAC, 2018). The 2020 National Population Census shows that among the floating population, 331 million people moved to urban areas, of which 249 million people moved from rural areas to urban areas (NBSC, 2021). Limited access to school where their parents migrated has resulted in a considerable number of children being left at home, while the other ones migrated and moved with their parents into the city.

As minors, their state of being left behind or migrant is largely forced upon them and contrary to their subjective will, which is intolerable from the point of view of human ethics. The educational problems of left-behind children are not only a price to pay for the frenzied economic growth, but also an affront to modern civilization. The long-term lack of parental affection has brought about painful development costs for the life-long prospects of left-behind children. Many studies (Shi et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2020; Zhang, 2015) have shown that compared with their peers, left-behind and migrant children tend to experience more difficulties in social adjustment, including behavioral problems such as rule violation and aggressive behaviors, and psychological problems such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

## 3. The New Generation of Migrants

The new generation of migrants refers to migrant workers in cities and towns born in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. According to the data from the National Bureau of Statistics, as of 2019, the number of migrant workers reached 290.77 million, among whom 50.1% were aged 16-40, 1% had never been to school, 15.3% had primary school education, 56% had junior high school education, and 16.6% had high school education. They have become not only a subpopulation but a new social class as well.

In contrast to their parents, the vast majority of the new migrants are basically alienated from the rural lifestyle as they no longer share the local community's values and cultural identification and never acquired any agricultural skills. Similar to their parents' generation, they are not likely to have not completed the nine-year compulsory education (from elementary to junior high school), and most of their employment opportunities are concentrated in labor-intensive or service industries. Despite their desire to integrate into urban life, the lack of educational attainment and cultural upbringing tend to make them feel inferior, alienated, and decadent, due to restrictions in social and cultural capital, income and educational level. Their employment status is highly precarious, and their jobs can hardly provide a sense of achievement. In urban management, there is an evident lack of public spaces that could either serve the interest of this class or make their voices heard by policy makers and the general public.

The 2020 Monitoring Report on New Generation of Migrant Workers in Beijing released in August 2021 shows that the new generation of migrant workers accounts for 50.1% of the entire migrant population, and the proportion of males is higher than that of females (MHRSSC, 2021). While their employment opportunities are still concentrated in labor-intensive industries, the proportion of the new generation of migrant workers who engaged in software and information technology services has increased significantly compared with their parents' generation which mainly worked at construction sites. The top five industries in terms of employment in 2020 are residential services<sup>1</sup>, repairs and other services, manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail, and accommodation and catering, absorbing 67.2% of the new generation of migrant workers (MHRSSC, 2021).

Comparing the Seventh National Population Census data in 2020 to the previous round in 2010, the average years of education of the population aged 15 and above increased from 9.08 years to 9.91 years, the average years of education of the working-age population aged 16-59 increased from 9.67 years to 10.75 years, and the illiteracy rate dropped from 4.08% to 2.67%. While this change incorporates the new generation of migrants who attend school, the data, on the whole, do not make for an optimistic reading. Taking national vocational schools as an example, there were about 26.85 million students enrolled in 2018 who mainly came from rural and urban low-income families, and this demographic concentration has been strengthened (Zhang, 2020). Children who were admitted to universities from rural areas generally share the perception that they could find decent jobs and earn more money after graduation, but in reality, most of them find it difficult to secure an ideal job that corresponds with their university major. Many college graduates end up without either further education or employment and call themselves "trash" (Zhang, 2020).

In 2020, *Sanlian Life Week* published a cover article titled "Exam Masters from Small Towns: Finding a Place in This World". "As the self-mockery term suggests, these "exam masters" are students from rural areas who excelled in the college entrance exam but lacks social and cultural capital to continue to succeed in university or after graduation (Yang, 2020)." They established a social media group called "985<sup>2</sup> Waste Recruiting Project", attracting more than a million members with an immediate media attention.

#### 4. Underlying Causes of the Educational Difficulties of Left-Behind and Migrant Children

The Chinese nation used to take pride in its tradition of respecting teachers and valuing education. Why is there the problem of left-behind and migrant children's education today? The slogan in the 1980s to the 90s used to be: "Even if (we are) poor, (we) cannot stop funding education." This shows that the Chinese people used to ascribe exceptionally high value to education. However, the educational difficulties of left-behind and migrant children have become a major problem affecting the people's life quality. What is the cause of this problem?

In addition to the well-known reasons such as the dual-structure of the education system between urban and rural areas under the household registration system, the income gap between urban and rural areas, and reduced social mobility, there are several other reasons that reflect deeper social problems.

