University of Reading

The Educational Aspirations of 'Left-behind Children' in Rural China: A Case Study

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Declaration of Original Authorship

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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Abstract

China has been experiencing rapid economic growth over the past few decades. Accompanied by the nation's modernization and urbanization, an overwhelmingly large number of rural habitants out-migrate to urban areas for work and better earnings. However, due to China's local household registration system(*Hukou*), children of migrants are not entitled to free schooling provisions in these urban destinations. As a consequence, millions of school-agedrural children have to be 'left behind' by their migrating parent(s) in their homeplace. They are called – the 'left-behind children'. This study investigates the future educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' and explores the educational impact of 'left-behind-ness'. It adoptsthe qualitative case study approach and uses ethnography as the primary research technique to capture factors that impact on aspirations, and to understand and explain why educational aspirations are different among these young people who share many similar social characteristics. Fieldwork was conducted in a nine-year comprehensive school in a rural region in southwest China, with data mainly being obtained from 17 'left-behind children'. Findings indicate that whilst undeniably educational aspirations are embedded in left-behind children's distinctly disadvantaged social background, aspirations are determined by these young people's own evaluation of whether attending university is 'rational', and are shaped by their individual family and school experience, relationship with adults and peers, perceived sense of self, as well as their personal and varied understandings of the social world they are living in. By focusing on the individuals and their experiences, this study suggests that being 'left behind' is experienced individually and it is these individual experiences that have influenced attitudes and aspirations differently among Chinese 'left-behind children'. This study not only extends understanding of Chinese left-behind children's educational experiences, but also provides new knowledge regarding

Chinese left-behind children's educational aspirations with a contribution to the integration of theoryas well as the broadening of theoretical applications by transferring Western theories to an Eastern context.

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Taking the path of doing a PhD is a long journey that requires time, strength, commitment and dedication. I have lost count of the number of time I was weeping in the office, thinking this was just too hard! And I was once on the brink of giving up when unexpected incident in life hit me harshly. I know for sure I could not have undertaken this journey that I did nor have got to the end in one piece without the enormous love, support, encouragement and inspiration of many people who have accompanied me along this long journey. Because of them, I am now able to realise my own aspirations too!

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

China has been experiencing extraordinary economic and social development since the 1970s. Such rapid economic and social progress has resulted in unprecedented large scale rural to urban migration across the country. Rural-urban migration that has resulted is seen as the major driver of China's urban growth over the past few decades and a passport out of poverty, with more than 500 million people estimated to have been pulled out of poverty (Tisdell 2009). However, despite China's impressive urbanization achievements, a long-lasting and highly peculiar Chinese institution – the local household registration system (*Hukou* in Chinese) continues to create significant social injustice and regional disparities. It is considered to be the major factor inhibiting labour mobility within the country as it strictly confines people's entitlement to basic social benefits such as health care and free education to their home places only, that is, these services are available only in one's place of birth, not where they move for work. It is therefore under this context that the 'left-behind children' phenomenon has emerged as Chinese rural parents who out-migrate to urban regions for work have to leave their children behind in their original rural communities where they are entitled to receive social benefits.

The number of 'left-behind children' in China is overwhelming as it has reached approximately 61 million in 2013(All-China Women's Federation, 2013). Since 2004, there has been a growing national recognition, and increasing attention, given to the issue of children 'left behind' in rural communities all over China(Duan & Zhou, 2005; F. Zhou &

Duan, 2006) [1]. However, it is only in recent years that this highly marginalized and significantly disadvantaged group has become the focus of international academics. It remains an under-researched area however, and one which needs much greater understanding. Many studies have attempted to present an overall picture of this 'left-behind children' phenomenon in China by providing some basic demographic data of this population; including the amount and the geographical distribution, and/or by offering different definitions of the term— 'left-behind children'. Systematic overviews of 'left-behind children' in the areas of educational outcomes, behavioural development, social interaction skills, and psychological well-being have also been offered (Duan & Wu, 2009; Duan & Zhou, 2005; Lin & Yuan, 2007; Wen & Lin, 2012; Xiang, 2007; Ye & Pan, 2011). There are also studies specifically looking at the impact of being 'left behind' on children's educational outcomes and psychological development in different national contexts, demonstrating how the experience of growing up as a 'left-behind child' can not only damage children's physical well-being, for example malnutrition, but less visibly yet more importantly, can also impose damage on their psychological stability and character (Berker, 2009; He et al., 2012; Valtolina & Colombo, 2012; Z. Zhou, Sun, Liu, & Zhou, 2005). However, debates remain on how 'left-behind children' should be defined and there have been mixed findings on whether being 'left behind' has a negative impact on children's educational outcomes at all. Also, many of these studies tend to be mainly quantitative and so lack the depth of exploration and understanding (Luo, Wang, & Gao, 2009; Ren, 2007). Therefore, whilst they describe the area of 'left-behind children', they do not clearly explore and explain their experiences of

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[1] When using EndNote, if there is more than one author with the same surname in the thesis, EndNote will automatically add the acronym of the author's first name so that the reader can tell who is who. This is APA style as it is clearly stated in the APA Manual book under the heading of 6.14 (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 176). In this thesis, there are a number of places where initials appear in the citations, which especially occurs with Chinese names as it is very common that people have the same last name. They are all due to the same reason as explained. Here, in particular, although the author with the surname 'Zhou' is the same person in both journal articles cited, there is another author whose surname is also 'Zhou' cited somewhere else in the thesis, thus, an initial of this author's first name appears.

being 'left behind', at home as well as at school. My study aims to fill some gaps in this field by conducting a qualitative piece of research and exploring in-depth the post-compulsory educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' who are in their last year of junior high school (Grade 9). This was explored in relation to their educational experiences within the context of being 'left behind'.

Not only will this research add depth to our understanding of this area, it will also be useful given the context of numerous global callings for a commitment to child protection and equality in education. Dating back to 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December, proclaimed the equal and inalienable rights for all peoples in all nations. Specifically, it stated that every individual is entitled to a certain standard of living and that they should not be deprived of adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services (Article 25). Alongside this, everyone has the right to education, not just accessible and equal educational opportunities, but also education that aims for the full development of the human personality (Article, 26). Subsequently, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. These proclaimed the child's rights to special protection which enables him to develop fully, and in a healthy and normal manner with freedom and dignity (Principle 2), the care, affection and security under the responsibility of his parents for the full and harmonious development of his personality and a happy childhood (Principle 6), and guidance for the best of the child's interests towards receiving proper education from his parents who should take the responsibility in the first place (Principle 7). China has ratified several UN international human rights treaties including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified in 1992) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ratified in 2001) (HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA, 2013).

More recently, the Education for All (EFA) movement unified 164 governments to make a global commitment to provide basic education for all children, youth and adults; governments, development agencies, civil society and other private sector were pledged to work together to achieve the EFA goals by 2015. The Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitment (UNESCO, 2000)was adopted as the guiding principle which enables UNSECO, as the leading agency, to coordinate partners as well as focus its activities on key areas. China, having long been one of the member countries who signed up for the international cooperation agreement since the 1990 Jomiten Conference, had presented its EFA 'Country Report' as an integral part of the East Asia regional report whose outcome, along with results from 5 other regional reports, provided a solid basis for the World Education Forum, Dakar, April 2000(Chinese National Commission for UNESCO, 2000). This report demonstrated what actions for EFA had been implemented in China since the 1990 Jomiten Conference, and what had been achieved, challenged and set up as future developmental strategy, goals or policy measures to promote EFA in China. Given this trend of recognition for and commitment to child protection and educational equality in the global context mentioned above, this study is also a response to those international callings.

Chinese 'left-behind children' are the product of China's process of urbanization and modernization which cannot be prevented. However, there is much we could do to assist and support these children. Furthermore, 'left-behind children' are often the most deprived and disadvantaged, particularly in relation to rural education in China (Hannum, 2003; Tan, 2011; Xiang, 2007). Hence, it is hoped that this research will throw some light on policy guidance for children 'left behind' in particular and rural education in China in general. This study aims to fill several gaps in knowledge within the phenomenon of 'left-behind children'. By

exploring the educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' in rural China, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding in this important but still under-researched area. To this end, the thesis aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the future education aspirations of 'left-behind children' in the final year of junior high school?

2. What factors impact on these educational aspirations and if they differ, why are they different?

3. How does being 'left behind' impact on the educational experiences and aspirations of the 'left-behind children' included?

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

This chapter opens the thesis by introducing the research in general and presenting key concepts and the conceptual framework. In Chapter Two I offer some background information important in understanding the 'left-behind children' phenomenon in China, make a review of some existing research findings among the 'left-behind children' studies and identify the research gap, and point out the significance of conducting this research in the context of global callings for a commitment to child protection and equality in education.

In Chapter Three I discuss some important theoretical concepts that are widely used to understand and explain class reproduction within education, with a particular concern on how family impacts on educational aspirations. I apply these mainly western-contextualized theoretical ideas to the Chinese social and cultural context and identify cultural nuances. I also address some alternative theoretical perspectives including the Rational Action Theory

and self-efficacy as an explanatory tool to understand different educational ambitions that seems more individualized. In this chapter, I also explore literature relating to social support outside of the family, the role of school and friends within education and aspirations.

In Chapter Four I present the rationale for my qualitative case study research design, methods and the process of data collection and analysis, as well as addressing some ethical considerations concerning ethnographic research with young people. I also present, in this chapter, my reflexivity as a researcher, as well as issues that doing research raised for me, such as challenges and emotions. Chapter Five provides detailed information on the region the research was carried out in as well as a rich descriptive account of the school; in addition, information about my stay in the school during data collection is also provided, including my daily life situation, travelling and transport issues, and the process of building a trusting relationship with students.

Chapter Six and Seven are the empirical chapters of my thesis. The two chapters present the results of my findings and are organized to reflect the different educational attitudes and aspirations of 'left-behind children'. Chapter Six addresses 'University non-aspirers and "the undecided"' (i.e. those who do not intend to receive university education or those who have not yet decided), Chapter Seven addresses 'University aspirers' (i.e. those who intend to receive university education). In these chapters I explore students' aspirations in relation to their attitudes to education, values and life goals, and sense of self, and I situate these ambitions within the context of their families and their experiences and relationships with school and friends. Impacts of 'left-behind-ness' on aspirations are also explored.

Chapter Eight is the discussion chapter. In this chapter, I discuss the main findings that emerge from the data and address them in relationship to key theoretical concepts within macro sociological theories that have been widely used to address educational inequalities, as well as some empirical findings pertaining to these theoretical ideas. Whilst some evidence presented supports popular theoretical assumptions concerning how social background shapes aspirations, other evidence indicates that there are cultural nuances when applying these mainly western-contextualized theoretical ideas to the Chinese context. Other important individual factors that appear significant in shaping the different attitudes and aspirations among 'left-behind children' included are also discussed, particularly in terms of how students evaluate future choices differently, relationships and degree of emotional connection within the family, and self-beliefs in the ability of achieving in education or other life ambitions. I also discuss some of the findings that relate to the role of community, school and friends in aspirations, and finally discuss how being 'left behind', as a distinct social characteristic of these socially disadvantaged young people, impacts on educational experiences and aspirations.

In the Conclusion Chapter I present a summary of the main findings of this research and recapitulate the main points raised in the Discussion Chapter. In addition, contributions of this research, the limitations of this research and suggestions for future studies, as well as implications of the research are presented.

1.3 Key Concepts and Conceptual Framework

The following are the key concepts that underpin this research and are framed in reference to literature that relates to the focus of this study.

1.3.1 'Left-behind children'

The term 'left-behind children' first appeared in the Chinese literature in 1994 (Ren, 2007). Since 2005, there has been a dramatic increase in research nationwide covering many issues of this special group of population in China (Lin & Yuan, 2007). Yet, up until now, there is still a great disparity in the definition of 'left-behind children' amongst researchers in China in terms of what it actually means. Due to the absence of a universally accepted definition, Chinese academics tend to define 'left-behind children' according to the specific purpose of their research in relation to the local condition of the place where the research is conducted (Luo et al., 2009). However, considering the extremely complex state of a country like China, for example, geographically, culturally and socially, providing a precise, unanimously accepted definition for the term 'left-behind children' seems to be very difficult.

Lin and Yuan (2007)did a very useful study in which they reviewed 313 research papers published between 2005 and 2006 in China and found that only 43 gave a specific definition of the term 'left-behind children'. From all the definitions given in those studies, they identified 6 main types in which a generic concept of 'left-behind children' was largely acknowledged, with certain defining characteristics which were distinctively adopted by different authors. The 6 main types of definitions are as follows:

1.'Left-behind children' refers to those children under the age of 16 who need to be taken care of by adults but are left in their original regions because of their parents' or one parent's migration to work in other places (Wu et al, 2004, cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007).

2. 'Left-behind children' refers to those children whose parents or one of the parents out-migrates to other places but they are left in their registered home place so they cannot live with their parents. There are two authors who specifically put an age limit for the children: Wu (2006, cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007) defines them to be under 14, and Yu (2006, cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007) defines them to be between 4 and 16. Wu (2006) also specifies that this is the definition of 'the rural left-behind children' (cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007).

3. The rural 'left-behind children' refers to children who are taken care of, educated and supervised by one of the parents, grandparents or other people in the rural areas because of the long-term migrant status of their parent(s); the corresponding 'not left-behind children' then refers to children under the age of 18 whose parents seldom or never out-migrate and are living with both parents (Ye & Murray, 2005, cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007).

4. 'Left-behind children' refers to children as well as juveniles who are in the stage of primary school education or junior middle school education and are left in their rural home place by their migrant parents (Lv, 2006, cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007).

5. The so called 'left-behind children' refers to a special group of children in the country's rural and urban areas. It is a term used to describe a 'child-parent separation' phenomenon which is caused by the child's parents or one of them who migrates to other places for work (Song, 2006, cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007).

6.'Left-behind children' refers to the under-aged children of the surplus rural laborers who out-migrate for work for a long period of time and leave their children to be looked after by their parents (the child's grandparents) or siblings (the child's uncles or aunts) or even the child itself (Xu, 2006, cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007). Luo (2004) adds the reason why parent(s) leave their children behind can also be for study (cited in Lin & Yuan, 2007).

By comparing and analyzing the main existing definitions mentioned above, Lin and Yuan (2007)suggest that future studies take 7 dimensions into consideration when defining 'left-behind children' in order to identify the research subjects more accurately. These 7 dimensions are:

1. The geographical distribution of children (urban or rural);

2. The schooling status of children (in school or not);

3. The age difference of children (below 14, 16 or 18);

4. The family structure of children (only-child family, divorced family or not);

5. The length of time children being 'left-behind' (shorter or longer than half a year);

6. Children 'left-behind' by both parents or one of them;

7. The main carer/guardian of the children (father/mother, grandparents, uncles/aunts, older siblings or themselves).

Any variation in these 7 dimensions may lead to differences in the research design and the later findings of such enquiries. In this study, 'left-behind children' is defined on the basis of considering all the 7 dimensions, and therefore refers to rural young people in the age range of 14-16 when they should still be in the stage of compulsory education in China and are separated from their parents for at least half a year; who are from any type of family structure (i.e. single, married, extended and so on) and whose main carer/guardian is either the grandparents, other relatives, parents' friends or themselves.

1.3.2 Migration

In this study, 'migration' is in accordance with the definition given by online Oxford Dictionary: *'Movement of people to a new area or country in order to find work or better living conditions'* (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016d). Thus, 'migrant parents' in this study refers to parents who move from their registered rural home place to a new area (metropolis, economically developed cities or other towns) to work so are temporarily living in that area.

1.3.3 The urban-rural classification

The urban-rural dual social structure of the Chinese society has existed since ancient times. So far, it has more than a thousand years of history counting from the Song Dynasty (Y. Li, 2008). However, the urban-rural dual social system, which is fundamentally determined by the economic disparity, did not come into being until the late 1950s (Y. Li, 2008).

The official urban-rural classification in China was stated in the document 'Criteria for the Classification of Urban and Rural Areas'(China State Council, 1955)and has been followed by governments at all levels since then. According to this document, urban areas (cities and towns), should coincide with one of the following criteria:

1. Places which have set up the municipal People's Committee or are at the location of the county People's Committee;

2. Places which have a resident population of more than 2000, with more than 50% of which are non-agricultural population.

3. Places which are at the location of an industrial and mining enterprise, a train station, an industrial and commercial center, a traffic artery, a school above the level of the secondary school, and a scientific research institution as well as a staff residence; these places, although have a resident population of less than 2000, they have a resident population of more than 1000 and over 75% of the residents are non-agricultural, they are called urban-type residential areas.

4. Suburban neighborhoods, no matter what the percentage of the agricultural population is, are defined as urban areas.

On the contrary, areas which do not conform to these criteria are defined as rural.

However, it must be noted that a document called 'Suggestions on Further Promoting Reform of the Household Registration System' has very recently been issued by China State Council (China State Council, 2014). The main message emerging from the document is that the government will remove the limits on *Hukou* registration in townships and small cities, relax restrictions in medium-sized cities, and set qualifications for registration in big cities. Specifically, it confirmed 11 concrete policy measures covering 3 aspects including adjusting the household registration transfer policy, innovating on population management, and safeguarding the legal rights and benefits of rural residents who have moved to cities and other permanent residents who have settled down in urban areas. However, for students and families in this research, these reforms do not seem to bring any change on their current situations.

1.3.4 Educational attainment

The word 'attainment' is defined by online Oxford Dictionary as *'the action or fact of achieving a goal towards which one has worked'* (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016b). Therefore, 'educational attainment' refers to the action or fact that someone achieves a goal towards which one has worked in education. The goal in education one has achieved is usually manifested through scores in school examinations or academic certificates. In this study, 'educational attainment' is specifically measured by two criteria in the Chinese context:

1. A student's school examination scores of any subject taught in his/her grade in school in conformity to the national curriculum or a revised version of the national curriculum owing to the unique local feature in terms of economic development, cultural background or local people's level of education, and so on.

2. A student's high school entrance examination score, which directly determines his/her admission of high school and is also an indicator of a student's academic competence to proceed with a higher level non-compulsory educational phase.

1.3.5 Aspiration

The definition of 'aspiration' is provided by Oxford Dictionary as *'a hope or ambition of achieving something'*(English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016a).'Educational aspiration' thus refers to one's hope or ambition of achieving something in education. Sometimes, the meaning of 'aspiration' and its synonym 'expectation', which is defined as *'a belief that someone will or should achieve something'*(English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016c), may be used interchangeably. In this study, a distinction was made between 'aspiration' and 'expectation'. The focus of this study is on students' educational aspiration i.e. ambitions of the highest level towards which they would like to attain in education, rather than their expectations of what they will attain, mediated by the self-measurement of their actual academic ability or their family background. However, considering the highly selective Chinese education system, expectations, especially mediated by student's own measurement of their attainment level was considered to be one important factor that determines and influences aspirations in this study.

Moreover, although the focus of the study is on educational aspirations, in light of previous studies on young people's aspirations (Baird, Rose, & McWhirter, 2012; Rose & Baird, 2013), possible aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' seen as their hopes, goals, plans or dreams are explored more broadly to understand how these young people's subjective perceptions could play a role in shaping their educational aspirations.

1.3.6 Conceptual framework

Educational aspirations of students in this study were explored within their context of being 'left behind', which includes their family context, and their community and school context. To understand the family context of these young people, factors including family resource and support, and in particular adult-child relationship and connection within the family were explored. To understand the community and the school context of these young people, factors including the connection and interaction among community members, family-school relationship, school-based resource and service, the role of teacher, teacher-student relationship, and friendship were explored. In addition, individuals' subjective perceptions and perspectives relating to life and the future were also explored, including attitudes and values, goals, dreams and plans, and a sense of 'the self'.