##### 4.1 Unequal Institutional Arrangements and Educational Resources Distribution

The 2019 Research Report on Primary and Secondary Education Information Software Markets (Gao, 2019) provides statistics on the distribution of educational resources per student in compulsory education and general high school education. The highest infrastructure costs per student at the elementary school stage were in Beijing with

<sup>1</sup> Residential life services refer to those such as housekeeping, health care, cleaning, and hairdressing.

<sup>2</sup> The "985 project" launched on May 4, 1998, when the Chinese government announced that "in order to realize modernization, China needs to have more first-class universities of world standards, and has determined the list of the first batch of key universities". The influence of the project has lasted until today and commonly referred to as the "985".

more than 30,000 yuan, while the lowest was in Henan Province with less than 6,000 yuan.

The teaching resources of each province could be measured by the student-teacher ratio. Comparing the student-teacher ratios at the elementary, junior high, and general high school levels, it is found that the largest regional gap relates to the proportion of teachers with high qualifications at the junior high school level. For every 44 junior high school students in Beijing, there is one full-time teacher with a master's degree or above; the national average is 480:1. The lowest ones in the national ranking are Guizhou, Yunnan and Guangxi, with the ratio in Guizhou at over 2000:1 (Gao, 2019).

The ranking of educational resources can be shown by the availability of the multimedia hardware facilities. When comparing teaching digitalization hardware configuration at elementary, junior high, and general high school levels, regional differences are more obvious. Developed provinces and cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu have strong financial resources and rank among the top in the country in terms of the provision rate of computer and network multimedia classrooms. However, less developed provinces such as Henan, Jilin, Heilongjiang and Guangxi are restricted by factors such as economics and infrastructure, where student population and ratio of high-tech classrooms ranks low in the country (Gao, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for rural areas in remote mountainous regions, network coverage is still limited and it is very difficult for children to attend online lessons easily. There was a widely reported case of two first-year junior high female students in Changyang, Hubei who received a notice from the school to start online classes. Due to a mountainous surrounding and poor connections, their grandfather had to find a spot on a hillside more than 300 meters away from home where the signal is slightly stable. He even used oilcloths and bamboo poles to build them a temporary "classroom" to keep out the wind (Jiu, 2020).

In recent years, although the Chinese government has begun to vigorously promote vocational education, the quality of both the students and the teachers has been declining simultaneously. Many vocational schools have problems such as homogenization of majors and syllabi that do not correspond with the needs of the industry. The schools often have no learning atmosphere at all. Most of the students ended up in vocational schools because they failed the college entrance examination.

## 4.2 Inter-Generational Education and School Transfers

Although migrant children live in the city, they can hardly enjoy equal access to education as their local peers due to the limitation of temporary residence. Many eventually end up as left-behind children or constantly shifting in-between.

Existing scholarship (CDRF & CCC, 2020; Xu et al., 2009; Yue et al., 2017) show that migrant children aged 0-5 are often semi-migratory, switching between staying in their rural hometown and staying with their parents in urban areas. Among migrant children aged 6-14, one-third of the adolescents have been on the move for more than 6 years. Their compulsory education is usually divided into two phases: their primary school education is often completed back in hometown, and when they reach the age for junior high school their parents often take them to the city of their work. Few children are fortunate enough to stay with their parents before completing the nine-year mandatory education. However, they must all return to their original residence place to attend high schools. As a result, a large number of underage schoolchildren transfer, or drop out of school, and many minors choose to work.

Intergenerational education<sup>3</sup> has become a common phenomenon in rural areas. While children are full of energy and curious about the world, most of their grandparents lack the time and education level to provide high-quality care. Literature has shown that poor nurturing and insufficient stimuli in home environment explains the prevalence of under development among rural left-behind children in China that may have enduring impacts on the formation of their cognitive ability and social-emotional skills in their life course. In addition, the long-term absence of parental companionship has also resulted in the feeling of detachment in the parent-child relationship.

## 4.3 Lack of Family Education

A survey of 3,415 left-behind children in 2018 showed that about 40% of the children met with their parents no more than twice every year, and about 20% of them contacted their parents no more than 4 times a year (On the Road to School Public Welfare Promotion Center, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Intergenerational education has unique characteristics in China, where the vast majority of grandfathers and grandmothers who have raised "left-behind children" have an average education level of below junior high school. The elder the caregivers, the more likely they have a lower level of education.