Chapter 2 The 'Left-behind children' Phenomenon in China

2.1 Economic Reform and Urbanization in China

Since 1978, as a result of the market reforms and open-door policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping[2], China has experienced extraordinary economic and social progress(Tisdell, 2009). This rapid economic and social development has been supported alongside China's urbanization over the past 30 years. According to Tisdell (2009), urbanization in China for the last three decades has been unprecedented in scale and has seen many remarkable achievements: high GDP growth averaging about 10 percent per year and a rapid transformation of the economy which has attracted a vast investment in manufacturing and infrastructure. In total, approximately 260 million people have out-migrated from agricultural regions to cities and engaged in activities in industry and services (The World Bank & The Development Research Center of the State Council the People's Republic of China, 2014). As a result, more than 500 million people are estimated to have been pulled out of poverty and a large number of these are believed to have participated in China's massive rural-urban migration. To illustrate, the estimated urban population rose from less than 12 percent of the total in 1978 to 52 percent in 2012 (The World Bank & The Development Research Center of the State Council the People's Republic of China, 2014). China, with a population of 1.3 billion, is now an '*upper-middle-income country*' (The World Bank & The Development Research Center of the State Council the People's Republic of China, 2014, p. 3) and has become the second largest economy in the world, playing an increasingly important and influential role in the global economy and has an advancing international status (The World Bank & The Development Research Center of the State Council the People's Republic of

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[2] Deng Xiaoping (22 August 1904 – 19 February 1997), transliterated as 'Tong Shau-ping', was a Chinese revolutionary and statesman. He was the paramount leader of China from 1978 until his retirement in 1992. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deng_Xiaoping, retrieved on 28 September 2015)

China, 2014; Tisdell, 2009). However, whilst China's booming economy has been facilitated by rapid urbanization, it has also brought about many challenges and problems including environmental degradation, serious scarcity of natural resources, and growing urban-rural inequality (The World Bank & The Development Research Center of the State Council the People's Republic of China, 2014). Within the overall context of China's urbanization, rural-urban migration is considered as one of the main factors that has caused the 'left-behind children' phenomenon.

Despite China's impressive urbanization achievements, the country is still less urbanized than expected in terms of people's income (The World Bank & The Development Research Center of the State Council the People's Republic of China, 2014), and there is still a staggering income gap between urban and rural households, even during economic reforms. For example, recent estimation shows incomes in urban areas are more than five times those in rural regions (H. Gao, 2013), and this gap is increasing over time. This makes China one of the countries in the world with the highest urban-rural income ratio (Sicular, Yue, Gustafsson, & Li, 2007). Moreover, China's urban-rural income gap has also contributed substantially to the overall social inequality between rural residents and urban residents in areas such as health care, housing, basic education and other social welfare (Dollar, 2007; Sicular et al., 2007).

2.2 Urban-Rural Inequality in China

The large size of China's urban-rural income gap and its substantial and increasing contribution to overall inequality within the country have been universally reported. There are also regional differences in China's urban-rural gap: the urban-rural income gap as well as its contribution to inequality is much larger in western China than in the eastern or central

regions. With respect to what causes the urban-rural gap, differences in education level has been pointed out to be the most important factor, and the education-related differences are not only between urban and rural areas but also among provinces as a result of spatial differences in incomes, in public expenditures on education, and in patterns of migration. Although China's local household registration system (*Hukou*) and related policies have been the major hindrance which continue to inhibit rural-to-urban mobility and create significant social injustice and regional disparities, studies on urban-rural gaps in other countries suggest migration is not the remedy for the elimination of the income gap or the equalization of the returns to education and other individual characteristics. On the whole, despite substantial government-led initiatives to ease restrictions on migration as well as the increasing number of migrants, there is little sign showing China's urban-rural gaps are reducing. A number of factors have been identified as being contributed to the persistence of spatial disparities in China, including non-labour income, access to community networks and support systems, job discrimination, access to schooling and other public services and so on (Sicular et al., 2007).

2.3 Rural-Urban Migration in China

Rural-urban migration, as a result of China's rapid economic growth, is seen as the major driver of China's rising urban growth over the last several decades (K. H. Zhang & Song, 2003).

Rural-urban migrants have made immense contributions to the urban construction and development in the destination cities. However, most of these migrants can only find low-skill manual jobs on construction sites or factories and are paid considerably less than urban natives (H. Gao, 2013). Also, they are often excluded from the urban public service system in the host locality, to which only local urban inhabitants are eligible. Therefore, they face both

inequality and discrimination in their daily life due to their 'rural residents' status' in these urban areas (J. Zhang, Li, Fang, & Xiong, 2009).

These migrants, without local household registration status in the migrant destination, are not entitled to the local full benefits of citizenship, therefore facing daunting problems: difficulties in school enrolment for their children and limited access to health care, adequate housing, and employment opportunities. Hence, they are called 'the floating population'(Liang & Ma, 2004). According to Liang and Ma (2004), in 2000, the estimated number of the floating migrant population accounted for 13 per cent of the overall urban population, and very likely the estimate should be much higher today. The emergence of 'the floating population' is the result of two causes, the booming economic development of China's coastal areas accompanied by its growing urban demand for cheap labour and the Chinese government's control over geographic mobility within the country by enforcing the local household registration system. It has been pointed out that 'the floating population' not only has begun to play an essential role in economic development and income growth in rural China, it will also strongly affect China's urbanization patterns and its population distribution among regions across the country (Liang & Ma, 2004).

2.4 The Local Household Registration System –*Hukou*

China's rising inequality including the urban-rural income gap and other social disparities is fundamentally attributed to a series of national policies and administrative systems that have led to the significant urban-rural bifurcation in the country. One of such administrative systems is called the local household registration system or the '*Hukou*' system. Roughly translated, *Hukou* means one's registered citizenship record in the country.

China's *Hukou* system was first put forth in the 1950s, since then, it has served as a national regulatory strategy to restrict population mobility and redefine city-countryside and state-society relationships. In compliance with the *Hukou* system, every Chinese citizen has to be officially and constantly registered with the *Hukou* authority (the *Hukou* police) since birth, as the legal basis for personal identification, and information will be documented and verified as the person's permanent *Hukou* record. A *Hukou* record includes a person's non-agricultural (urban) or agricultural (rural) status, his legal address and location, his employment, his family information, his religious belief, and physical features (Wang, 2005). Being registered in the *Hukou* system means an individual has primarily established his identity, citizenship and official status, which all firmly relate to every aspect of a person's daily life in terms of eligibility for food, clothing, shelter, employment, education, marriage and joining the army (T. Cheng & Selden, 1994). However, one's legal permanent residence acquisition as well as all other community-based rights, benefits and opportunities are only confined to his *Hukou* locality. And one cannot permanently change his *Hukou* location and especially his *Hukou* status type from agricultural (rural) to non-agricultural (urban) without proper government authorization (Wang, 2005).

This long-lasting and highly peculiar Chinese institution is considered to have played a complex role in China: on the one hand, it facilitates economic growth and assists in enhancing socio-political stability, while on the other hand, it creates significant social injustice and regional disparities, and causes strong tensions in areas such as human rights, equality of citizenship, and basic ethics (Wang, 2005). It is also a major hurdle that inhibits labour mobility within the country and results in migrant parents choosing to leave their children in the original rural places of residence in order to receive eligible education. This is

simply because the system strictly confines people's entitlement to social benefits such as health care and free education to their home places only (H. Gao, 2013).

2.5 The Basic Education System in China

This section discusses the basic education system in China. Four key issues will be examined here in order to provide background information about how the current national education system works. The four key issues are 1) educational stages, 2) exam-oriented education, 3) unequal distribution of educational resources, and 4) basic education in rural China.

2.5.1 Educational stages

'Basic education' in China comprises of pre-school education, nine-year compulsory education from elementary to junior high school, and standard senior high school(China.org.cn, 2006). There was also a 5-year alternative primary school education system which was implemented especially in rural areas during much of the 1980s and 1990s(N. Zhou & Zhu, 2007). A tiny number of students (2%) have 4-year schooling at junior high school stage (China Education Center, 2015). Today however, most places across the country are following the 6-year primary school education and 3-year junior high school education system.

China's basic education system can also be divided into two main stages: the compulsory education stage and the post-compulsory education stage. The compulsory education stage takes 9 years to complete, divided into 6-year primary school education and 3-year junior

high school education. Schools in compulsory education stage enrol students in the catchment area.

The 'Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China' was first introduced in 1986. Since then, governments at various levels have committed to implementing the 9-year compulsory education with the aim of the universalization of basic education nationwide, especially in rural, poor and ethnic minority regions (China Education Center, 2015). This law was amended and adopted at the 22nd Session of the Standing Committee of the Tenth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China on June 29, 2006, and was soon enacted and put into effect in the same year (Lawinforchina, 2015). This amended law stipulated its purpose of '*guaranteeing the right to compulsory education of school-age children and adolescents, ensuring the implementation of the compulsory education policy and promoting the quality of the whole nation*' (Article 1). 'Compulsory education' was defined in it as '*theeducation which is implemented uniformly by the State and shall be received by all school-age children and adolescents. It is a public welfare cause that shall be guaranteed by the state*' (Article 2). 'Compulsory education' also means 'free education' for individuals as '*no tuition or miscellaneous fees may be charged in the implementation of compulsory education*', and the State takes responsibility for guaranteeing funds and ensuring the implementation of the compulsory education system (Article 2). Significant progress has been made since the introduction of the 1986 'Compulsory Education Law', for example, statistics show in 2010, the net enrolment of children at primary school age was above 99%, and the primary school graduates who continued their study in junior high schools accounted for 99%. In 2010, the total number of primary schools in China was 280,184 with an

enrolment of 17,388,465 students. Altogether there were 87,665 secondary schools across the country (China Education Center, 2015).

The post-compulsory education stage refers to senior secondary school education, which includes 3-year senior high schools, adult high schools, secondary specialized schools, vocational high schools, technical schools, and secondary technical schools for adults (China.org.cn, 2015). Generally speaking, students who complete junior high school will either further their education to senior high school, which takes 3 years to finish and will lead on to higher education (university or college) to obtain a degree or vocational high school, which is prone to immediate employment after graduation. The emergence of vocational high schools (*zhi ye gao zhong)* is a result of China's economic reforms in the 1980s which brought market elements into the economy, eventually transforming the traditional socialist 'planned economy' pattern into the socialist 'market-oriented economy' pattern (K.-M. Cheng, 1994). This 'market-oriented economy' pattern has radically changed the operational mechanism of the economy in China and, as a consequence, it has also brought fundamental changes to young adults' ideologies. For example, the notion of 'job' and the concept of 'choice'[3] were developed among young Chinese citizens for the first time in over forty years as a result of great variety of jobs that were created and offered by all types of industrial and commercial units in the country (K.-M. Cheng, 1994). Vocational high schools emerged to meet the needs of individuals who prioritized specific skills training that were considered as making students more employable. These tended to be in and remain in areas where the job market is promising. The programmes and courses are essentially in-house training

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[3]Since the communist take-over in 1949 and before China's economic reforms in the early 1980s, jobs and choices were perceived by Chinese people especially young school graduates as submitting to the national needs for the purpose of socialist development. There was strong indoctrination and ideological education in the socialist China at that time that young people should always be subject to the national needs. It was unequivocally propagated across the nation that when there was contraction between individual interests and collective interests, the later should always prevail. (K.-M. Cheng, 1994)

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programmes for specific employers (K.-M. Cheng, 1994). As a result, graduates of these schools are often readily recruited by potential employers and are usually paid a higher salary than graduates from elsewhere (K.-M. Cheng, 1994). In this sense, such job-oriented training provided in these schools is more attractive than higher education for young adults who value the practicality of this type of education as universities do not assign jobs.

2.5.2 Exam-oriented education culture

China adopts a highly selective elite education system, with the key feature being that it is exceedingly exam-centric. This education system could be considered to originate from the historical old imperial examination system which helped to select the best administrative officials for the country some two thousand years ago. For Chinese people, examinations are inseparable from their life: from school admissions to job recruitment and promotion, numerous competitive examinations are used to select the most capable and qualified candidates for higher level education and employment. Stephen Wong wrote in the Asia Times, '*It's possible that no other country has as many exams as China*' (Asia Times Online, 2009).

As mentioned above, China's current education system is a state-controlled public education system with an emphasis on the nine-year compulsory education system designed by the Chinese Ministry of Education(Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). At the compulsory education stage, examinations are mainly used by the school for assessing students' course grade at the end of each term[4] as an indicator of students' learning outcomes. A report that presents a student's score for each subject, the overall score of all subjects and his/her position in the

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[4] In China, there are two terms in each academic year: the autumn term and the spring term. The autumn term starts in every September and ends in January or February; the spring terms starts in every February or March and ends in July.

league table will be completed by the school before a term finishes and will be sent to parents as a debriefing of the student's academic performance in the past term(Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). However, at the post-compulsory education stage, especially in senior high schools, examination takes a leading role in high school students' life. Examination scores are no longer numbers only shown in the school report, much more importantly, they determine the chance of a student going to university as well as what type of university he/she can apply: only the top-performing students can enrol in prestigious universities in the country(Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). Also, as an anecdotal evidence, there is a deep-rooted belief among Chinese people that the better the university a student graduate from, the more chances a student will get for satisfactory jobs and enjoy opportunities that are off-limits to lower scoring students. In this sense, performing well in examinations is vitally important for Chinese high school students as it largely determines their life chances.

Students in China who finish the three-year senior high school take a key examination that will determine their future. This exam is called the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) and is known colloquially in China as '*gaokao*'. Taking this exam is a mandatory requirement for entering Chinese universities. The *gaokao* system started in 1952 and apart from a period of suspension for ten years during China's Cultural Revolution[5], it has been adopted as the gatekeeper of university admittance in China until today(Davey, Chuan, & Higgins, 2007). Every June (on the 6th and the 7th), millions of high school students take the *gaokao* exam, and students try very hard to score as high as possible in *gaokao*.

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[5] The ten-year Cultural Revolution in China: '*a political movement during 1966-1977 when education was disrupted and universities were closed*' (Davey, Chuan, & Higgins, 2007, p.387).

Under such a 'one exam determines all' cultural atmosphere, *gaokao* has been a primary concern and priority in the nation. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine the pressure Chinese high school students are under as well as the overwhelming impact this highly exam-oriented education system via *gaokao* has on millions of high school students across China.

On the one hand, the Chinese exam-centric education system causes tremendous stress for students, for example, there are up to about 10 hours a day of studying time plus homework; on the other hand, there is a tacit recognition among parents and teachers that only high-achieving students are praised and valued, which oftentimes leaves the lower-achieving students being marginalized, disregarded and disvalued (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). In addition, a highly exam-driven education system can often downplay other essential developments for a student including creativity, abstract reasoning and critical thinking. It can also be seen as creating students with inadequate social development in terms of psychological well-being and personality formation (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011).Kirkpatrick and Zang (2011) also claimed that China's mainstream formal education with an excessive focus on testing has resulted in many Chinese students considering passing examinations as the only aim of learning.When linking this to students of this research,especially those who achieve less well, it is important to consider that this highly exam-driven education system in which examination score is the only indicator of a student's academic ability and learning outcome may very likely result in a student with lower scores having less confidence or motivation in educational pursuits.

2.5.3 Inequality in education

Alongside with the urban-rural inequality embedded in the urban-rural societal discrepancy in Chinese society, there is also an overall educational gap among geographic regions in China. This gap may be a result of the general disparity in terms of economic development between different geographic regions or the historical, geographic and sociocultural differences between provinces(Rong & Shi, 2001). Nevertheless, substantial educational inequalities remain and are increasing across provinces and within provinces, between rural and urban areas and within rural and urban areas across the country. Previous studieshave provided empirical findings regarding inequality in education in China. For example, women, ethnic minorities and the disabled are found to be the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups with the highest illiteracy rate and the lowest educational attainment in Chinese society(Rong & Shi, 2001). A person who resides in a less developed region has much more disadvantages on enrolment and attainment than someone resides in a more affluent region(X. Zhang & Kanbur, 2005). This spatial difference is more astonishing if the effect of gender, minority status and disability is considered, for example, a minority woman in a less developed province in northwest China is 24 times more likely to be illiterate than a Han[6] male in Beijing (Rong & Shi, 2001).

Regarding to what causes such inequality, previous studies have also attempted to provide an explanation. Rong and Shi (2001) point out China's lack of investment in education is the major factor in its educational problems; X. Zhang and Kanbur (2005) indicate that fiscal decentralization in China has disempowered the central government from redistributing economic as well as educational resources across the county, therefore exacerbating

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[6] The Han Chinese is the major ethnic group in China which accounts for over 90% of the population; besides Han, there are 55 ethnic groups and they are called 'the ethnic minorities'.

inequalities as many local governments especially those in poor regions with insufficient revenues can hardly afford to invest more in education. And given the national policies towards economic and social development are overall '*urban-biased*'(X. Zhang & Kanbur, 2005, p. 192), hence there are huge spatial differences in terms of educational resources between urban and rural areas as more and better resources are aggregating into cities and towns. H. Liu (2014)also confirms that uneven distribution of educational resources is one primary cause of educational inequality, particularly in rural China, as high-quality resources are only aggregating into county seats. The other cause is unreasonable enrolment principle, for example, the principle of 'enrolment into nearby schools', which makes those high-quality schools (*keypoint* schools) only available for students in the serving district or students with more affluent parents who could bypass the principle by paying sponsorship fee(H. Liu, 2014).

2.5.4 Education in rural China

As mentioned above, the policy of fiscal decentralization in China profoundly exacerbates inequality in education resulting in variation in public educational expenditures. In the wake of decentralization, rural China on the whole, being much less economically developed, is becoming more disadvantaged. Without sufficient local government revenues or subsidies from upper levels of government, governments as well as individual families in many poor rural areas have to take on more of the burden of financing and managing schools in the local region, as a result, salary obligations to teachers are often not met and high-quality education system is not provided(Hannum, 2003). It has also been clarified that both socioeconomic status and gender have an impact on people's educational opportunities in rural China – girls in poor villages are the least likely to be supported for schooling. However, with more

increased household income as well as increased village income, rural girls are proved to benefit more than rural boys in terms of educational opportunities (Hannum, 2003).

With regard to basic education in rural China, evidence has shown that dropouts especially at the secondary level remains as a serious problem, thus indicating the 9-year compulsory education in rural areas has not been provided and received as it should be (Q. Li, Zang, & An, 2013; F. Liu, 2004; Yi et al., 2012). In addition, people in rural areas tend to have their own perceptions and decisions about basic education that are believed to be the result of rational choices by the students and their parents as they often calculate the costs and benefits of receiving education. For them, getting education or not is more of a practical matter rather than a fulfilment of obligation under the compulsory education law (F. Liu, 2004). As a strong belief in social mobility through education is held among Chinese rural families, education is seen as the only means to break away from agricultural life. To a large extent, for most parents in rural China, the primary aim of education is not to learn general knowledge or practical skills but to get access to higher social status and prestige; therefore, if investing in education is not deemed guaranteed to pay off economically and /or socially to the fullest extent, education is very likely regarded by rural parents as worthless (F. Liu, 2004).