The biggest problem for left-behind children is not financial difficulties, but troubled psychological status caused by long-term family separation. Some children developed emotional estrangement or even resentment towards their parents. Surveys have found that many children were left to their grandparents under the age of one. They often grow up with negative emotions, such as upset, confusion, violence and inferiority complex. Many left-behind children began to have negative behavioral dependence on their fathers from the fifth grade. More than 10% of left-behind children claimed that their parents were already dead; 80% of children reported that they have no purpose in life, some said that they used to have some kind of dream but not anymore (On the Road to School Public Welfare Promotion Center, 2018). Although some children have completed college and landed good jobs, many of them lead a monotonous life, inclined to be indifferent to other people or easily get stubborn, socio-emotionally challenged to achieve long-term life success.

#### 4.4 After-School Activities for Leisure Time

The use of leisure time of both left-behind and migrant children are often disappointing. With the popularization and widespread use of mobile technology, most of the left-behind children have mobile phones, providing channels for parents to contact and supervise their children at home. Surveys show that 90% of junior high school students among left-behind children in rural areas have mobile phones, and 70% of primary school students have access to mobile phones after school. However, in addition to facilitating communication with parents, mobile phones are more often used as entertainment tools for children after school, which has taken control of their spare time. They play games and watch short videos on TikTok and Kwai in order to kill time. More worrying is the demographic trend of in terms of screen time. According to a recent survey, rural left-behind children under the age of 5 in poverty-stricken counties have an average daily screen exposure of 1.9 hours (TVs, mobile phones and tablets) (CDRF & CCC, 2020), which is nearly twice the standard recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019).

Screen exposure is not only a catalysis for “problematic children”, but also a way to kill time. When the long-absent parents return home, they often find that the children have become indifferent towards school and mobile phone have become their favorite toy. In many areas, rural children spend more time online than urban children. The three activities of watching videos, playing games and sending messages take up almost 90% of children’s free time. There are also children who entertain the idea of going out to work when they are about 14-16 years old. They do not like to engage in or learn about agricultural activities in general because for them farming is too much hard work.

Leisure time plays an irreplaceable role in children’s growth and socialization. Leisure marks the difference between people. If it is used well, it can increase one’s resilience; if it is not used well, it can turn a life into waste. This issue has not yet attracted enough attention from education departments and researchers.

### 5. Social Problems Underlying the Education Difficulties

In 2020 during the epidemic, there were 285.6 million migrant workers in urban areas (NBSC, 2021). More than half of them were under the age of 40. This means that the number of left-behind children and migrant children as well as the emerging migrant class is still likely to increase. If their educational provision is not improved, the overall level of social progress will be curbed.

#### 5.1 Institutional Arrangements Reinforce Social Stratification

As of 2019, the number of migrant workers reached 290.77 million, whose average age was 40.8 years old and average monthly income was 3,962 yuan. In terms of education for children of migrant workers who have migrated to cities, the problems of entering school, difficulty in furthering education, and high costs were more prominent in the eastern region and large cities (NBSC, 2019).

In attempt to address this problem, the State Council issued the Plan for Promoting the Settlement of the Non-registered Population of 100 Million in Urban Areas in 2016 (The State Council of China, 2016). The Plan attempted to promote the urban settlement of rural migrants capable of finding secure jobs and live in cities with their families except for a few mega-cities. This policy is an attempt to bring opportunities for the “agricultural population” to be transformed into a “non-agricultural population” in terms of legal residential status (The State Council of China, 2016).

However, resolving this problem is not so simple. From 2010 to 2015, the number of left-behind children aged



0-17 in urban areas increased from 20.42 million to 28.26 million (NBSC, UNICEF China, & UNFPA China, 2015). The increase in the number of left-behind children in urban areas is the result of “in-situ urbanization”, referring to the process of transforming the original administrative villages and natural villages into towns that would change the local household registration category from rural to urban. Although the “in-situ urbanization” has reduced the number of left-behind children in rural areas, it increased the number of urban left-behind children on the other end. Therefore, despite the apparent reduction in terms of statistics, the measure has shown limited effect in alleviating the rigid social stratification associated with parental migration.

Although social stratification is not a phenomenon unique to China, artificial restriction imposed by the household registration system is a very important contributing factor to stratification in the Chinese society. In addition, in recent years, unemployment upon graduation has increased the cost of higher education, and there are greater uncertainties in the rate of return both for society and individuals. In the job market, one’s identity has become one of the biggest sources of employment discrimination. The household registration system further reinforces this discrimination in employment, making endeavors to change one’s life through education gradually less promising. This fuels the negation of the value of education among left-behind children while they are growing up. At present, social upward mobility in China has become more rigid, meaning that there is weaker inner-generational social mobility, strengthened intergenerational inheritability, reduced opportunities for people to utilize their talents, and lack of social safety net mechanism.