Chapter 3 Family and Education

3.1 Introduction

Research highlights the importance of the role of family in determining educational outcomes as well as the life course. Of particular concern in educational research is how poverty in association with other background disadvantages could adversely influence children and young people's educational prospects. Given the focus of this research on 'left-behind children', understanding the role of family is of particular significance. In this chapter, I therefore address some of the ways that academics make sense of the role of family in shaping individuals' educational outcomes and discuss some of the ideas regarding how poverty at the level of family underpins individuals' educational experiences and aspirations towards higher education and occupation.In addition, a focus on the influence of school, and friends and peers will also be considered.

The role of family in children and young people's educational life has always had a central place in the sociology of education. The crucial role of family has long been pointed out by Musgrave (1979)and Goode (1982) because it is in the family a child begins the process of socialization and receives their primary education. Family background, usually considered in terms of the socio-economic status (or in some case the 'social class') of a child's parents, is believed to have a potent influence on their educational outcomes and opportunities (Croll, 2004).

Within the umbrella term 'family background', there are many different dimensions or characteristics that are used as an indicator of what 'family background' actually means. Some studies look at the impact of family background on children or young people's educational performance by measuringfamily income, family structure, and/or parenting factors, whereas some others correlate family background as measured specifically by family socio-economic status (SES) with children or young people's educational outcomes (Caro, Cortina, & Eccles, 2014; Chudgar & Shafiq, 2010; Considine & Zappalà, 2002; Hartas, 2011; X. Liu & Lu, 2008; Nonoyama-Tarumi, 2008; Zhao, Valcke, Desoete, & Verhaeghe, 2012). Whilst an extensive body of literature has illuminated an important link between family background and educational outcomes, understanding the mechanisms within family is far from straightforward and is even more complex when we consider different family contexts– for example urban versus rural or western versus eastern as well as families with different structures, resources, life styles, values as well as parenting factors. This study is specifically interested in exploring the importance of family in shaping educational experiences as well as forming aspirations of 'left-behind children' in rural China; i.e. the family in which a 'left-behind child' is raised potentially has all the typical characteristics of a disadvantaged family discussed in the literature – as poverty leads them to migrate for work and thus, the 'left-behind-ness', plus those potentially associated with their rural context and this 'left-behind-ness'. Whilst family poverty as well as parents' and carers' low level of education may influence aspirations, as research shows (Fuller, 2009; 2014) the impact of the added disadvantage of potentially extreme isolation resulting from a lack of parental involvement, guidance or advice in the process of future-planning is important to consider in understanding aspirations and choices of these young people. Moreover, 'left-behind children' in this study all have complicated relationships with their family, and as my data clearly shows that

educational choices as well as other life plans of these young people are closely related to, and strongly influenced by their family relationships.

3.2 The Role of Family

3.2.1 Cultural capital

For Bourdieu, family is the primary and most important site for individuals in the course of socialization, educational development and occupational pursuits. His ideas of 'capital' in three forms, namely 'economic capital', 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' that an individual possesses, accumulates and profits from are fundamentally domestic products (Bourdieu, 2002). Among the three forms of capital, 'economic capital' refers to financial assets including money, income or investment. It is the base of all other capitals as it facilitates the acquisition of and conversion to cultural and social capital and thus is the most important capital within education because of its link to cultural and social capital. What he calls 'cultural capital' encompasses a wide range of linguistic and cultural competence, manners, preferences as well as orientations that are both personally embodied and institutionalized, as he states '…*subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language*…' (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 495). In particular, Bourdieu uses the level of parental education as a proxy for cultural capital as he believes cultural capital is passed down from parents to children, and the reason why higher-class pupils gain more cultural capital than their lower-class peers is because their higher-class parents, who have a higher level of education, are able to inculcate cultural capital in them at home. It is also this type of capital that is central to Bourdieu's argument of social class inequalities in educational outcomes as well as his much wide-ranging theory of social reproduction because of its link to educational outcomes:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e. the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 282).

In his essay 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction' (Bourdieu, 1977a), Bourdieu's theoretical stand in relation to cultural capital and social reproduction is understood as a process in which people from dominant classes are distributed with much greater cultural capital embodied in individual dispositions, knowledge, skills and abilities and are given privileged access to such capital in its objectified form of cultural resources and goods, these are ratified and rewarded by the educational system in the institutionalized form of cultural capital – i.e. academic qualifications. They monopolise this capital, in Bourdieu's opinion, and exploit it to their own exclusive benefit in order to preserve their superiority related to their advantaged social status and this occurs inter-generationally, therefore disadvantage is reproduced. In particular, it is crucial to his theory that cultural capital facilitates educational success and in turn, educational success is associated with occupational advantage.

As noted earlier, family, according to Bourdieu, serves as the very first site of cultural capital distribution among individuals from different social backgrounds in the social reproduction process. It is within the family that the embodied cultural capital in the form of knowledge, skills, abilities, norms and values istransmitted and inherited between individual family

members deliberately or unconsciously – in most cases, it is the parents who take on the role of transmitting their own embodied cultural capital to their offspring via early domestic education which demands a prolonged process of cultivation, inculcation and assimilation (Bourdieu, 2002). In the course of the transmission of parental embodied cultural capital, parents with high cultural capital ensure their children's participation in 'high' cultural activities such as reading, and museum, concert, theatre attendance. Children who are frequently given the opportunity to practice those cultural activities are more inclined to establish a type of cultural habit based on those things that educational performances are assessed in the educational system as it shows one's familiarity with the 'legitimate' culture (Bourdieu, 1977a). In this sense, children from families who can afford those cultural activities and also have the awareness of how familiarity with this 'high' culture facilitate educational performance and support a much more advantaged position for ensuring educational success.Chinese 'left-behind children' in this study therefore are likely to be at a distinct disadvantage in academic achievement given that not only are they from poor family backgrounds and the education level of their parents is low, there is also little parental involvement in activities and resources that support their schooling, as their parents are working away.These young people inherit little cultural capital from their family where resources are low. In addition, arguably these students also have a much more limited opportunity to participate in any of the activities that support learning due to their geographical location. As they live in a remote rural areawhere there is no provision of such cultural resources, resources such as museums, art galleries and libraries. This, combined with parents' potential lack the awareness and knowledge of how this 'high' culture could benefit their children's education places these 'left-behind children' at additional disadvantage.

For Bourdieu the school continues these initial inequalities and reinforces them by carrying out educational practices in a way that certain linguistic and cultural codes are used throughout the actions of teaching where only students with the corresponding cultural competence are able to understand these codes and therefore achieve academic success (Bourdieu, 1977a).For example, those with lower cultural capital tend to have less vocabulary (restricted linguistic capital), therefore, if a student with restricted language codes does not understand the elaborate language used by teachers (i.e. the language of the middle, educated classes) in class as well as that appeared in textbooks and examinations, then learning is impaired which will later adversely affect examination performance, educational achievement and consequently occupational opportunities (Fuller, 2009)

The significance of parents in education is also illuminated by research illustrating a link between the cultural capital of parents and educational attainment. For example, pupils' possession of cultural capital constitutive of cultural activities (reading, television, music, and aesthetic cultural participation), cultural knowledge and language which lead them to succeed in education is strongly associated with their parents' cultural capital that is highly classed and transmitted within the household (Sullivan, 2001). Parental cultural capital is also of central importance when considering how parental school involvement can promote attainment. By conducting an intensive ethnographic study of family-school relationships of children at primary school age, Lareau (1997) suggests that even though both middle-class parents and working-class parents in the study valued educational success, their capability of and confidence in promoting their children's educational achievements differed. This difference was then reflected in the way of parents' response to teachers' requests for parental involvement in schooling which was believed by the school to have a strong relationship with academic performance. For Lareau, it is a variety of class-specific cultural factors including

educational levels, perceptions of family-school partnership, and availability of shared information about schooling that become a form of cultural capital which determine parental participation in schooling and consequently influence children's academic performance.

Reay (2004a, 2005) also notes the disparity of mothers' ability to engage in and support their children's schooling is powerfully classed and deeply rooted in cultural capital. This is becausethe middle-class mothers, by drawing on a range of educational knowledge, experiences and strategies, feel more empowered and confident to intervene their children's education; whereas the working-class mothers who have limited skills and knowledge in relation to schooling feel less entitled to provide academic support. In the similar vein, Gillies (2005) demonstrates middle-class parents are more equipped with socially and materially grounded skills and values in the process of childrearing which enables them to effectively involve in their children's educational trajectory, help their children to negotiate disadvantages and challenges, and manage risks. In this fashion, middle-class parents consolidate their advantage and ensure the privilege for their next generation in a meritocratic society. Despite the important differences noted, these are very much related to the Western context where the role of parents in schooling is somewhat different to that in the Chinese context, for example, organizations like the parent-teacher association or a role like parent governors, which aid in facilitating parental participation and involvement in children's education in the UK, do not exist in the Chinese educational system. Therefore, cultural differences in terms of how parents can engage in children's education is important and does need to be acknowledged.

As illustrated, the skills, abilities and resources available to students via the cultural capital of their families, matters. The level of one's educational attainment is largely understood as determined by the cultural skills endowed on them by their family, and their families' ability to engage with their education as well as providing the additional resources that support and encourage their learning. In this sense, family background and social origins will have a crucial bearing on individuals' academic success. Moreover, research suggests family and social background are also important in shaping attitudes and aspirations towards higher education. In a review of research, Fuller, (2009) found that much research highlights how children from different social backgrounds develop class-based subconscious dispositions that predispose them to value education differently and this has an impact on their ambitions and aspirations in terms of further and higher education. Bergerson (2009) also reviewed numerous studies that used Bourdieu's ideas to explore the roles of family in the college choice process of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. She pointed out family characteristics including parents' education and income, parental expectation, parental encouragement, and family's access to information play into the formation of educational aspirations and expectations for college, as well as the provision of resources and support with which these aspirations can be fulfilled in individuals' college-choosing processes. This is because for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, cost is a primary concern, and because of their parents' low educational level and low income, they are not provided with the knowledge or resources in the college choice process, they hence may find they evaluate their options differently to those that do not have to make these considerations.

Given the role of family in relation to the endowment of knowledge, skills, resources and aspirations in relation to education, 'left-behind children' in rural China are potentially more disadvantaged considering both the financial and cultural constraints of their families. Not

only are they economically disadvantaged but also the cultural capital that they potentially inherit from their parents is extremely limited: the educational level of their parents is quite low and most of the time since childhood parents are absent from their daily life so there is little parental involvement. One of the areas of interest to this study is the way in which family poverty as well as parental absence impact on aspirations and choices of 'left-behind children' towards education and occupation. As a theme arising from the literature, educational attainment was also explored as one possible factor in accounting for the formation of aspirations and choices in this study.

In light of this theoretical point of view, family background – in particular, economic capital and cultural capital within the family – weighs heavily in individuals' educational attainment. Parents, as the owner of a family's economic and cultural capital, undoubtedly should be the most important, if not the only factor in accounting for their children's educational experiences and outcomes. These ideas are relevant to this study; a study where children are separated from their parents and thus the impact of this is important to consider. A large body of quantitative research has constantly suggested family monetary resources is a crucial determinant of educational performance, as Bourdieu suggests. Thus, the impact of poverty, as well as cultural resources, is important to consider. West (2007), for example, suggests the effect of parental income and family financial resources is of primary importance in children's academic performance as the availability of financial resources within the family determines how much parents can invest in their children's education and provide additional support for their offspring's educational needs. This indicates the importance of the connection of money and education and the important role that the economic resource of family has in complimenting and supporting schooling. For example, external resources such as computers and the internet are helpful for students doing homework or looking for

information when they are studying at home; students who struggle with certain subjects like maths at school can also be better supported when their parents who can afford private tutoring classes or additional learning materials. Also, economic resources are useful for students' accumulation of cultural capital, as noted above, through participation of extra culturally and educationally enriching activities such as music lessons or museum and theatre visits that help to meet the requirement of the curriculum.

However, Aakvik, Salvanes, and Vaage (2005) argue that the educational level of the parents matters more than parents' income in relation to children's educational attainment. Kim (2004) also suggests different family structures– i.e. family with two biological parents, families with single parents, and family with step parents exert different effects on children's educational performances because different types of families provide their child with different amounts of human resources, for example, the quantity and quality of time parents can devote to provide guidance and supervision of the child's education. In addition, the importance of parents as positive role models, which as an important human capital element, is missed in single-parent families, as a result of the absence of the father or the mother. The author claims that without discounting the importance of family financial assistance, human capital resources and other non-monetary resources that are ultimately propagated through family structure are what determine children's educational success. The same could also be true in those families where the parents are often absent due to the demands on earning a living. These findings lead us to pay special attention to the importance of the non-economic familial influences on education, which for Bourdieu are highly cultural and social embedded. It is also evident in this study that educational experiences, aspirations and career choices of Chinese 'left-behind children' are strongly influenced by a number of family-related factors including parents' low level of education, manual-labour-related working experience, no or

very little parental involvement in education as well as future planning, and especially an absence of emotional support from the family.

3.2.2 Habitus

In addition to cultural capital, another concept Bourdieu employs to explain differentials in educational aspirations is habitus. Bourdieu defines habitus as '*a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 82-83). The word 'dispositions' is the essence of Bourdieu's notion of habitus which encompasses three distinct meanings: '*the result of an organizing action*', in other words, '*structure*'; '*a way of being*' or '*a habitual state*'; and in particular, '*a predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination*' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 214), which implies that the system of dispositions is socially constructed and it determines an individual's entire orientation to the world as well as forms of behaviour and practice within it (Goldthorpe, 2007a). In addition, the habitus '*could be understood as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class*' (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 86). In other words, habitus is the collective attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of actors in their social world who share similar social locations – i.e. socio-economic status.

Those deeply ingrained and internalized past experiences and values then define one's understandings and expectations of, for example, educational and occupational pursuits, which then engenders individuals to create practices as the strategic and practical response to the opportunities and constraints existed in their particular social conditions, instead of

simply and directly conforming to any cultural norms or economic restraints (Swartz, 2002). Aspirations, in essence, are the product of one's habitus in the form of an internalization of objective chances and reflect an individual's subject hopes regarding his or her own chances for educational and occupational success (Macleod, 1995). A child with a poorer social background who grows up in an environment where success is rare is much less likely to develop strong ambitions than his or her middle-class counterpart who come from a social world where people often reach higher levels of attainment and success. Therefore, ambitions and aspirations regarding education and occupation that young people have for themselves are '*the structurally determined products of parental and other reference-group educational experience and cultural life'*(Swartz, 1997, p. 197); whether a student decides to continue schooling or drop out will thus depend on '*their practical expectations of the likelihood that people of their social class will succeed academically*' (Swartz, 1997, p. 197). Habitus, in this sense, functions as what Bourdieu describes '*the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less "sensible" and "reasonable"*'(Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 79).

One's habitus, represented by an amalgamation of dispositions which generate actions and develop aspirations, is a product of unconscious socialization in the family during early childhood (Dumais, 2002). The habitus of individuals does not only result from a person's individual history, but is also a result of the collective history of family and class that the person belongs to(Reay, 2004c). This is because, according to Bourdieu, family serves as the primary site of the creation and transmission of cultural capital; cultural capital acquired within families is the crucial element of the formation of the familial habitus, which in turn is transmitted within classes and further forms the habitus of their members (Goldthorpe, 2007a). Family, in this sense, makes a significant contribution to the formation of class

habitus through family practices from which the social structure and one's place in it are perceived; individuals then determine opportunities and prohibitions in their life and develop aspirations accordingly (Dumais, 2002). As the family continues to play a key role in class reproduction and class inequalities (Crompton, 2006), one's habitus which is developed in its essentials within the family will result in individuals from different social groups forming different aspirations towards education and occupation, thus will further lead to the perpetuation of class reproduction and inequality (Dumais, 2002).

Educational researchers have utilized the concept of habitus to make sense of and understand how family- and class- based dispositions shape young people's aspirations. Reay's important study (1998) demonstrated that working-class students' experiences of higher education choice-making are powerfully influenced by their familial habitus which transmits to young people a collective expectation of what is acceptable *'for people like us'*(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 64-65, cited in Reay, 1998) and a feeling of uncertainty regarding going to university within the family. When considering children's visions of future employment, Pimlott-Wilson (2011) showed evidence that children's imagination and aspiration towards future occupational choice are significantly inculcated by their deeply embedded dispositions formed within family socialization. A child's choice of a particular occupational type over others is strongly bound up with the employment choice his or her family members have made. However, the author also claims the influence of habitus does not always restrict individuals' choices to familiar patterns; it also allows changes and more choices towards futures developed by new experiences and new perspectives. Even though individuals do form higher aspirations towards education, they have less knowledge and few resources thus lack the capacity to pursue their desired future. As Bok (2010) explained, low socioeconomic students do not lack aspirations, but they and their families' cultural capital and habitus, informed by their socio-

economic and cultural backgrounds and life-world experiences, largely hinder them from developing capacities required to realize their aspirations. Having little access to knowledge and information of higher education within the family or from the wider networks beyond the local community, lower socioeconomic students who are required to navigate their aspirations by understanding the field of higher education, drawing on experiences to achieve entry as well as make informed choices are just like being asked to 'do a play without a script'.

Indeed, I also aim to show in this study that Chinese 'left-behind children', as well as their parents, do not all lack aspirations towards higher education; in fact, these parents all have high expectations for their children to achieve higher in education. Bourdieu's notion of habitus is not overly powerful in explaining why a low socioeconomic status and a lack of past experiences regarding higher education did not inhibit some of the 'left-behind children' developing a *'habitus'* to aspire for higher education. This is important as many academics have been dismissive of the deterministic nature of Bourdieu's ideas. For some, it is purely economic resources i.e. money, that influences the choices, and the risks and benefits of these (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997).

3.2.3 Family social capital

Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory offers explanations for the ways in which the limited economic foundation of social class constrains educational achievements and limits aspirations. The idea of class-determined dispositions firmly endowed by one's family is presented as an explanatory tool to understand the role of family in shaping children and young people's aspirations. Alongside Bourdieu's well-known concepts of cultural capital

and habitus - which have been used to explain the profound importance of family - another concept i.e. social capital, has been introduced into education by a number of scholars and is receiving increasing attention.

For Coleman, social capital in supporting children's development refers to *'the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up'* (Coleman, 1987, p. 36). He particularly focused on the importance of social capital of the family in a child's education and defined it as *'the relations between children and parents (and, when families include other members, relationships with them as well)'* (Coleman, 1988, p. S110). The social capital within the family is understood as the relation and interaction between a child and his parents as well as other family members who play an important role in the child's life (e.g. grandparents as the child's main carer in the family), and this notion of capital has a positive effect on educational achievement via a strong relation and a successful interpersonal interaction between a child and parents or other adults in the family (Coleman, 1987). Social capital within the family that benefits a child's education is largely missing as a result of the physical absence of parents in the family as well as a lack of attention given to the child by the parents, and even though parents or other adults are physically present, the social capital in the family is still missing if there is not a strong relation or a good interaction between the child and his parents or other family members. As a result, no matter what level of cultural capital[7]is possessed by the parents, the child cannot profit from it without the availability of social capital within the family too (Coleman, 1987).

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[7] In the article 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', Coleman used the term 'human capital' that was measure by parents' education and defined it as being embodied in the skills, knowledge and capabilities acquired by parents in relation to their child's education. I replaced it with 'cultural capital' here as the concept of cultural capital used in this study is also measured by parents' knowledge, skills and abilities that are relevant to the child's education.

One of the examples Coleman gave to explain what social capital within the family is, how it operates and how is it different from the concept of culture capital (or the term he used as human capital) is this: in one public school district in the United States, many Asian mothers purchased one additional textbook for themselves to study their children's school subjects in order to help improve their children's academic performance (Coleman, 1987, 1988). By providing this example, Coleman intends to illustrate the importance of parental involvement as well as investment of time and effort in their children's academic success. He points out although these mothers had a low level of education so, had little cultural capital, they showed a great concern about their child's education and demonstrated a strong willingness to devote time and effort to supporting it by getting involved and supporting the work of the school. This strong family involvement established via the time and effort spent by the mother, rather than a high level of cultural capital possessed by her, is what promotes educational attainment for the child in the Asian families of Coleman's research. For Coleman (1988), family social capital bears as much weight as family economic or cultural capital does in supporting education of the family's children; and more than that, a lack of social capital in the family - resulting from a weak child-parent relation will largely diminish the power of cultural capital in the family that could benefit the child's education. As a result, he suggests, a lack of this form of family social capital will engender much less satisfying educational outcomes such as dropping out of school (Coleman, 1988).

Coleman's concept of family social capital provides another possible explanation in understanding the impact of family on educational outcomes.He also shared his somewhat pessimistic view of why the modern western society is responsible for what he called '*the*

erosion of social capital' (Coleman, 1987, p. 37) available for the young both inside and outside the family. For example, in the modern American society, a new structure of household and neighbourhood, reflected by both parents working and no longer closely-knit communities, results in individualism and isolation, and diminishes the social capital available for raising children. In particular, alongside this new structure, some of the roles traditionally carried out by the family have been replaced by new social institutions, for example child care centres. These social institutions, regardless of the explicit demand, cannot replace the role of family in providing the social capital characterized as '*attitudes, effort, and conception of self*' that is important for children (Coleman, 1987, p. 38). As a consequence of the loss of family social capital, a child's school achievement as well as other development will be largely decreased. Implicit in this, one could assume, this also has a negative impact on educational aspirations. In this study, the concept of social capital within the family introduced by Coleman can be seen as largely missing among Chinese 'left-behind children'. For these young people, as their parents are working away most of the time, there is an obvious lack of physical presence of parents in the family; moreover, there is also less opportunity for their parents to offer attention, concern and engagement in their lives. It is then not surprising to see that though parents of these young people all have an expectation that their child will attend university, most of these young people did not develop the same ambition for higher education for themselves as their parents did for them.

Coleman's notion of family social capital and its influence on education has been operationalized in empirical studies. For example, Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless (2001) measured family social capital by both the opportunity for parent-child interactions and the quality of parental involvement in their children's lives that includes parents' nurturing activates (e.g. helping with homework or discussing school issues) as well as

efforts spent on providing parental supervision and monitoring. Their finding suggests that students' academic performance is powerfully promoted by a nurturing household environment created by a successful interaction between parents and children via parents involving in children's education and providing guidance and monitoring. Croll (2004) demonstrated that academic performance is not entirely associated with the socio-economic status of families but is also strongly related to within-family social capital attributes such as direct parental monitoring and parent-child communication. Following on from this, Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012)also investigated how social capital was related to young people's educational aspirations in a rural setting. They found family social capital, especially accrued from parents' expectation for their children attending college as well as frequent child-parent interactions and discussions on college and career matters, played a significant role in shaping educational aspirations of rural youth beyond socioeconomic and demographic features.

However, critics like Virginia Morrow have made a number of criticisms of Coleman's notion of social capital as well as many US studies derived from Coleman. Morrow (1999, in Fuller, 2014) pointed out Coleman's formulation of social capital is '*not adequately contextualized in socio-economic history… it is gender-blinded, ethnocentric, and arguably a concept imported from the USA without due attention to cross-and inter-cultural differences*' (Morrow, 1999, p. 749). Such a critique suggests the concept of social capital should be adequately contextualized and understood within specific social and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, whilst drawing on those popular western ideas regarding social capital and its potential usage in explaining educational differentials, my study explored this concept in the Chinese rural context with the families of Chinese 'left-behind children' to explore its value in explaining outcomes for this group of young people.

Morrow also critiqued Coleman's conceptualization of social capital being modelled on only one type of family structure i.e. the nuclear family. Such an approach implicitly lays the blame for not providing sufficient social capital to facilitate children's educational achievement or other developmental needs on one-parent families and other family types(Fuller, 2009),whilst also neglecting conduits for accumulation of and availability to social capital generated from other family structures. This is a very relevant critique given that nearly all of the young people in this study are from not only the non-nuclear family but also have a unique family structure as being 'left-behind children'.

This formulation of social capital, with an over emphasis on the social and economic foundation of the family as a prerequisite for generating social capital and ensuing good educational outcomes is not always supported by research. Research by Fuller (2014) suggests that an over-emphasis on the ability of parents to invest social capital in their children neglects the ability of children themselves - as autonomous active individuals.

Bourdieu (2002), in a different lens, conceptualized social capital as a collectively-owned resource that is strongly linked to group membership and social networks. For Bourdieu, group membership entitles its members to have access to a network of connections in which social capital can be possessed and mobilised to one's own advantage. '*The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent….depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize'*(2002, p. 286), and essentially, the size and value of the network of connections available for individuals depends on what group membershipone has, i.e. a member of a higher-class group or a member of a lower-class group. Furthermore, social

capital is never completely independent of the economic and cultural capital, the possession of which reflects '*a minimum of objective homogeneity*' (2002, p. 286) which is the prerequisite for one's membership of a group and the network of connections. In this sense, social capital is structured and largely determined by class. Membership in groups, involvement in social networks and social relations developed from the membership can be used by social actors to generate profits or secure privilege in various social fields (Siisiainen, 2003). Understandably, different group memberships and different levels of involvement in the social networks, as well as availability of the social connections will result in individual actors controlling different amount of social capital thus exploiting different potentialities. In terms of education, Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital offers an explanation in understanding how members of different social groups negotiate the field of higher education supported by their class-based social networks and social connections, for example, when making post-compulsory educational choices. However, Bourdieu's concept of social capital is less useful in explaining variations in educational aspirations amongst students with similar economic and cultural background, for example in this study, i.e. why Chinese 'left-behind children' of similar social background develop different aspirations for higher education.

3.3 Alternatives to Cultural Explanations

3.3.1 Critiques and Debates

Cultural capital and habitus serve as central concepts of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory that are drawn upon to understand why students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds tend to present less satisfactory educational outcomes. In light of research evidence that shows a strong link between family background and young people's educational trajectories and achievements, cultural capital and habitus which are primarily

endowed on young people by their family would seem to be highly useful constructs for explaining and understanding the role of family in shaping aspirations.

There are, however, debates on and critiques of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, suggesting not over relying on these theoretical tools to explain and understand differentials in educational outcomes. For example, Barone (2006) pointed out Bourdieu's account of educational inequalities postulated in his Cultural Capital Theory (CCT) has been widely disputed by a number of empirical studies which doubt the idea that cultural capital is strictly connected to social class as Bourdieu implies and caution against Bourdieu's argument that cultural capital is the main determinant of school success. By providing a review of empirical literature on the role of cultural capital in schooling outcomes as well as presenting his own comparative analysis of learning outcomes and their determinants among 25 countries, the author concluded that cultural capital is far from providing an exhaustive explanation of schooling inequalities and given the limited explanatory power of CCT, other mechanisms such as social ambition, economic and cognitive resources which also underlie the impact of family background on student achievement should also be considered when explaining inequalities in school. Sullivan (2002) also argued that the concept of habitus which is never been clearly defined by Bourdieu is '*too nebulous to be operationalized*' (p. 150) and '*is at once too all-inclusive and too vacuous to be of any use to empirical researchers*' (p. 163). She also pointed out that although the link between the concept of cultural capital and educational attainment has been the focus of a great deal of empirical studies, there have been mixed findings, largely due to varied definitions and operationalizations of this concept. Given the majority of empirical work has found that cultural capital does not explain most of the social class effects in relation to educational attainment - and it remains unclear whether educational credentials are an important mechanism of social reproduction or social mobility

when it comes to labour market outcomes - the author therefore concluded that many elements of Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction are '*empirically unhelpful*' (p. 163).

Jenkins (2002) questions about the unconscious nature of Bourdieu's notion of habitus and sees Bourdieu's account of the correlation between the objective probabilities and the subjective aspirations as problematic. He argues that '*consciousness must be involved*' (p. 77) in the process, as Bourdieu insists, in which dispositions of the habitus produce practices, albeit Bourdieu does not make it clear how this process works; and challenges Bourdieu's argument that aspirations are generated by dispositions of the habitus in a sense to be compatible with and pre-adapted to the objective conditions. He further points out the idea of class-based strategies, which, according to Bourdieu, mediate the interaction between the habitus and the social reality and predispose actions, are merely '*presumed to exist because, for explanatory purposes, they must exist*' (p. 84).

Goldthorpe (2007a) cast much doubt on the idea that '*the habitus, as initially formed by family and class, may be subject to confirmation by the school but not, other than exceptionally, to any kind of reconstitution*' (p. 8).He seriously challenged Bourdieu's position that family is the only site for the creation and transmission of cultural capital by drawing evidence from Halsey, Heath, and Ridge (1980), which showed schools were creating cultural capital for those who were not able to acquire it in their homes and intergenerational upward educational mobility did occur in Britain in the course of expansion of secondary education (cited in Goldthorpe, 2007a). He stated that the theory of social reproduction, in which the notion of habitus is implicitly expressed by the over-socialized conception of the actor, along with other problematic conceptual propositions, '*never*

appeared persuasive' (Goldthorpe, 2007b, p. 2) and claimed '*Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, in which the concept of cultural capital is embedded, can now been seen to have failed*' (Goldthorpe, 2007b, p. 1). By commenting on research such as that of DiMaggio and De Graaf, Goldthorpe demonstrated how research findings like these could help us understand why the theory fails: in particular, it is because cultural capital can be acquired outside of the family via schooling; and the habitus is by no means as deterministic as Bourdieu supposes (Goldthorpe, 2007b). Goldthorpe's argument on the acquisition of cultural capital outside of the family has also been supported by more recent research. For example, Kisida, Greene, and Bowen (2014) presented evidence of how children, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, can generate a greater incentive to acquire new cultural capital by participating in a cultural activity, which could be a compensation for their family background disadvantages and a reconstruction of their habitus.

Whilst critics, like Jenkins and Goldthorpe, are critical of Bourdieu's explanation of educational inequalities as an integral part of his broader theory of social reproduction, it is probably fairer to say the theoretical assumptions Bourdieu provided still have great utility because they offer the thinking tools with which one could make further argument and reflection in their own research, as Jenkins mentioned '*Bourdieu is…enormously good to think with*' (2002, p. 11). One of the arguments and reflections made by scholars in their research by using those thinking tools is that the concept of cultural capital as well as its association with educational achievement should be adjusted or refined within different national contexts. To illustrate, De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp (2000) found parental knowledge and experience of beaux arts, which is considered by Bourdieu as the most important indicator of parental cultural capital in France, is less relevant to children's educational attainment than parental reading behaviour in the Netherlands; it is the latter that

transmits skills and qualities to the offspring that are more rewarded in the Dutch educational system; Marteleto and Andrade (2013) demonstrated how the highly unequal educational system of Brazil impedes family cultural capital being translated into adolescents' academic success, suggesting academic achievement depends not only on the possession of family cultural capital, but also on the school context in which cultural capital can be recognized and activated; in Brazil, it is the case that in many schools family cultural capital is not activated and translated into academic achievement.

In light of evidence like this, I want to explore in this study that how cultural capital could have an impact on left-behind children's educational aspirations and choices. For example, the primary reason of students for not aspiring to university is their self-perceived poor academic performance, which can be understood as resulting from low amount of cultural capital available in the family considering the low education level of their parents.Also, due to limited knowledge and experience existed in the family, some students chose a path which may very likely lead them to the opposite of attaining higher education because they have few or unreliable sources of information relating to post-compulsory educational institutions.

3.3.2 Rational Action Theory

Some critics of the cultural reproduction theory also opt for a key critique and alternative theory for considering the specific impact of povertyon aspirations; that of Rational Action Theory. Goldthorpe (2010), for example, seeks to offer an explanation for why these differentials persist despite educational expansion and reform as well as increasing overall levels of educational attainment of young people from all class origins. He advocates that rather than blindly following cultural values and norms, social actors are able to act

autonomously in choosing their means to pursue goals by drawing on their knowledge about their society and the situations they find themselves in it as well as evaluating their opportunities and constraints in relation to achieving their goals (Goldthorpe, 2010). For Goldthorpe (2010), class based differences in educational choices are economically determined and can be simply understood as the result of a rational calculation made by students and their parents concerning different options they might take in terms of costs and benefits, and the probability of success in pursuing them. That is to say, students and their working-class families calculate the costs of pursuing a higher education based on their limited economic resources, and then choose the educational route that has the highest likelihood of material benefit in return. It is thus understandable that less ambitious yet less costly educational choices would be considered by students from less advantaged families as rational and adequate to meet life needs; it is also understandable that for some, vocational courses with a focus on the occupational skill training that would reduce the risks of unemployment appear to be more rational thus are favourable in comparison with more risky academic courses with a higher-level academic qualification (Goldthorpe, 2010).

Without discounting, as some critics view, the important role of cultural factors in explaining class differentials in education, Goldthorpe (2007b, 2010) focuses on the secondary rather than the primary effects that stratify educational aspirations; effects that underpin students' evaluation of options open to them when they reach those transitions or branching points in education. It is therefore under this principle that Goldthorpe is in a significant departure from Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory. It is worth clarifying that when explaining class differentials in education, Golfthorpe merely suggests it is *'the resources, cultural and other, that children and their parents have in pursuing values that are ... largely shared'*(2007b, p. 6) rather than values that are considered as having more of an impact on

aspirations. Indeed, as Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) concluded in their study that although cultural capital had a strong influence on educational attainment, it had little impact on educational aspirations as the aspirations for higher education of the pupils in the study were best understood as the result of their calculation of risk of downward mobility based on a cost-benefit analysis. However, as some researchers also indicate (Fuller, 2009), the rational action approach fails to account for why students who are under financial constraints and pressure resulting from family poverty still aspire to pursue the higher-education trajectory, just like the 'left-behind children' who aspire to university in this study.

3.3.3 Sense of 'the self'

Although this thesis is framed within macro sociological theories to understand aspirations, it is also worth noting that how a young person makes future choices, based on the choices they see as available to them, is also informed by their sense of self. As Fuller (2009, 2014, 2016)found, aspirations of a young person are often informed by their own understanding of their chances of success. In her research exploring aspirations she found that how a young person made choices was not always based on the obvious notions of attainment but, on their own sense of 'educational-self', whereby some high attainers had low aspirations and some low attainers had high aspirations. This sense of confidence and efficacyin the shaping of aspiration and career goals is similar to that noted byAlbert Bandura, a social-psychologist.

Perceived self-efficacy is defined as *'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations'*(Bandura, 1995, p. 2). Such self-beliefs of efficacy determine and influence people's thinking, feeling, behaviour and action, as well as how people motivate themselves (Bandura, 1994, 1995). Different senses of self-

efficacy produce very different effects on people's accomplishments and their well-being throughout the course of the lifespan. People with a strong sense of efficacy are assured in their capabilities in controlling over threatening situations, they therefore approach difficult tasks and set themselves challenging goals as they believe they can master difficulties and challenges; they sustain their interest and engrossment in activities and maintain full commitment to tasks and goals; when facing failures or setbacks, they attribute them to personal deficiencies in efforts or knowledge and skills to be acquired, and they persist in and intensify their efforts until they achieve their goals and are quick to rebound from failures or setbacks. As a result, this strong sense of efficacy enhances personal achievements and decreases vulnerability to stress and depression (Bandura, 1994). However, in contrast, people who distrust their abilities see difficulties and challenges as threats, and they preoccupy themselves with many negative thoughts about personal deficiencies, obstacles they might encounter, and all sorts of unfavourable outcomes in order to avoid coping with difficult tasks. Their aspirations are low and their commitment to tasks and goals is weak. They easily withdraw efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties, and their sense of efficacy is recovered slowly from adversity. As a result, they easily become victims to stress and depression (Bandura, 1994).

One's belief in one's personal efficacy is in part built and strengthened by *'mastery experiences'* (emphasis in the original) that provide *'experience in overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort'* alongside the *'vicarious experiences'* that is provided by *'seeing people similar to themselves succeed by perseverant effort'* (Bandura, 1995, p. 3). *'Mastery experiences'* can create a robust and resilient sense of efficacy because experiences including successes and some difficulties and setbacks in life convince people they have what it takes to succeed and have taught people that sustained effort is requisite for success; however,

failures, especially when they occur before one establishing a strong sense of efficacy, can also become *'mastery experiences'*, yet can undermine one's efficacy belief (Bandura, 1995). *'Vicarious experiences'* gained by people observing the behaviour and its result of their social models who are perceived as having great similarity to themselves can also influence efficacy beliefs. As Bandura explained, modelling influences of this kind can raise one's belief that they see themselves also possessing the competencies to succeed in activities they aspire; likewise, they can also lower one's judgement of self-efficacy and decrease motivation (Bandura, 1995).

Efficacy beliefs are believed to contribute significantly to individuals' academic development. Students who have a firm belief in their self-regulatory skills to manage academic demands in the learning process are more assured in their efficacy to master academic activities, and this perceived academic efficacy then promotes their academic accomplishments as well as raising their academic aspirations.However, students with a low sense of efficacy to regulate their learning and to master academic subjects perform much worse academically and aspire lower in intellectual pursuits (Bandura, 1995). Students' academic self-efficacy also affects some other spheres of their developmental trajectories that are beyond the academic domain, for example, the social and emotional behaviour. Students with a high sense of academic efficacy are more prosaically oriented and popular among peers and can retain their emotional well-being, while student who have a disbelief in their academic efficacy are more likely to conduct problem behaviours and participate in antisocial activities as a result of early academic disengagement (Bandura, 1995). Efficacy beliefs are also believed to play a vital role in individuals' occupational development and pursuits as perceived self-efficacy determines what career options people would seriously consider pursuing and the higher

one's belief of personal efficacy is, the wider the career options they have, which directly challenges the rational model of how people make decisions (Bandura, 1995).

Research with similar findings(Croll, Attwood, & Fuller, 2010; Fuller & Macfadyen, 2011; Goodman & Gregg, 2010)also indicates that a student's value of learning and school, and a sense of educational self-efficacy reflected by a confidence and belief in an ability to succeed were significant in explaining and understanding differential attainment and aspirations. Hence, it is also important to consider how a sense of self-efficacy of the 'left-behind children' in this study, i.e. their own understanding of themselves and the ways they reflectively make sense of themselves impacts on their aspirations and choices.

As noted above, for some academics, habitus is deeply ingrained with one's class position, and family background is the foundation and mechanism on which one draws to develop aspirations, make decisions, and formulate and carry out plans. Considering the fairly low social position and the remarkably disadvantaged family background of 'left-behind children' in rural China, there is the assumption that neither their family nor they themselves will have high aspirations towards education and occupation as their class-based habitus determines they have an inclination not to do so. However, as my data will show, it is also possible that parents of 'left-behind children' do aspire highly for their children's education; they also encourage their children to aspire for higher education, whereas individual students regard attending high education (HE) as something they want to do if they could but will eventually choose a path they think that matches their best interests and will generate the best result for the future; they also hold a strong belief that higher education does not always guarantee one's success or a good life as universities do not teach many of the skills one needs to be

competent enough for employment in the society and one can achieve whatever they choose for the future as long as they work hard. Choice, in particular, the post-compulsory educational choice, is thus another interest to this study because not only it is important to understand how aspirations of 'left-behind children' are developed, but also to understand why and how certain educational choices are made by individuals regardless of their desirability of higher education as a valued aspiration, and in particular, how some of these choices, instead of being defined as 'low aspirations', may be perceived as individuals' personal and different aspirations.