## **5.2 Social Marginalization in Urban Public Space**

More than ten years ago, the author carried out a survey on the leisure life of migrant workers in Beijing from the perspective of leisure sociology. The interviewees mainly worked at supermarkets, photocopiers, housekeeping services, security guarding, barber shops, restaurants, couriers, delivery services. There were about 100 respondents in the research and some cases have been tracked for up to two decades. The research report concluded that there were “eight zeros” in migrant workers’ leisure life, which referred to the following: almost no leisure time in daily life, no cultural and spiritual pastime, limited understanding of the concept of leisure life, almost no participation in community activities, little integration into urban culture or lifestyle, almost no awareness of rest and recuperation, and almost no time to play with their children, and there were almost no channels to represent their interest (Ma, 2010).

The research paid special attention to the design and service of urban public spaces, which almost marginalized the migrant worker population. They were separated from the community and have little to do with the community governance system except for family planning and school enrollment. Community management often neglects or marginalizes this group and the allocation of public service resources basically does not take them into account. Community authorities know the demographics of the migrant population within their jurisdiction well, but community public services and recreational activities are generally excluded from the scope of their services (Ma, 2011).

Unfortunately, more than a decade later, this situation has changed only slightly. Their working hours are still excessively long, their workplace has shifted from construction sites to express delivery, takeaway, programmers, restaurant waiters, supermarkets and other industries, and their entertainment form has replaced TV and the Internet by mobile phones, yet they still do not have time to appreciate various performances or cultural activities, and even go to public parks that they pass by every day. In recent years, despite progress in urban public policy, there are still huge gaps in the actual implementation across different areas.

American anthropologist Robert Redfield had long portrayed the city as a locus of cultural change. The purpose of urban social integration is to enable people of all walks of life to live in the city with dignity. But migrant workers as a sub-population and a class have been being marginalized in this respect.

## **5.3 Disintegration of Traditional Education Systems**

Education is a unique social practice. It can not only enable inheriting and acquiring life experience, but also cultivate a comprehensive and rich mind and intelligence. Education ethics has long been upheld within China’s cultural traditions. Historically, China has formed an education system consisting of “official school”, “private school” and “family learning” that complement each other. This system emphasizes the unity and mutual assistance of family members, nurturing of morality, training in survival skills and the ability to earn a living. It is not only reflected in the educational philosophy of teaching students according to their aptitude, but also in the educational ethics of making the best use of their talents and materials.

The inheritance of family learning has supported China's historical reputation as a "state of etiquette" and a nation that "respects teachers and values education". FEI Xiaotong pointed out that "for China, a nation with a rich agricultural civilization, land has been the foundation of rural Chinese people's life, where many excellent qualities of the Chinese people are cultivated"<sup>4</sup>. According to historical records, by the end of 1935, there were 101,027 private schools nationwide, among which 35,394 had been transformed (Wang, 2011).

Successful education requires the joint efforts of the school, the society and the family. However, with hundreds of millions of people migrating to work in the past 40 years, the family learning traditions in rural civilization has basically disintegrated. A sizeable proportion of the left-behind children have become "problematic" teenagers, or unable to envision a meaningful pathway of life other than getting married and raising children. An article by a rural-born PhD student recorded his reflection upon returning home: "Most of the rural students who went to college at the expense of the happiness of the entire family have no hope of earning as much as the cost of education after graduation, and many leave their elderly parents impoverished...If a person is deprived of the opportunity to love one's parents and children just to survive, how can you expect one to love others, to love the society, and to love nature?" (Wang, 2018).

Underlying the phenomenon of education inequality, we can see both the breakdown of the family learning system and a social crisis caused by the sudden breach in and loss of Confucian values in rural educational systems.

#### 5.4 The Challenge of Education Difficulties to Human Relations

"Human relations" (*ren'lun*) is a basic concept in Confucian thought. Among them, the relationship between father and son was considered the most prominent, highlighting the importance of family education. The emergence of various forms of family education such as "family learning", "family rules", "family education", and "family appointment" had a profound impact on the mentality, intelligence, character and artistic accomplishment of children, bringing positive influence on both the family and the society.