The evidence of Watts and Bridges (2006) has clearly indicated that non-participation in higher education is not simply a matter of low aspirations but that it may be a result of personal perceptions and understandings in which the benefits and values of high education are not recognized as they conventionally are. Young people from lower socio-economic groups tend to have their own and different aspirations which reflect the lives and lifestyles they value and the reason for them not to engage in higher education may be simply because high education is not necessary for them to pursue what they aspire to (Watts & Bridges, 2006).The authors therefore have challenged the conventional rhetoric of a meritocratic society for losing its sight of a broader set of human and social values as it mainly conflates higher education with higher aspirations and assumes aspirations which are not directed towards pathways through HE are low or even inferior. They also suggest, without a greater understanding of young people's personal life stories, their views on high education embedded within their social contexts, particularly how and why HE may or may not be relevant to what they want to do with their lives, the UK government will not successfully tackle and realize its widening participation agenda. Indeed, this study is also seeking to find

out whether there is an alternative reading of low aspirations as different aspirations of 'left-behind children' in rural China that are closely linked with their own biographies and values.

More interestingly, 'left-behind children' in this study are aware of the disadvantages stemming from their family, yet they do not consider them as hurdles impeding their progress, rather, they see them as advantages and merits with which they can compete with their urban counterparts in the labour market as children from cities may not be able to bear hardships as well as they could. In this sense, low-SES habitus may also be able to generate much confidence, optimism, even a sense of superiority, that allow individuals to develop expectations for 'people like us' which is to the opposite of what Bourdieu insists. Indeed, individual students have their own understandings of the outside world, their own interests of potential careers, and their distinct perceptions of choosing a path that enables them to quickest repay their beloved ones (e.g. grandparents) for all the hardships they suffered and all the love they gave. These factors are also very important to this study in order to better understand aspirations and choices of Chinese 'left-behind children'.

3.4 Networks of Support – Social Capital Outside of the Family

As discussed earlier, Coleman's theoretical view of the concept of social capital not only provides an insight into how families with differential possession of this capital have different impacts on their children's educational outcomes, it also focuses on the significant role of the community as a broader channel that is beyond the family in generating this capital to support education.

Coleman also explored the value of social capital for a young person's development outside the family i.e. in the community. He defined social capital outside the family as resources provided by social relationships among parents and parents' relations with other community members (Coleman, 1987). For Coleman, social capital in the community intrinsically exists in a strong community relationship, which enables its members to provide shared norms, obligations, expectations and trust for each other. In terms of educating the next generation, strong community links can bring parental members together to create and sustain a vibrant network in which educational responsibilities are taken, educational resources are shared, and reciprocal and supporting relations between parents and the educational institution of the community are built. One of the examples that Coleman gave is regarding how social capital of this kind exists in religious communities. With his colleagues, Coleman demonstrated how students in Catholic schools who regularly attended religious activities had considerably lower dropout rates than their counterparts who did not do so or Catholic students from non-religious schools (Coleman, 1987). For Coleman, the strong adult community surrounding the religious schools is of significant importance in reducing the dropout rates because it contains much greater levels of social capital for the young to value education, especially for those whose family does not provide them with extensive social capital to support education (Coleman, 1987).

Coleman's notion of community social capital and its influence on education have further been operationalized in empirical studies.For example, Israel et al. (2001) examined the influence of social capital that exists in the residential community on students' educational achievement. They indicated that the community social capital, although it was found to play a less important role than the family social capital in influencing achievement, should not be disregarded as a resource for children. This is because a caring community environment, with

supportive interpersonal connections can successfully convey positive norms and values towards high educational performance which will help young people, not only excel in school but also succeed later in their career.

Research also shows social capital outside of the family is important in shaping young people's educational aspirations, especially those who are underrepresented or low-income students. For example, among Latina high-school students in the United States, possession of low levels of social capital, which was reflected by having no sufficient access to social networks as a result of having less supportive teachers and counsellors, and less access to school-based nurturing programs or college preparation programs, was found to be the reason that limited a student's college attendance choices (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003). Educational aspirations of rural young people were also found to be associated with school social capital derived from teachers' educational expectations for them(Byun et al., 2012). Such findings are relevant to this study because 'left-behind children' in rural China also have no access to social networks in their rural community as their school does not have any program or service that could provide students with guidance or counselling for higher education or career preparation.In addition, most of their teachers do not feel the responsibility to offer guidance or support for students to make further educational choices or career options beyond a job requirement of teaching their subjects, nor they express their educational expectations for students.

3.5 The Role of School

Outside the family, school also plays an important role in shaping young people's aspirations and choices. Research has identified a number of school-based factors and highlighted how

school context can strongly influence the choices and decisions of young people with respect to their education and occupation. Foskett, Dyke, and Maringe (2008)discuss in the UK context how different school types distinguished by whether the school had a sixth form or not, the orientations of the school reflected by its leadership, ethos and values, the socio-economic environment of the school, and the organization and delivery of careers guidance in the school offered distinctive influences on post-16 choices and decisions of pupils regarding their education, training and career pathways. The study indicates that schools relied on their own agendas, aims and orientations to control and shape post-16 choices and decisions of their students and in particular, schools in high socio-economic environments tended to place a much greater emphasis on encouraging their students to progress to academic pathways, while schools in low socio-economic localities focused more on offering vocationally oriented routes to their students. In a similar vein, research by Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, and Swan (2011)illustrate the ways how school context shape American high school students' occupational aspirations and choices. By comparing high schoolsvaried in terms of student achievement and socio-economic status in five states of the US, the authors found the development of students' career interests and their educational and career decisions correlates closely with the resource level of their schools. This is because schools at different resource levels (high, middle or low) have different priorities and provide varied career curricula or programming and channels available for career-related information, which all effectively affect and shape students' occupational aspirations and plans.

Teachers, in particular, as key actors who shape the learning experience of students at school, can and do play a significant role in shaping young people's academic performance as well as their future choices. Teachers' motivational strategies, for example, that are varied as a result of teachers' personal beliefs and a number of contextual factors including the educational

philosophy of the school and the demographic characteristics of the students can affect students' academic performance differently (Hornstra, Mansfield, van der Veen, Peetsma, & Volman, 2015). Also, teachers are one of the most important sources young people will draw on in making post-compulsory choices and decisions. However, a teacher's lack of knowledge and experience in providing information, advice and guidance regarding some of the options can undermine students' chances to receive impartial guidance. Therefore, students face difficulties in making informed decisions about the routes and pathways that are the most suited to their academic abilities as well as personal interests (Fuller, McCrum, & Macfadyen, 2014).

Labelling theory, although is most commonly applied to understand deviant and criminal behaviour, also suggests that teachers generate subjective evaluations and create prejudiced expectations about their students based on not only students' school performance but also their social status characteristics including race, gender and class and they then give academic labels (e.g. 'Tigers', 'Cardinals', and 'Clowns') to students drawn from these evaluations and expectations, and these labels exert influences on students' academic behaviour, progress and achievement (Rist, 2011). Expectations of specific behaviour and achievement from particular students, in particular, are operationalized within the classroom by teachers in the form of treating students differently. For example, devoting differential teaching time towards different students, or giving more time to a perceived high achiever to answer a question than a perceived low achiever, or using more frequent praise to encourage students they believe to be high achieving. As a consequence, this teacher treatment affects students' self-concept, motivation as well as aspiration, and with time, a student's academic behaviour and achievement will be shaped and will conform more and more closely to the teacher's original expectation about him and the label he was given, i.e. students with high teacher

expectations will result in achieving high in education, while students with low teacher expectations will be led to a low achievement(Rist, 2011). In this vein, students' aspirations develop in response to reinforcement and encouragement from their teachers around them in the school.

It is therefore important to also consider how school context as well as teachers could have an impact when understanding Chinese left-behind children's post-16 educational choices and future career options, especially given that comparing to high school students in Japan, South Korea and the USA, Chinese students were found in general to have the least school-based career guidance except for having their homeroom teachers as the main career guidance provider (Xiao & Newman, 2014).

3.6 The Role of Friends and Peers

Research also indicates the significant impact of peers and friends on young people's educational and career choices. When making higher education choices, friends and peers play a crucial role in informing young people their own academic standing within the ranking of friendship groups, which then can help them make judgements and decisions about which higher education institutions and courses are 'feasible' within the HE hierarchies (Brooks, 2003, 2004). Although families as well as educational institutions also provide information to inform students their academic ability and standing, in some cases students' academic positions are more strongly influenced by comparing and ranking between friends; and for some individuals, friends are of particular importance in constructing a sense of identity and bringing some level of confidence, which then has a strong bearing on decisions these young people make for their higher education (Brooks, 2003).

Friendships are also social resources for adolescents as the attitudes and behaviours of friends can positively influence adolescents' academic outcomes (Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder Jr, 2003). This is because adolescent friendships serve as sources of social capital, especially academically oriented friendships. By forming a friendship with academically oriented peers, a student is then able to access to various forms of resources provided by this friendship, for example, friends' knowledge and skills that can help solve problems related to academic subjects, friends' emotional support that help tackle difficulties and challenges, friends' social support as well as modelling of behaviours, and friends' introduction to a larger academically oriented social network. All these resources not only can promote adolescents' academic achievement but also can encourage their school engagement, help them navigate the schooling process, and raise their awareness of valuing education in their life (Crosnoe et al., 2003). For students with a lower socio-economic status from more disadvantaged schools characterized by low overall student achievement and less positive school ethos, the academic importance of friends is more evident. This is because amid the dearth of resources in their disadvantaged school environments, academically oriented peers serve as their main academic resource and are the social capital that protects some of them from disengaging and losing their way (Crosnoe et al., 2003). The importance of peer groups is alsoidentified by studies that investigate into the impact of peer groups on students' post-16 educational choices. For example, Thomas and Webber (2001) suggests that peer groups have a strong and significant effect on whether boys intend to continue on to post-compulsory education at the age of 16. The study found that boys are much more inclined to remain in education if they are amongst peers whose intention is to stay on. Thomas and Webber (2009) also identified the important role peer groups played in shaping students' decisions at the age of 16 about whether or not to participate in post-compulsory education. The study showed

evidence that boys are far more influenced by their peer groups than girls and if a male student is surrounded by peers who are academically able and intend to stay on in post-compulsory education, then this male student will very likely be encouraged to also want to stay on. Naz et al. (2014) also indicate that the positive influence of peer and friends is significant on various aspects of young people's academic choices including the selection of subjects, the selection of learning resources, and the selection of co-curricular activities as well as time provision for homework. Moreover, the study also shows that friends and peer are pivotal in young people's career decision making process as career decision making, the selection of job and professional career, employment opportunities and earning tendencies are all mostly decided and influenced by peer and friends.

Beyond the primary and secondary educational stages, friends and peers continue to play a crucial role in young people's lives when they have moved into university. Brooks' study (2007) demonstrates that university friendships which are perceived by young people to be closer and more mature have had specific benefits for them as this new form of friendship provides emotional support and stimulates social learning. This is because friends at university offer sympathy, understanding and encouragement and it is this kind of emotional support that enables many students to persevere with their studies until competing their degree, especially in the face of difficulty and stress; in the meantime, friends at university also help to boost young people's self-confidence and self-reliance as a result of living away from home and immersing in a multi-cultural social context where they have the opportunity to learn not only more about themselves but also other cultures and various worldviews.

In addition, Bandura (1994) also highlights the importance of peer influences in the development of children's self-efficacy. This is because children judge and verify their self-efficacy by comparing themselves to their peers, and as they gradually entering into larger communities, they broaden self-knowledge of their capabilities among peers and learn efficacious thinking and behaviour from peer models who are most capable and experienced. However, as peers are selected discriminately by children based on shared interests and values, selective peer relationships can limit the development of personal efficacy to directions that are only of mutual interest thus will greatly hinder a child's other potentialities. Moreover, the growth of children's personal efficacy can be adversely affected if the peer association they connect with is less well functioned (Bandura, 1994).

3.7 Summary of the Theoretical Framework

Within the sociology of education, a particular concern is how persisting inequalities in the educational achievement and aspirations of young people are strongly influenced by their different socio-economic/cultural background (Fuller, 2009). Whenever explaining inequality, 'social stratification' is used as a general term to describe a hierarchical social structure in which the unequal distribution of societal resources (material and symbolic) in association with hierarchical social positions is justified and maintained (Crompton, 1998; Rothman, 1999). Social class (or simply class), as a particular form of social stratification, is often used as an explanatory tool to conceptualize and denote the intrinsic characteristics of different social groups divided hierarchically on the basis of various indices including income, occupation, culture, attitudes, and life style (Scott, 2000). Although the concept of class is somewhat difficult to clarify and categorize (Scott, 2000) and there are debates as to whether it even exists (Beck, 2001), it does provide a useful theoretical framework in which the role and significance of various 'capitals'(economical, cultural and social) are used to provide

theoretical understandings of the relationship between social advantage/disadvantage endowed and educational outcomes.

In exploring these capitals and their impact on young people's educational outcomes and life chances, the important role of family has long been emphasized (Annette, 2002; Croll, 2004; Mirza, 1997; Musgrave, 1979). As the primary place for the socialization of a child, the family not only provides an economic basis for the child deriving from the parents' income, wealth and occupation, it also transmits a particular way of life to the child in which certain language use, behaviour, value, taste, attitude and moral are accumulated and adopted collectively by members as culture and social skills/resources in their particular social stratum (Bourdieu, 1997). Fundamentally, it is variations in economic basis, culture and social skills/resources that lead to differential education and life course outcomes of people from different social classes, and this class-based differentiation tends to be reproductive across generations (Swartz, 1997). More specifically, analysis of the correlation between individuals' socio-economic background and educational outcomes has put more emphasis on the impact of the domestic transmission of cultural and social characteristics, rather than simply the impact of the parental income or occupational level (Croll, 2004).

Although the economic condition of a family associated with the parents' income and occupation is by no means the sole determinant of a child's educational outcomes, economic benefits transmitted within the family do seem to foster better academic achievement of children from wealthier families. This familial economic disparity among individuals fundamentally lies in the stratified social structure in modern human societies. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the unequal distribution of 'economic capital' (wealth, income and property)

and 'cultural capital' (knowledge, culture and educational credentials) forms the social hierarchy in modern advanced societies (Swartz, 1997), while *'economic capital is at the root of all other forms of capital…'*(Bourdieu, 1997, p. 54). It is under this broad societal classification, Bourdieu specifically uses the concept of 'habitus' and 'cultural capital' to insightfully explain how class distinctions in the immaterial aspects of social life shape and determine differential educational and occupational attainment among members of different social status groups, and how the prevailing stratified social structure is reproduced intergenerationally (Swartz, 1997). To Swartz's understanding, Bourdieu contends that dispositional variations among individuals ensuing from class differences in habitus ultimately account for their differential educational choices, but a child also subjectively shapes his own educational and occupational expectations on the basis of his self-estimated objective chances which are highly associated with what his parents or whomever he sees as reference has achieved in their life trajectories. Swartz (1997) also confirms Bourdieu's thesis on individuals' differential educational performance and attainment is the resultant of the great class differences in members' possession of a wide range of cultural capital resources.

As the subjects of my study are young people who were born into poor rural families and are 'left behind' by their migrating parent(s) in their original rural areas, it is likely that the above theoretical explanations regarding how social disadvantage impacts on educational attainment and aspirations, could be an even bigger issue for the 'left-behind children' in China. Being a 'left-behind child', they are disadvantaged on a number of levels: by being placed in an economically disadvantaged social status since birth because of poverty, but they are also, as a result of parental migration, deprived of basic parental guidance, involvement, support and encouragement as well as many other resources acquired within the family in the course of socialization and education. However, whilst sociological theory provides a useful framework

in which to situate this study, it is worth noting that it tends to be ethnocentric in that it is Western in approach. My study therefore aims to extend our understanding in this area, by considering these theories within an Eastern lens, one that accounts for the specific cultural context of 'left-behind children'.

3.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have firstly discussed concepts within macro sociological theories that have been widely used to address educational inequalities, as well as some empirical findings pertaining to these theoretical ideas. A particular focus is on how family plays a role in shaping children and young people's educational outcomes by drawing on the concept of cultural capital and habitus, as well as family social capital. On the other hand, critiques of these theoretical views have been addressed, and additional theoretical ideas including the Rational Action Theory and self-efficacy have also been discussed. Moreover, the influence of networks of support beyond the family on aspirations and choices, i.e. social capital outside the family, the role of school, and the role of friends and peers have also been considered.

In this study, aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' were understood within a broad theoretical framework within the sociology of education. However, macro explanatory tools like cultural capital and habitus are not satisfactorily useful in explaining variations in educational aspirations among Chinese 'left-behind children' who share a similar social background, and the importance of individual differences and complexity cannot be ignored. Moreover, family social capital, with an emphasis on relationship and connection between these young people and their families is of great importance in understanding aspirations, and

as Rational Action Theory suggests, for individuals from disadvantaged families, making choices that are considered as rational and adequate to meet individual life goals is also what shapes educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children'. In addition, it is also important to consider how 'left-behind children' understand themselves and the ways they reflectively make sense of themselves because their aspirations and choices are also informed by a sense of self-efficacy and self-identification. With these queries in mind, my research questions are as follows:

1. What are the future education aspirations of 'left-behind children' in the final year of junior high school?

2. What factors impact on these educational aspirations and if they differ, why are they different?

3. How does being 'left behind' impact on the educational experiences and aspirations of the 'left-behind children' included?

Chapter 4 Methodology and Methods

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methods used to answer the research questions, the framework that informed these methods as well as a rationale for their use. Challenges, limitations as well as the ethics of the research are also discussed.

4.2 Research Design

The general design of my research project is a qualitative case study using ethnography as the primary research technique. This type of design was chosen because of the nature of my research questions and the desired depth I want to achieve, and also the philosophical assumptions which underpin the overall methodological approach of this study.

My research questions are constituted of 'What', 'How' and 'Why' questions. The aims of my study are to uncover the real-life experiences of junior high school age, 'left-behind children' in rural China, exploring the educational aspirations of this particular group of children, and discovering critical factors that impact on these young peoples' educational pursuit. The qualitative paradigm, which intrinsically assumes the social world has multiple facets in which individual, personal experiences and subjective knowledge, perceptions or interpretations are all forms taken as realities, and should be observed or sensed in natural settings(Merriam, 1988).An ethnography is therefore well placed to permit this level of understanding.

This study draws on an interpretative methodological framework which is outlined below.

4.3 Methodology

Taking into account the nature of my research project, this research falls under the paradigm of constructionism in terms of ontology, and the paradigm of interpretivism in relation to epistemology.

To explain further, the philosophical foundation of my research lies in the ontological view that social reality is not external to individuals; it is not a given 'out there' with an objective nature independent of individuals' consciousness or cognition (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). More specifically, it is not a set of given data or physical facts that are static, unquestionable or always quantifiable. Instead, social reality inherently takes on the form of all kinds of definitions, norms, rules, beliefs, symbols, behaviours, activities and the like that human beings, as the initiator of their actions and the creator of their environment, actively make and develop through their 'free will'. The process of creating and developing social reality is also ongoing and is subject to changes, thus the nature of reality in the social world is really multi-layered, complex and open to various understandings and interpretations (Cohen et al., 2000). Social researchers, known as interpretivists, unlike positivists, see knowledge as unique, subjective and reflecting personal experiences and seek to explore as much of this knowledge as they can to better understand more social phenomenon as well as their underlying mechanisms(Cohen et al., 2000; May, 1997). However, what should be borne in mind is that the aim of social research under this ontological perspective (constructionism) is that they are not searching for universal laws or regularities that could identify the elements, explain causal relationships between factors or predict certain

phenomenon on the basis of the reality being observed. In this regard, social reality may not be acquired in the same way as natural scientists adopt for knowledge acquisition in the world of natural science(Cohen et al., 2000). Knowledge is understood to be socially, culturally and historically specific.

Alternative approaches to social science research, specifically, the paradigm of positivism, sees social reality only in the existence of the physical world, independent of human beings' individual experiences; the general and absolute laws are the source of knowledge and the methodological procedures undertaken should be in parallel to those in the world of natural science. Positivists advocate the adoption of predominantly quantitative methods and the role of researcher being a detached observer who could argue for their approach to most forcefully reveal universal laws that explain and govern the observed reality(Cohen et al., 2000). However, considering the objective of my specific research, the positivist paradigm may be less successful in its application to such a study in which the immensely complex human experiences, the specific social and cultural context as well as the intangible quality of social phenomenon are involved(Cohen et al., 2000).

The ontological position of constructionism relates to the epistemological perspective that focuses on acquiring and identifying more subjective knowledge based on unique and essentially personal experiences and insights(Cohen et al., 2000).As it is suggested that one's epistemological perspective is accountable for one's choice of methodological procedure(Cohen et al., 2000), with the standpoint emphasizing the importance of researchers "*sharing the frame of reference*"(Cohen et al., 2000, p.20) with individuals and with the goal to understand in depth how and why individuals interpret the world around

them and act in certain ways in their settings (Cohen et al., 2000), the choice of a qualitative approach is therefore the most suitable for my research.

Within the qualitative methodological framework, there are a number of approaches to the study of interpretive practice. My research draws on one of the most popular 'traditions' – the phenomenological approach. According to Patton (1990), a phenomenological approach seeks to answer the question: "*What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?*" (p. 69). The focus of the researcher is on exploring the ways in which ordinary members of society subjectively construct and interpret their life world in their natural settings (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998). According to Holstein and Gubrium (1998), the only way to make sense of people's everyday life experiences is by understanding their "*stocks of knowledge*" (p. 139) including images, theories, ideas, values and attitudes with which individuals engage in social activities and interact with other members. To this end, my research employed participant observations and in-depth interviews, which allowed me to grasp this type of knowledge from Chinese 'left-behind children' in order to have a better understanding of their experiences as well as perceptions of the social world they are living in.

I hold the view that the social world should be studied in its natural state without intervening, manipulating or controlling its elements. As researchers, when we seek to explore understandings of an event or behaviours in a setting, we impose ourselves on our interpretations. Being one of the researchers exploring educational outcomes of 'left-behind children' in rural China, my research is only able to demonstrate my own understandings and interpretations of this topic. However, I am confident of my interpretation and reflexivity and

I am aware of its limitations that will be discussed later in the thesis. Lastly, but not the least importantly, taking time to build a good rapport with my informants and establish a relationship based on trust via my immersion in the research setting greatly enhanced my understandings, hence enabled me to achieve the depth I hoped to. Based on these areas of importance, a qualitative case study, based on an ethnographic design was chosen.

4.3.1 A qualitative case study

Yin (1994) suggests that case studies: *'are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context'* (p. 1). A case has been chosen because *'it is an instance of some concern, issue or hypothesis which calls for an intensive examination of the phenomenon of interest'* (Merriam, 1988, p. 10). The case study approach seeks to understand and explain a complex social phenomenon in a holistic perspective, elucidate its characteristic features as well as significant factors and, more importantly, uncover the interaction and interrelation among all the elements so as to delineate how each part works together as a whole (Merriam, 1988). Yin also suggests a case study design is particularly suitable when multiple variables of the phenomenon under study are individually inseparable from the overall context (Merriam, 1988). A qualitative case study design is precisely chosen because the interests of researchers, instead of testing hypothesis, are to discover perceptions and insights, understand processes, and interpret meanings in context (Merriam, 1988).

My choice of adopting a case study design as the most appropriate plan for my research project was therefore decided upon the information mentioned above. The case of my study

was a rural village in China and the educational experiences and aspirations of junior high school students 'left behind' living there. By concentrating on one school where the number of 'left-behind children' accounts for the major proportion of the whole student population, my case study captured some distinctive educational experiences as well as perceptions of these 'left-behind children', through which an in-depth understanding of how these experiences and perceptions relate to and impact on their educational aspirations was then acquired. Moreover, by selecting a number of more individualized 'cases'— 'left-behind children' who had different attainment levels and developed different aspirations for themselves, some critical factors that shape and differ aspirations among 'left-behind children' were identified.

Although there is some weakness with a case study design primarily concerning with regard to their inadequacy of providing generalization (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994), given one of the aims of this research, that is, testing theoretical ideas that are mainly Western in focus in the Chinese context, conducting a qualitative case study is also the most appropriate approach as Yin (1994) notes: '*Case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a "sample", and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytical generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)*' (p. 10).

4.3.2 Ethnography

Accompanied within the qualitative case study approach discussed above, this study was also designed as an ethnographic type of research. An ethnographic study is characterized by its

overarching '*anthropologic concern for cultural context*' and its '*sociocultural interpretation*' of the social unit under study, meaning an ethnography is a distinctive form of qualitative research, whichever fieldwork is undertaken (Merriam, 1988). As this research was firmly located within the midst of the Chinese-rural- 'left-behind children's' cultural context, and with its emphasis on context and '*thick descriptions*', my study sought to provide a good '*sociocultural interpretation'* and, therefore, has drawn upon data collected from different sources. By doing this, I was able to understand processes, complex and diverse experiences, viewpoints, emotions, social relations, thus was able to portray the experiences of this particular group of young people in their natural setting and as closely as possible to the meanings they attach to it (McNeill, 1996). By living in the village with students under research where the fieldwork of this case study was located, I endeavoured to get at the richness of understanding that ethnography can allow.

Ethnography, today being used much as an effective research strategy (Berg, 2004), is an approach that involves '*extensive fieldwork of various types including participant observation, formal and informal interviewing, document collecting, filming, recording, and so on*' (Van Maanen, 1982, p.103, cited in Berg, 2004). As such, my study also adopted different data collection methods used commonly in ethnographic research, including participant observation, interview, and school documents; a questionnaire was also used specifically for acquiring student family information as well as identifying individuals for the later in-depth interviews. Each method used is discussed below.

4.4 Methods of Data Collection

4.4.1 Participant observation

In ethnographic research, participant observation is a central technique of data collection (Delamont, 2007). The 'field' is the '*naturally occurring settings*' where researchers physically involve and directly participate in activities in the setting in order to study the people of interest by means of gaining intimate familiarity with their daily social practice (Brewer, 2000). As several scholars have stated, there are four 'roles' in general that the researcher can take on when conducting fieldwork: '*complete participant', 'participant-as-observer', 'observer-as-participant', and 'complete observer'*(McNeill, 1996; Patton, 2001). In this study, I, the researcher, as the main "research instrument", took on both the 'complete observer' role and the 'observer-as-participant' role in the fieldwork.

The 'complete observer' role, as Patton (2001) suggests, is never taken as the dominant role, rather, '*is illustrated by systemati*c *eavesdropping, or by reconnaissance of any kind of social setting as preparation for more intensive study in another field role'*(p. 147). In the case of my study, I initially exposed myself as a 'complete observer' to the population of interest – students in the chosen junior high school. This role, as the starting point of building up the interpersonal relationship between my informants and myself helped me in the first place to get close to people in the research setting, place myself physically in their daily-life situations, watch, listen and interact to gradually get a flavour of the community life I was engaged in.

Observations enabled me to identify some things of interest as well as, identify potential participants for my primary focus. Moving to the role of 'observer-as-participant' allowed me to participate as a researcher, which means my participation was determined by my research

interests rather than by roles in situation (McNeill, 1996). In practical terms, in order to gain an understanding of students' school life as much as I can, I chose to be present in as many situations as possible to conduct observations during school days with teachers and students. Living in the school made my participation and observation of this kind possible and observation in this phase allowed me to gain very detailed information about students' learning and living environment and experience at school. By using participant observation, I collected data regarding what a typical school day is like for these 'left-behind children', how they study and live at school, how they interact with other students and teachers, how they manage difficulties and problems, and so on. Later, as the observation process went on, interesting scenes were noticed, some initial themes emerged, and potential informants were identified prior to conducting a series of individual more focused in-depth interviews.

Observations were conducted in different time slots, activities and settings according to the school timetable during school days from Monday to Friday. For example, I conducted classroom observations (morning or afternoon) of different taught subjects to get to know how students were learning with their teachers in the class. I also observed how students were handling homework or discussing about issues in many of those evening self-study sessions. And I observed students' behaviours, interactions as well as emotions when they were with their teachers and, when they were doing their routine activities such as having meals in the canteen, doing sports exercise during class break, as well as getting ready to rest in the dormitory rooms.

4.4.2 Questionnaire

A short questionnaire with both multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions included was designed to collect preliminary information of students in the research as well as identify potential informants for later in-depth interviews (Appendix 1). Questions were regarding personal and family information, school performance, learning experience, friends, future plans, as well as views on some statements. This questionnaire helped me gain some preliminary but important background information about students in this research; it also helped me quickly get an understanding that students had different ambitions and plans, and different views about higher education as well as other issues. All this information then guided me to design interview questions in the direction of exploring how aspirations were shaped and why aspirations were different.

4.4.3 Interviews

A series of one-to-one interviews were conducted with core informants identified after the observation and the questionnaire had been undertaken, and after students gave me their consent to be interviewed. The interviews were guided by a list of questions that were semi-structured but very open-ended, in that they were designed to be flexible and conversational. There were two groups of interviewees with 'left-behind children who intend to go to university' in one group and 'left-behind children who do not intend to go to university or cannot decide yet' in the other group. In total, I interviewed 17 students and each of them was interviewed several times to cover the main aspects relevant to addressing the research questions. Some students were interviewed more than others because of new information emerging for further investigation.

My initial research design had also included focus group discussions before conducting individual interviews and I did arrange one focus group session with 6 higher-achieving students in the class as a 'trial session' to see how it works. My goal for this was to provide an opportunity to bring these students together at the same time, and to explore general topics such as experiences of school and the role they see education in their future, as well as to learn viewpoints shared by individual students when they are with their peers, which may be somewhat different when they share with me in an individual interview. However, it turned out to be a failure, as students appeared very uneasy about this type of discussion, even though by that time students were quite familiar with me, they were with their classmates, and I had explained what this session was about, they appeared reluctant to share views in this situation. Students told me afterwards that they had never experienced anything like this before so felt this was too alien. They were willing to share opinions on topics I was interested in, but they did not like the idea of group discussion and preferred to discuss thoughts and ideas with me alone. I felt it was important to respect students' wishes and I did not want to risk the relationship and trust that had taken me a long time to build with many of these students; I therefore decided to conduct one-to-one interviews only.

Interviewing is a very useful method for my study considering the nature of the research questions which are to explore a range of factors relevant to the focus of the research by delving great depth into the experiences and perceptions of 'left-behind children' during education. Interviews allowed me to have face-to-face conversational interaction with individual student, listen to stories about what each of these young people had experienced and perceived in the world around them (Kvale, 1996), and explore in depth about aspects that were interesting and important to addressing the research questions. Interviews also

allowed me to ask for clarification and explanation on areas that I did not fully understand, for example, during observation or answers given in the questionnaire.

Interviews were carried out most of the time in my room provided by the school during my stay where students all felt at ease and relaxed; some of the interviews were carried out in the teachers' office when I was the only one using it. Interviews were carried out either during the lunch break[8] (12.30 - 14.00) or in the evening self-study session when students had finished their study task and agreed to be interviewed. The time each interview took varied depending on what the topic was, for example, when I was asking about families and experiences of being a 'left-behind child', an interview usually lasted longer (an hour). On average, one interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and all of them were recorded. Questions asked in interviews were regarding the following aspects: students' plans for the future (education and occupation), their attitudes to education, their opinions about the society, their families and family life of being a 'left-behind child', their feelings about school and school life, and how they consider being 'left behind' has an impact on them (see in Appendix 2 - a sample of interview questions). All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by myself initially in Mandarin Chinese. In the course of data analysis, transcripts that contained all core information were translated into English gradually and were given to a fellow PhD student in the same department whose first language was also Mandarin Chinese to check my translation.

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[8] It is when students take a nap after lunch before the afternoon classes begin. I have negotiated with the school to use this time to do some interviews and asked for the permission from the homeroom teacher too. I also asked consent from the students and was told most of them did not have the habit of taking a nap so were willing to do interviews with me.

4.4.4 School documents

Getting access to school documents enabled me to obtain information regarding academic performance of students in the Grade 9 class (the class in which the research was undertaken), as well as the attainment level of the school, which showed it was an underperforming school in the research area. In this study, 'attainment' refers to exam scores which include a student's scores of each taught subject in his or her grade in school examinations. Due to the highly selective and competitive nature of the Chinese education system, students are required and expected to achieve a high score in all school examinations[9]. Apart from that, a student's attainment level is not measured or presented by other evaluative means. For example, a student who has a wide coverage of reading on history will not be treated differently if he or she gets a low score in the history exam. By getting a copy of students' score records of all the major examinations they took since Grade 7 as well as the class ranking list that demonstrated students' academic positions in the class provided by the school, I was able to identify students based on their attainment levels and this further helped me select informants with different attainment levels in the class for in-depth investigation.

I also got access to school documents regarding the geographic and demographic background of the region, education of the region, and the history of the school. Through these documents, I collected important context information about my research setting. I also obtained information about the situation of 'left-behind children' as the school provided me with family information records of students in all grades when they registered at the beginning of an academic year. I also asked the principle for his approval to look at some official files about the operation of the school i.e. the general and region-specific principles, guidelines, instructions or agendas that illustrate how educational services for children and young people

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[9] In China, exam scores are given in numerical terms: 89/100, 93/100, not by different levels of A, B, C, D.

in the area are delivered in the light of China's nine-year Compulsory Education policy[10]. I understood there is often a disparity between what should be done and what is actually done as a result of various practical reasons due to the unequal distribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas (Hu, 2012). To investigate what this disparity may be like, I also searched for documents that could help me understand the role of the school and the local education department in making educational provisions and providing services for 'left-behind children' in this area. Unfortunately, I did not find much in this respect. I therefore sought to gain relevant information via observation, interviews as well as some unstructured casual conversations during my stay in the school.

4.4.5 Identifying a school and gaining access

I began to search for a school from mid-December 2014 and asked for help from my family and friends in my hometown to find a suitable one across the province. I was looking for a rural school that had a relatively high proportion of 'left-behind children', and was willing to host me and was likely to be cooperative and supportive for my research. Quite accidentally, my mother attended a psychology course training in early February 2015 where she met a group of public school teachers from different regions of the province. During information changing and conversations, my mother got to know that these teachers were all from rural schools and the reason they came for this training was to help students in their schools who were mostly 'left-behind children'. '*What a fantastic opportunity and what a luck for my daughter's research!*' My mother said to herself, she then told these teachers about me and my study and the situation of me trying to look for a school. Teachers were all very interested

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[10]In China, state-owned schools (primary and junior high) and the local educational department take the responsibility for ensuring all school-age children in the administrative area have the right to receive the nine-year compulsory education.

and responded they would definitely talk to the head of their schools and help me get into one of these schools. Thanks to these teachers' help, at the end of February 2015, I had been gladly accepted by several schools. At last, I chose the 'Riverside Comprehensive School' as the best fit. The selection of 'Riverside' was mainly due to practical considerations as 'Riverside' was the closest to reach among all other schools (it takes 5 hours to travel one-way to 'Riverside', whereas it takes at least 8-9 hours to travel one-way to other school). And I paid my first visit to the school in early March, as soon as the Chinese Spring Festival was over.

I was warmly received by the teacher my mother knew from her training class when I arrived in the school in my mother's company. The teacher introduced me to the principle and he offered me the only available staff dormitory room at that time to stay and a table in the teacher's office to use and allowed me to work as an independent researcher from the middle of March onwards. As the first step, I was introduced to all school administrators and some homeroom teachers (*ban zhu ren* in Chinese) in the following staff weekly meeting when I explained my research and asked for support. The staff and teachers were very enthusiastic about my research and all agreed to provide their best assistance and support. With their enthusiasm and commitment, I gained more confidence, motivation as well as sense of responsibility for conducting this research.

For the next step, I asked the *ban zhu ren* of Grade 9 to take me to meet the students in the class. Before the meeting, I discussed with my mother, who was in the school with me at that time and who was a very experienced middle school teacher herself, about how I should introduce myself and my research. My mother gave me some advice and she also offered to

give a Math class to the students as she thought this would be a very helpful ice-breaking approach. I then discussed this with the *ban zhu ren* and she very much agreed with this idea. Then, I went to the class with the *ban zhu ren* in her Math class, introduced myself, my mother and explained why I was here and what I was going to do in the way that was easy for the students to understand. The students were not too surprised to see me because their teacher had already informed them about my arrival and what I was going to do here. Naturally, they were quite shy and reserved as this was the very first time they met me – a total stranger from outside. However, I sensed many students were also happy to see me and my mother and excited and very curious about what was going to happen. Just as expected, my mother's idea worked out really well as the *ban zhu ren* said the students were impressed by the teaching of my mother who was addressed by them as 'the urban teacher'. After the class, many students came and sat around with us and we started talking.

4.4.6 Participants

The sample of the study included students in the Grade 9[11] class (in total 34) and the sampling strategy behind qualitative research like this was to purposefully select participants (Creswell, 2014). With the school's permission, I observed students on behaviours and activities in various situations within their school life to gain some initial understanding of these individuals at the research site. Both questionnaire and school documents that provided information regarding student family situation and attainment level were collected to identify potential participants for face-to-face in-depth interviews. Initially, 19 students were invited to participate in the interview session – with both girls and boys included, with different post-16 educational intentions, with various family situations, and with different attainment levels

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[11] As will be mentioned in Chapter 5 Research Context, 'Riverside Comprehensive School' is a small-size school. There was only one class in each grade from grade 1 to grade 9.

in order to increase the possibility of disclosing diverse perspectives regarding the research questions. The students chosen were also the ones with whom I had spent most of time at school and had gained their trust being not only a researcher but also an adult friend who had shown great interests and care for them the whole time. After explaining in detail about my research to each student and asking for their consent to be interviewed, 17 of them agreed to take part and signed the consent form (see in Appendix 6).

Table 1 Information on students

Number of students	17
Gender	11 girls, 6boys
Age range	14 - 17
Attainment level in the class	High attainers: 4 Middle attainers: 7 Low attainers: 6

4.5 Data Analysis

My data analysis was mainly guided by the conceptual framework and research questions. The analysis process followed the central steps of qualitative research analysis: organizing the data, coding the data, aggregating codes into themes, and displaying and comparing (Cresell, 2013). Despite the availability of software programmes that support qualitative data analysis, for example, NVivo, I chose to do my analysis 'long hand'. My decision to do the analysis long-hand rather than using a tool such as Nvivo was first of all due to pragmatic reasons as Nvivo does not easily support data analysis with texts in the language of Chinese. In order to use Nvivo, I would need to translate all scripts that were transcribed originally in Chinese (about 190 pages) to English before analysing and that would take quite some time to complete. Secondly, the original Chinese texts that kept the style of students' talk as well

as some specific vocabularies they used in their local dialect were believed to better suit the need of analysis as they retain the original subtle meanings, whereas the translation to English may result in the loss of them. However, interview transcripts that contained core information were translated into English gradually in the course of data analysis.