Over the past 40 years, hundreds of millions of people (at least two generations) have moved from the countryside to the city. Besides the rise of modern cities is the loss of millions of rural families where left-behind children experienced troubles such as truancy and dropping out of school due to lack of parental presence. The traumatized children often have poorer academic performance and reduced ability to thrive in adulthood. Education without love is challenging the traditional value system of human relations.

#### 5.5 Insufficient Human Capital Investment for Fueling the Economic Transformation

China's economic achievements have attracted the attention of the world, but the difficulties in the education of left-behind children have indeed become a shortcoming in the overall social progress. With the implementation of high-quality development strategy, the demand for skilled labor such as specialized technical talents will increase in the future. Rural youth will once again become a major labor force against a backdrop of declining birth rate and aging population. The lack of high-quality vocational or professional training means that cheap labor will find it difficult to adapt to or obtain jobs which require more complicated skills and technical expertise, hindering the development of labor market and economy in the long run.

As of 2019, the number of migrant workers reached 290.77 million, of which 50.1% were aged 16 to 40 (NBSC, 2019). While not everyone necessarily has to go to college, they should all finish high school so that all children could be equipped with the skills they need in the future (Leng, 2020).

Rural youth population constitute the main source of China's future labor force, and they will also become an important driving force behind China's endeavor to transform its economic model from labor-intensive "made in China" to innovation-driven "designed in China". However, there is still a long way to go. In China, even though education from elementary school to junior high school is free, many rural students still prefer to drop out of school for the immediate financial return from low-skilled jobs, even though more advanced education can increase their future income. Additionally, vocational education is plagued by poor teaching and outdated syllabi, making only a little contribution to enlightening students' employment prospects than middle school graduates. The dropout rate in vocational schools averages as high as 33% (Huang, 2020). To make up for this shortcoming, structural reforms of education systems have become a pressing issue in China.

<sup>4</sup> Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005), one of the founders of Chinese sociology and anthropology. He received his PhD degree from London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 1938. Under the guidance of his tutor, Prof. Malinowski, he completed his doctoral thesis *Rural Economy*, widely recognized as "a milestone in the development of anthropological fieldwork and theoretical study".

## 6. Conclusion

“Education is the influence of the older generation on the younger generation who have not been able to adapt to social life. Its purpose is to develop their physical, intellectual and moral qualities, so that they can fulfill the requirements placed on the individual by the society and specific circumstances” (Huang, 2020). Education is also considered to be one of the most effective means to achieve social equality. Historical experience tells us that respecting education and encouraging learning is “the foundation of building a nation, and cultivating talents is the first priority of government” (Zhu, 1981)<sup>5</sup>.

More than a century ago, Huang Yanpei, a modern Chinese education reformer, advocated that vocational education should be a development priority in order to “prepare individuals to earn a living”, to “prepare individuals to serve society”, and to “prepare the world and the nation to increase productivity” (Huang, 1917). In the 1930s, the educator Liang Shuming<sup>6</sup> believed that “both the essence of Chinese culture and the vast majority of the Chinese population are in the countryside, so it is necessary to start from there” (Liu, 2018). In his “rural experiment” in Zouping, Shandong from 1931 to 1937, Liang proposed that “the education at villages and townships is not only popularizing cultural and scientific knowledge but also serve as social institutions that perform the dual functions of etiquette and politics” (Bian, 2014).

Today, these values are being subverted, dragging down the full realization of contemporary educational goals. Although China is already the world's second largest economy, nearly half of its population still live in rural areas, and 600 million people have a monthly income of less than 1,000 *yuan*. In addition, the imbalance in urban and rural development, unequal distribution of educational resources, restricted domestic migration, asymmetry in the distribution of social welfare, and rigid social stratification are jointly forming negative consequences. The educational difficulties of left-behind children, migrant children and the new generation of migrants will have long-term effects on their cognitive and social-emotional development, undermining the future development of Chinese society.

In any case, ignoring children's education will inevitably lead to “disrespect at the top, under-education at the bottom, social riots among people, and impending doom” (Mencius, 2010). In the face of these challenges, the history of human education and the wisdom of the sages are our valuable reference. China's ongoing education reform and talent strategy can only be successful when equality, civilization, nurture and education are simultaneously pushed forward.

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<sup>5</sup> Zhu Zhiyu was an educator during the Ming and Qing dynasties. He required students to have the four qualities of honesty, modesty, diligence and perseverance. His most representative work was titled *Zhu Shun Shui Ji: Persuading to Learn*.

<sup>6</sup> Liang Shuming (1893-1988), a famous thinker, philosopher, educator, and one of the early representatives of modern Neo-Confucianism, is also known as “the last great Confucian in China”.



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