First, interview transcripts were reviewed line by line and marked manually with initial descriptive codes categorized under four general conceptual categories: 'plans, choices and intentions', 'family factor', 'school factor', and 'individual or cultural factor'. Coding at this stage was used to organize data into manageable units as well as help identify key themes and patterns of interest (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). To do this, I adopted the 'cross-sectional and categorical indexing' technique that '*involves devising a consistent system for indexing the whole of a data set according to a set of common principles and measures*'(Mason, 2002, p. 150) and created a set of 'indexing categories' for the data and apply them to the data in a systematic and consistent manner. This enabled me to get a systematic overview of the data and to locate and retrieve certain resources in the data more easily and straightforwardly for further analysis, including issues, topics, information, examples or themes (Mason, 2002).

After segmenting and condensing the data in this way, I explored data in each of the four general categories with more inferential codes to understand different but interwoven elements of the data. A thematic analysis was carried out to identify and describe key themes emerging from the content of the data through a process of iteration and aggregation (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Then, by displaying and comparing, the goal was to extract patterns, associations and explanations from the emergent themes. A key analytical category of this study is educational aspirations, especially differences in

educational aspirations. A summary was given for every participating student by revisiting each participant's narratives, with all the themes identified and relationships examined among the themes. This then allowed me to make comparisons and note patterns in relation to differences and commonalities across the cases and among categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For the purpose of both analysing and presenting the data, I organized students into two groups based on their post-18 educational intentions. In the two substantive 'finding' chapters, students studied were categorized as 'university aspirers', and 'university non-aspirers and "the undecided"'.

To compare for similarity and difference within coding, transcripts were explored and discussed with my supervisors. This is a precaution against distortions and bias and is to ensure the themes and categories within the coding have been developed with consistency, credibility and confidence, which is considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985)as an important practice in establishing the trustworthiness of data analysis for qualitative research.

Eventually, as the result of data analysis, six key categories and sub-themes within these categories were identified. They are presented in the table below.

Table 2 The key themes

Key categories	Sub-themes within categories
Future Ambitions	Education Work
Attitudes to education	Higher education Further Education School
Family	Practical support Emotional support Educational involvement Ambitions
Community	School Home
Sense of self	Ability – education Ability – to achieve ambitions
Friends	Practical support Emotional support Educational support Educational decision making

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues raised in this study had been carefully considered by the University Ethics Committee before the fieldwork was undertaken. Ethical considerations were addressed in compliance with the BERA guidelines and the code of ethics of the University of Reading.

Given the fact that the target population of this study was young people under the age of 18 in the absence of supervision of parents, the primary ethical consideration was regarding from whom I should ask for permission for them to participate in the study (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Instead of the parents, the main caregiver, usually the grandparents, take the responsibility of taking care of the child's daily life as well as supervising the child's schooling, in which case, they should give their consent to their child's participation.

Meanwhile, students themselves have full power to decide whether or not to participate and whenever they wish to opt out (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). All participants were given an informed consent letter (see Appendix 6) written in a language they could easily understand in which the research purpose and method, the protection of privacy, and their rights to decline participation were included. Consent from the caregivers was sought by providing all students an information sheet written in simple language (see Appendix 5) to bring home with and had it signed and, in addition, as students had already known about the study themselves, they were also reminded to explain to their grandparents or other family members when necessary and were told to tell their family to contact me directly if they had any questions or concerns regarding the research. Research was carried out only with students who had agreed to take part and, students were periodically reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time without this having any impact or implication for them in any aspect of their home or school life. As a researcher working with young people, I aimed to make these young people feel they were being respected and could gain a sense of control over the research process.

I closely attended to these young people's emotional state when interviewing them and made sure any issues occurred regarding student protection (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012) in the course of data collection were properly dealt with. To do this, I always discussed with my supervisors in time to make sure good ethical practice was followed in this study. When a student appeared reluctant to answer a certain question in the interview, I did not insist but quickly changed to another topic. On occasions when during interviewing a student asked me to pause the recorder for a while because they wished to share certain information without being recorded, I respected their wishes and only turned the recorder back on when they were willing and ready. After the interview, I immediately noted down this part of information to

supplement the interview data. Moreover, when interviewing provoked some strong emotional reactions, for example, a girl cried when recalling her family being poor and looked down upon by others before her parents left the village to work. I stopped further questioning at once and chatted with her instead, giving her time to express emotions and have a period of time to rest to help her soothe her feelings and recover. In addition, when concerns regarding student protection arose, for example, one such incident with Xiaoli (see in Chapter 6), I did not hesitate in informing her homeroom teacher (*ban zhu ren*) immediately and Xiaoli was also informed that I would be doing so.

I was fully aware of vulnerability of these young people in forming new relationships, especially when the end of research comes and it is time to say goodbye. Thus, I was aware of the need to plan for my exit from their day-to-day lives. Moreover, it was my genuine desire to retain contact with these young people and keep caring for them. I made sure students note down my mobile number and email address, and I assured them that I would come and visit them again once I finished my study.

I also made sure all information collected from the participants was kept in strict confidentiality and treated anonymously with pseudonyms including names of the school, the village, and the participants. All participants included were well informed about the strict confidential nature of this study. The collected data (paper documents and audio/video recordings) was kept in secure locations, such as locked in the drawer of my dormitory room in the school or saved in electronic files secured with an encryption key on my personal computer.

4.7 Research Issues

4.7.1 Reflexivity

Being fully engaged in the fieldwork, the researcher attempts to acquire an understanding of social life by means of capturing 'the insiders' view' (Berg, 2004). The type of immersion requires that the researcher not agree or accept everything at face value or, simply describes the subject under study. Rather, the researcher should keep an ongoing conversation with themselves, by asking questions of what they know and how they know it, in other words, being reflective (Berg, 2004).

As 'reflexivity' requires the researcher actively constructs interpretations then questions how these interpretations arose (Berg, 2004), as well as to be self-critical and self-conscious as researcher (England, 1994), I also reflected on my researcher's role and believe my personal background as well as experiences shaped my interpretations when understanding educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' in the study (Creswell, 2014). For example, it was my natural interpretation that a student's rejection or indecision of attending university was primarily a rational response to their understanding of having low academic aptitude reflected by their poor academic performance. This is because, having been a junior high school student in China myself, I understand how important a student's academic position is for their educational pursuit in the Chinese education system and how straightforwardly poor academic performance and low attainment level can be a sign to show a student that higher education is simply not reachable for them.

Moreover, considering my social background of being 'urban'[12] and my experiences of going to a highly selective school since junior high school in which good resources and a great deal of support were provided for students to reach the goal of attending university, I believe school resource, teachers and school-based service are very important for students to develop a higher educational aspiration for themselves. My interpretation therefore leaned toward the lack of resource and support at the school level had an impact on students' aspirations. In addition, being a PhD student studying abroad now, I know my own aspiration would unlikely be developed and sustained if without the tremendous amount of support from my family, practically and emotionally, and my very strong emotional connection with my parents. The role of family, in particular, connections between parents and child as well as parents' emotional support therefore became key elements of my interpretation.

4.7.2 Challenges and Emotions

One of the difficulties I experienced throughout the course of data collection was regarding the weekly travelling between my place and the research setting[13]. Due to inconvenient local transportation, the school was rather difficult to get to from the outside. It was also a challenge to get students to trust me – a complete adult outsider who had little in common with them. I realised simply being friendly and verbally assuring students that I was not an authoritative teacher was far from enough to make students feel secure, comfortable and more involved in my research. That was why I decided to live at school during weekdays from the very beginning so that I could show my presence as frequently as possible to gain students' familiarity with me being around as part of their school life. As the familiarity increased and I was more and more engaging in many aspects of the school life, students started to feel more

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[12] See 'The Urban-Rural Classification' in Chapter 1 Introduction
[13] See 'Travel and Transport' in Chapter 5

at ease having me around. Then, I had more opportunities to talk with the students and let them know more about me, so gradually, we began to build a relationship and I began to earn their trust.

One of the things I found hardest in the field was learning when to stand back. As having spent a reasonable period of time with my informants, I inevitably come to care for them and want to offer help as much as I can. One example of this was when students came to me asking for guidance about which high school they should choose or what potential career path they should consider because of lack of help and support; my instinct had been to provide advice and guidance with information in detail, because as someone older and educationally more experienced, I could really give some practical help for future planning. I knew, however, I must retain objectivity, which means, as researcher, I cannot help them the way I could have if I were just an older friend.

With all those time getting to know the students and listening to their stories, experiences, feelings and thoughts, it gave me great empathy for these 'left-behind children'. I have lost count of the number of times my heart has been touched upon deeply by these young people and their young lives: their complicated feelings for parents, their genuine love and gratitude for grandparents, their longing for care and love, their attachment to friends and cherishing of friendship, their helpless to the reality of being a 'left-behind child', and their confusion and bewilderment about the future. The hardest point in the research came then, when it was time to say goodbye. Many students took my mobile number and email address and hoped to remain contact with me in the future. Many sought assurances that I would come and visit them again once I finished my study. I agreed to do so; after having spent a long time

building relationships and sharing, it was my genuine desire to retain contact and keep caring for them.

4.8 Limitations

The findings of this research were based on qualitative data collected in one village of China. The qualitative data has both of its strengths and limitations. On one hand, the qualitative data can provide detailed information on how individuals behave and react in the same exterior environment (the school) and why individual students from the same socio-economic background demonstrate different educational aspirations. This is particularly useful to understand the schooling experiences of and challenges for the 'left-behind children' population, and explore the underlying mechanisms that distinguish some of them from the rest. On the other hand, however, an intrinsic limitation of qualitative data collected via in-depth interviews lies in its small sample size. As a result, the findings presented in the study cannot be generalised to other schools or areas across China because the sample was based on purposive sampling, and the sample size was not large enough to reach conclusions about circumstances and experiences of schooling of all 'left-behind children' in China. In addition, as my study lacks comparative analysis between 'left-behind children' and non- 'left-behind children', this creates limitations on the degree of understanding in what extent being 'left behind' has an impact on these young people's experiences and aspirations. Adding a comparative component would have added strength to my research design, however, due to the fact that there were too few non- 'left-behind children' subjects in the research school (less than 5%), it was thus not possible to make comparison. And considering time constraints, it was not possible to explore more than one case in which non – 'left-behind children' subjects could be included with the depth I aimed to achieve.

Chapter 5 Research Context

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, information about the context in which the study took place is provided. Given that this is an ethnographic study, detailed information on the area the research was carried out in as well as a rich descriptive account of the school was considered important.

5.2 The Region - Geographic and Demographic Background

The broad region in which the study was situated locates in the southwest of China. It is a county[14] in terms of the level of local government in China. This county – County X has 23 subordinate townships and 34 *Xiangs*[15], with a total population of 676794 by the end of 2014. The specific region where the school under study locates is called 'Riverside *Xiang*', one of the *Xiang* in County X.

'Riverside *Xiang*' has 10 villages with in total 2621 households and a population of 9961. Among the total 2621 households, 2376 are agricultural households with a population of 9719, which makes it a typical agricultural region.

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[14] Counties are the basic administrative unit in China. There are currently five practical levels of local government: the provincial (province, autonomous region, municipality, and special administrative region), prefecture, county, township, and village (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_China, retrieved on 30 September 2015).

[15] 'Xiang' is a specific Chinese administrative unit which subordinates the level of township. Literally, it is translated as 'county' in English as it seems that there is no such an administrative unit in western countries like the UK, but it refers to a specific level of administration in China. 'Xiang' is a two-level-lower administrative unit than 'county'. A county usually comprises of several townships, and a township is composed of several *Xiangs*. A 'Xiang' is then composed of several villages. The smallest unit in China should be 'production team' as a village usually consists of a few 'production teams'.

5.3 The Region – Education

There are 66 elementary schools, 17 junior high schools, 5 general high schools and 5 vocational high schools in County X. In recent years, the number of students who enrol in local schools has largely decreased owing to the fact that more and more local residents tend to send their children to schools in urban areas where they out-migrate for work. Take the sample school for the study – 'Riverside Comprehensive School' for example, there is only 1 class in each grade from grade 1 to 9 and the average number of students per class is about 35. Usually in China, urban and rural likewise, schools like 'Riverside' that accommodate students in 9 grades have at least 3-4 classes in each grade with about 40-45 students in each class. Given the declining number of students' enrolment in County X, the local Education Bureau therefore assigns enrolment tasks for local schools – in particular, schools in the post-compulsory education stage including general high schools and vocational high schools. In order to finish the task, local schools are competing with each other to attract students. It is very common in the region that a few months before the summer term ends each year, local high schools will send their representatives to visit each local junior high school so as to introduce their school to the students. Because students who are about to graduate from junior high school in the same year will soon choose the high school they want to go before taking the Senior High School Entrance Examination (SHSEE) in June, therefore, by doing so, local high schools are more likely to increase the enrolment. It is also a fact that because of the local high schools' demand for enrolment, junior high school graduates in County X will not be rejected for admission in local high schools, which means, except for the selected classes in one or two high schools in which only top students with outstanding academic performance are enrolled, junior high school graduates in County X will be able to go to the high school they choose regardless of their academic performance so long as they want to stay in education.

However, some students – in particular, students who generally present poor academic performance are not always given a flexible choice-making opportunity as they have been chosen by their school to study in a vocational high school rather than a general high school after finishing junior high school. This is called 'student diversion' project, which is a regional characteristic regarding education in County X implemented by the local Education Bureau in order to deliberately balance student enrolment between general high schools and vocational high schools as well as promote enrolment in vocational schools. The 'student diversion' process usually begins in mid-May – one month before SHSEE and lasts for about a week. The aim of the 'student diversion' process is to classify students into two groups – one with students who very likely can be admitted to general high schools and the other with students who very unlikely can, thereby are believed to better go to vocational high schools instead. Take the grade 9 class in 'Riverside Comprehensive School' for example, 24 students out of 34 were chosen for the 'student diversion' process in May 2015.

5.4 The School History

The current 'Riverside Comprehensive School' is located in the central area of the local region – Riverside *Xiang* – and it is now the only school in the region. 'Riverside' *Xiang* consists of 10 villages. There used to be one elementary school in every village, one elementary school in the central area of 'Riverside' *Xiang* called 'Riverside Central Elementary School' and one junior high school called 'Riverside Junior High School' which was also located in the central area of Riverside *Xiang*. By 2005, elementary schools in the villages had been closing down owing to the decreasing number of local students. By about 2006, only the 'Riverside Central Elementary School' remained and served as the only

primary school in the region accommodating students from 10 villages. Prior to 2008, 'Riverside Junior High School' had always been the only junior high school in the local area.

After the earthquake in 2008[16], students and teachers of 'Riverside Central Elementary School' were moved to the campus of 'Riverside Junior High School' due to safety consideration. Later, the campus of 'Riverside Central Elementary School' was demolished. From 2008, these two schools started to move toward combination by firstly sharing the same campus but still functioning in different systems. Until the spring of 2013, the whole school was moved together to a brand-new campus at which time the primary school sector and the junior high school sector were officially combined as one united institution. The brand-new campus is where the current school is now located. Before moving to the current campus, students and teachers from the previous 'Riverside Central Elementary School' had stayed on the old 'Riverside Junior High School' campus for approximately 5 years. The students who are the focus of this study, are now in Grade 9 but were in Grade 3 in 2008 when moving to the old junior high school campus. Because of the damage caused by the catastrophic earthquake in 2008, students and teachers living on the old junior high school campus had to stay in prefabricated houses for 5 years. The accommodation is that which is usually built on construction sites for workers to live in temporarily; being easily assembled and disassembled. When asked about living in those houses, the students described it as 'very uncomfortable' and 'extremely cold in winter and extremely hot in summer' as the materials are not supposed to keep people warm in winter or cool in summer.

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[16]The 'Wenshuan earthquake', which is also called 'The big Sichuan earthquake', took place on May, 12th, 2008. It is the most violent earthquake in China after the 1976 'Tangshan big earthquake'.

5.5 The School – Basic Information on Placement, Layout and Facilities

'Riverside' is a state school. There are currently 39 in-service teachers and 455 students in the school. It enrols students in the catchment area from kindergarten to grade 9 (the last year of junior high school). The current number of kindergarten students is 136, the number of primary school students is 224, and the number of junior high school students is 95. Students in the kindergarten sector are roughly divided into three classes on the basis of the age difference among students: one class with children who are aged 3-4 years old, another one aged 4-5 years old, and the other one with children who are at the age of 5.5-6 years old. There are currently 3 female teachers who are respectively in charge of each kindergarten class. Besides these teachers, there are several teachers who are mainly responsible for taking care of the children's daily living. In the primary school sector, there are 6 grades as with most primary schools in China, but with only one class in each grade. There are 3 grades in the junior high school sector, again as with the majority of junior high schools in China, but also with only one class in each grade. Therefore, in total, there are 6 classes in the primary school sector and 3 classes in the junior high school sector. With this size and this number of students, 'Riverside' is rather a small school.

There are 10 mandatory subjects in grade 7: Chinese language, mathematics, English language, politics, history, geography, biology, art, music and physical education (PE). In grade 8, physics is added as a new mandatory subject, which makes a total of 11 subjects. In grade 9, there are 10 mandatory subjects students have to study under the requirements of the national curriculum: Chinese language, mathematics, English language, politics, history, chemistry, physics, art, music and PE; however, for the purpose of preparing for the Senior High School Entrance Examination (SHSEE) which takes place each June, subjects like art and music, which will not be tested in SESEE, are cancelled or replaced by other subjects that

will be included in the SESEE testing system, such as Chinese, Math and English. Among the total 39 in-service teachers currently working in the school, there are about 20 teachers teaching junior high school classes. They have to cover the teaching tasks for all the subjects. During my stay, I have noticed it is quite common for teachers who teach certain subjects for one grade, and also teach other subjects for the same grade or in a different grade. For example, a teacher who teaches chemistry for grade 9 students also teaches biology for students in grade 7 and 8; another teacher who teaches history for grade 8 students also teaches computer lessons and science for grade 4 students.

On this new campus, there are four main buildings: the teaching building, the boys' dormitory building, the girls' dormitory building and the canteen. The teaching building and the boys' dormitory building are on the same side and are next to each other, the girls' dormitory building is on the opposite side, face-to-face with the boys' dormitory building at a somewhat 200-meter distance, and the canteen is in the middle of the two dormitory buildings. (See Figure 1 below):

Figure 1 Map of the school
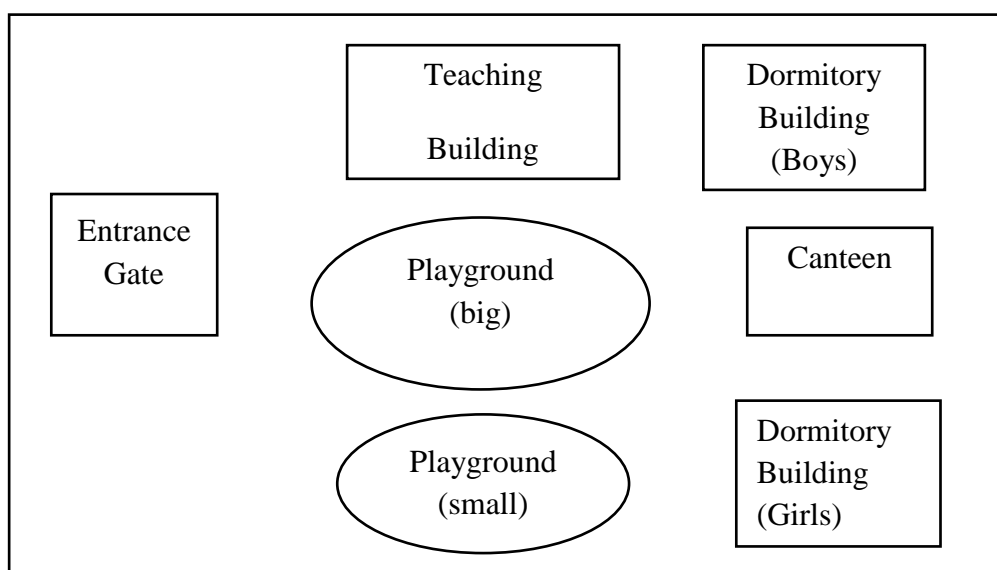
The teaching building has three floors with a mixed combination of classrooms and offices as well as facilities such as labs and the reading room in each floor. Except kindergarten class 1, all the classrooms are on the same side of the building with the class arrangement as follows: kindergarten class 2 and 3, grade 1 and 2 are on the ground floor; grade 3, 4 and 5 are on the first floor; grade 6, 7, 8 and 9 are on the second floor. Teachers' offices are on the other side of the building and are mostly on the first and second floor. During my stay, I was allowed to work in one of the offices on the second floor and was offered a desk in it. There are 9 teachers in this office; 7 of them mainly teach junior high school classes and 2 of them mainly teach primary school classes. Every teacher is provided with a desk that has several drawers which can be locked. There are neither heating or cooling devices nor facilities like filing cabinets, lockers, computers, printers or photocopiers in the office. Only recently (the second week of my stay), a water machine was provided in this office. Facilities in each classroom are about the same. Take the grade 9 classroom for example, each student is provided with a small wooden desk and a small wooden chair; there is a big rectangle blackboard on the wall in the front of the classroom; a bigger wooden desk which is in front of the blackboard is for teachers with boxes of chalks and a blackboard eraser on it, as well as some teaching tools under it, including set squares and protractors. There is a water machine at the back of the classroom. Like any other classrooms, there is no provision for either heating or cooling devices or computers or other multimedia teaching facilities in this classroom.

Each of the two dormitory buildings has three floors with a combination of rooms designed separately for the staff and students. All rooms (about 10) on the ground floor of the two

buildings are for the staff. On the first and second floor, half of the rooms are for the staff, the other half are for students. During my stay, I was lucky enough to be offered the only staff room available at that time which was on the ground floor of the girls' dormitory building. The size of a staff room and a student room is about the same. The difference is that there is toilet and wash basin in each of the staff room but not in the student room. And there are neither heating or cooling devices nor hot water supply in any of the rooms. Teachers can fetch hot water using thermos bottles in the canteen during the day, but students are not allowed to do so. I was told and saw that not only is there no hot water supply in any form for students on the campus, but also students have very limited access to running water[17]. To illustrate, for more than 100 students who were living in the girls' dormitory building during my stay, only one running-water tap was provided which was in the toilet on the first floor. Other places on the campus where students can get running water are toilets in the teaching building and several running-water taps at the back of the canteen. Inside each student room, there is space for 6 bunk beds[18]. A room has 6 bunk beds inside usually accommodates 12 students, but in here, as a result of the school's insufficient provision for students' basic living facilities, one bunk bed most of time accommodates 3-4 students as 2 students have to share one bed. Take the girls' room of grade 9 for example, there are usually 15 girls[19] living in this room but there are only 12 beds, so there are 3 beds which each accommodates 2 girls at a time. The boys' room of grade 9 is the same. There are no facilities like wardrobes in the room for students to keep their belongings; there are only several desks which are the same as the ones students use in the classroom and these are provided in the room so that students can

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[17] Running water is usually not drinkable in China; it is mainly used for washing and cleaning. In order to get drinkable water, one usually fetches running water from the tap and then gets the water boiled.

[18]There are 8 smaller bunk beds in each of the rooms that are for kindergarten kids

[19]The total number of students in grade 9 is 34, and there are 17 girls and 17 boys. There are 2 girls and 3 boys in this class who do not board at school but go home every day after school as their home is very close. However, from the fifth week of this term (April 13th), they were required by the school to board until the end of the SESEE. Therefore, there was about a two-month period of time when 17 girls were living in one room and 17 boys were living in one room. This means that during that period of time, there were 5 beds out of 12 in one room which each accommodated 2 students at a time.

put their personal belongings on top or under it, like tooth brushes, cups, towels and washbowls.

5.6 A Boarding School

'Boarding schools' in China were initiated by the State Council in 2001 for the purpose of making provisions for educational resources in the stage of compulsory education among rural areas(HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA, 2013). The construction of boarding schools in China has effectively improved the condition of many rural schools; it has played a positive role in expanding the scale of implementing compulsory education in the vast central and western regions of China as well as ensuring the enrolment and completion for the compulsory education among children of school age in the central and western regions of China (Baidu Baike, 2017). In practice, students who study in boarding schools spend all their time at school following a strict timetable except for the holidays.

'Riverside Comprehensive School' is one of these boarding schools. As now it is the only school in the region, 95 percent of the students are boarding in the school [20]due to the fact that the majority of them live very far away[21]. Accordingly, each student is charged for a monthly boarding fee which covers the cost of living at school given which grade they are in. During my stay, I was told the monthly boarding fee for students in grade 1 and 2 was ¥230 (about £23), for students in grade 3 and 4 was ¥240 (about £24), for students in grade 5 and 6 was ¥250 (about £25), and for students in grade 7, 8 and 9 was ¥260 (about £26). In addition,

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[20] Not only the students, but also most of the teachers are living at school during weekdays (Monday to Friday), either with their family or by themselves, which is a requirement of the principle.
[21]Most students' homes are in the deeper countryside where it takes a couple of hours to reach and the transportation is very inconvenient and also dangerous.

each term[22], each student is charged for additional learning materials such as workbooks, test papers and so on of which the fee also differs according to a student's grade. Take the term of my stay – the spring term of 2014-2015 academic year for example, from grade 1 to grade 9, the fee for per student was ¥49.7 (about £5), ¥56.2 (about £6), ¥97.44 (about £10), ¥100.29 (about £10), ¥100.75 (about £11), ¥97.45 (about 10), ¥193.3 (about £19), ¥255.6 (about £26), and ¥244.6 (about £25), respectively. Apart from the two fees mentioned, there are no other fees charged for students in the school.

In order to better organize and manage the school life for both the staff and students, the school makes its main school regulation in the form of timetables. There are two working timetables in each academic year; the two timetables are on the whole the same except that the time arrangement for all school activities in the summer term is in general a bit earlier than that in the autumn term due to the better weather condition.

Take the autumn-term timetable of 2014-2015 academic year for example, students except kindergarten are woken up by an electronic loudspeaker at 6:30 every morning, they have about 5 minutes to dress up and come out together and assemble in the playground (playground 1); then they line up in rows and run about 10 circles (2000 meters) around playground 1 for 20 minutes. Home teachers of each class usually show up to organize and supervise, some of them run with the students. Then students have the morning reading class from 6:50 to 7:30 (the morning reading class for grade 1 and 2 ends at 7:25); then from 7:30 to 8:10 is breakfast time: they have steamed bread, pickles and rice porridge every day, and

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[22]There are two terms in each academic year in China: the autumn term and the spring term. The autumn term usually begins in September and ends in January or February; the spring term usually begins in March and ends in July.

on Tuesdays and Thursdays, they also have boiled eggs. Students queue in line outside of the canteen with their own metal bowl in hands and enter the hall where food is served one after another from grade 1 to grade 9, this means younger students always get food earlier so grade 9 students as the oldest students in the school always eat at the last. Food is served in several huge metal bowls or plates and is served by the canteen staff by spooning food from each of the bowls or plates into every student's bowl. Because there is only 40 minutes for breakfast, food is served by the canteen staff in a very fast manner from one student to another that is somewhat similar to the factory assembly line. Students who have been served food are sitting and eating with their own class in the designated area of each class arranged by the school. A staff member who is chosen to be 'teacher in charge of the week' is responsible of keep students in discipline and will intervene when things go wrong by blowing a whistle. After each meal, students go to the back of the canteen where there are running water facilities to do the washing-up themselves.

Morning classes begin from 8:15 to 12:00: there are four classes, each class lasts for 40 minutes and is followed by a 10-minute break, except for the break time after the second class which is 40 minutes because the students are asked to do exercises on the playground in the form of either jogging or broadcast gymnastics. There is a 15-minute break time after the third class as a result of doing ocular gymnastics eye exercises. This eye exercise programme, along with the broadcast gymnastics programme, is included in the national curriculum for the purpose of protecting students' eyesight after a long-time study and is applied among all elementary and secondary schools across China. Then from 12:00 to 12:40 is lunch time: for lunch, the way food is served and students are organized is the same as that at breakfast; there are usually three main courses served at lunch including two meat dishes and one vegetable dish, accompanied with cooked plain rice. Students can also choose whether they would like

all the main course dishes or just one or two of them or how much rice they would like to have, and there is hot soup served at lunch which students can help with themselves. Then from 12:40 to 13:50 is the afternoon nap time; and afternoon classes begin from 14:05 to 16:30: there are three classes, each of which also lasts for 40 minutes and a 10- minute break is followed after each class except for the 15-minute break time after the first class, again for the eye exercises. From 16:30 to 17:00 is the extra-curriculum activity time which is a self-arranged time period for the students themselves. From 17:00 to 17:40 is dinner time: for dinner, the way food is served and students are organized is the same as that at breakfast and lunch; there are usually two days (Monday and Wednesday) when rice and the lunch-style hot dishes are served, on Tuesday the breakfast-style meal with rice porridge and steamed bread is prepared, and Thursday is always noodles' day with Chinese wheat noodles cooked with green vegetables. During my stay, I was told by the students and teachers that the lunch meal is comparatively the most satisfactory one and the dinner meal is the least satisfactory; and most students and staff disfavour the most the noodles on Thursdays, many students skip dinner on that day because of this. Then from 17:40 to 18:00, there are 20 minutes' meeting time for the home teacher with the class discussing issues in terms of class management or others, and from 18:00 to 20:20, there are three evening classes, after that, the whole day ends and students are asked to go to bed at 20:35. The 'teacher in charge of the week' comes to every dormitory room and makes sure everything is in order before the bedtime. When the bedtime comes, no student is allowed to talk or do other things. They will be punished if they are found to have broken the rules.

The autumn-term timetable had taken effect since October 1st 2014 to early February 2015. Since April 1st 2015 to early July 2015, the spring-term timetable had been in operation. The overall system is not much different, yet the whole-time slots were shifted a bit ahead: the

getting-up time has been changed from 6:30 to 6:00, the previous 1 hour and 10 minutes' afternoon nap time has been extended to 2 hours, thus accordingly the going to bed time has been changed to 21:15 instead. In addition, for the purpose of preparing for the forthcoming SHSEE in June, a fourth evening class is added in the spring-term timetable for grade 9 students only, therefore, the bed time for grade 9 students has been extended to about 21:45.

5.7 Care and Support of the Students

In general, students who board at school cannot leave the campus during school days without permission given by teachers. There is a security personnel living in his office during school days who is in charge of checking individuals entering and leaving the school: visitors need to register before entering the campus, students will not be allowed to leave the campus if no valid written request for leave is provided, and the electronic gate can only be opened by the security from inside of his office. The security office is right beside the school entrance gate.

Except for the role of carer arranged for kindergarten as well as grade 1 and 2 students, 'Riverside' is not staffed with a particular person who is in charge of the students' daily life in the dormitories. The carers are responsible for helping children with their daily activities including getting dressed, personal cleanliness, eating in the canteen, going to bed and so on. For other students, it is either the person who is 'the teacher in charge of the week' or the home teacher of each class deals with issues in turn on a daily basis in the dormitories. One of the duties of 'the teacher in charge of the week' is to come to each dormitory room prior to bed time to make sure all students are ready to go to bed, then he/she will leave after a while if everything seems to be in order. The home teachers mainly come to the dormitory rooms before bed time to help 'the teacher in charge of the week' manage issues but may also come

around at other times to meet students. Students usually go to their home teachers first when they feel unwell, the home teacher then will decide what help the student might need: whether he/she needs to see a doctor or goes back home or simply stays in the dormitory room to rest. There is no doctor, nurse or other medical personnel in the dormitories. If students are really ill or there is any sort of an emergency, they could go to the local hospital to see a doctor which is very close to the school with only a 5-minute's walking distance. Students also go to their home teachers if they have other needs, for example, girls in grade 9 sometimes go to their home teacher's room on the same floor of their room to get drinking water as she has a water machine and she is always happy to help.

There is no place in the school for students to get showers or do laundry. I was told the previous principle had undertaken a project to build shower facilities that were provided by solar energy in the school; I have also seen those solar-energy facilities being left on the roof of the school canteen; but now for some reason, the current principle decided not to put them in use. Students therefore can only do basic personal cleanliness during school days and they usually take their dirty clothes back home on weekends or they simply do not change clothes for 5 days. I have witnessed how kindergarten students were organized by the carers to clean themselves before going to bed in the open area outside of the school canteen in the late afternoon: each of them used a small plastic washbowl to get water from the taps at the back of the canteen, then they put their washbowls on the lower stairs with themselves sitting on the higher stairs so that they could easily wash the feet after washing the face. The taps only provide cold water and there is no additional warm water provided for them.

There is a basketball court and a number of table tennis tables on playground 2. Playground 2 is the main place on the campus where students and staff have PE lessons and do sports. There is also a certain area on playground 2 where there is play equipment particularly for kindergarten pupils, including swings and slides and so on. During my stay, I have seen students playing basketball, badminton or table tennis in the afternoon extra-curriculum activity time; some teachers also use those sports facilities in the late afternoon. There was once or twice during my stay when 'Riverside' was organizing a teacher's basketball match between 'Riverside' and another local school, students from all grades came out to watch the game and support their teachers in the afternoon activity time.

Apart from sports, students have very limited leisure time and have no access to radio, television and other forms of entertainment at school. Many students have mobile phones but they are not allowed to bring their phones to the school. If they are found to secretly use the phone at school, their phones will be confiscated until Friday when they leave school. Birthdays or other personal anniversaries are not celebrated at school.

The main access to drinking water for students is the water machine at the back of every classroom. A water machine is an equipment that by using which a plastic barrel of purified water has to be put upside down first and the front raised part of the barrel needs to be stuck in the hole on top of the machine, then one can get either hot water or cold water by pressing one of the two buttons on the machine. This machine is now very commonly used in China as the main drinking water supply equipment in a variety of places including offices and homes. Once one has got a machine, he or she just needs to order those water barrels from the water companies and get them delivered. In 'Riverside', a barrel of purified water is provided for

each class once a month and is collected from the school canteen by one of the student's cadres whose position is called 'commissary in charge of subsistence'. However, I noticed since the beginning of my stay, the water machine in grade 9 class was not in use for a long time with an old empty water barrel on top. Later I was told by the commissary in charge of subsistence of the class there has been 4 months that there was no water provided in the class. He went to the school canteen several times asking for a new water barrel, but the canteen staff told him there was not any, and no explanation was given and no one knows when there will be drinking water supply in the class again. During this period of time, students had to go to the small shop[23] on the ground floor of the boys' dormitory building and buy bottled mineral water which cost ¥1(10 pence) per bottle.

5.8 'Left-behind children' in the School

The proportion of 'left-behind children' in the total number of students in 'Riverside' is nearly 90 percent. Among this 'left-behind children' cohort, nearly 95 percent have been 'left behind' by their migrant parents since they were very young and have been living with their grandparents since then. For most of them, the history of going to a boarding school can be traced back to their primary school years; and for some of them, the age when they started going to a boarding school was even as early as kindergarten.

For these young people, going to a boarding school or not has never been a choice for them, neither for their parents: there was only one primary school in their village before 2005; from 2006, the 'Riverside Central Elementary school' was the only school in the local region; and since 2008, the current 'Riverside Comprehensive School' has been remained as, still, the

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[23] This small shop is attached to the school and run by a teacher and his family. It mainly sells snacks and drinks with few varieties.

only school in 'Riverside' region. Therefore, going to a local state boarding school has always been the only option available for the majority of 'Riverside' residents.

Students usually leave school on Friday afternoons and return on Monday mornings before the first morning class begins. Most of them walk back home from school and walk to school from home every week as a result of few means of transportation available in the countryside. Most of students walk for about 1 hour between school and home and they usually have companions, either are their siblings who study in the same school or their friends who live in the same village. Some students are picked up by their family members, mostly the grandfather, by motorbike. There are students who leave in the most distant village and need to walk up to 2 hours in the mountain to reach school or home. Considering the time they have to be at school on Monday mornings (8:15), it is almost impossible for them to walk to school, especially in winter. Instead, they wake up very early (5am) in order to catch the mini-bus which passes by their village at a scheduled time. However, as this service is provided by self-employed individual bus owners, the mini-bus is not always stuck to schedule, so there are times that the students have to wait longer early on a cold dark winter morning.

5.9 My Time in the School

5.9.1 Daily life

As mentioned earlier, during the period of my fieldwork from March to June of 2015, I was lucky enough to be offered the only staff room available at that time which was on the ground floor of the girls' dormitory building. This room is about 5 meters long and 2.5 meters wide, and like any other staff rooms, there is a toilet and wash basin in it. Since I was a temporary

resident there and would rather like to have a simple life, I did not put in much extra furniture inside of the room like all other teachers who redecorated their room a lot so that it felt really like a cosy home to them. I basically lived on with what was provided in the room from the beginning except having brought my own bedding and other personal hygiene items. The school provided me with a metal bunk bed, one large wooden desk – one of those in the teachers' office, 3 small wooden desks and 2 small wooden chairs – those ones are what the students are using in the classroom, and a rubbish bin. There are shops and restaurants available on the streets off-campus, so I could easily get most of the daily necessities within a very short walking distance from the school. Besides, I was kindly offered by the teacher (Mrs Yue[24]) who introduced me to the school other items, such as the thermos bottles to fetch boiled water from the canteen and 4 extra small wooden chairs and another rubbish bin. Mrs Yue's room was on the second floor of the same building and she was living with her daughter as she was a grade 4 student in this school. She insisted on offering me those items and has been very kindly caring for me during my whole stay.

I did not need to cook meals when living in the school as I was given permission by the principal to eat with teachers and students in the canteen. I was soon noticed and acknowledged by my presence on the campus and was treated just like another adult in the school by students as well as staff. Like all other teachers, I can come and eat a bit earlier than the scheduled lunchtime on the timetable and was allowed to serve food by myself. I usually sat in the canteen and ate with Mrs An and two other teachers who I was more familiar with, and listened to them chatting and also chatted with others.

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[24] This is a pseudonym for the teacher. She was also the home teacher of the grade 9 class.

5.9.2 Travel and transport

I usually stayed in the school from Monday to Friday every week and left the school at noon on Fridays. There are two main public transportation services in 'Riverside' on a daily basis: the mini-bus service that provides one min-bus leaving at 6am, 7am and 8am respectively (6:30am, 7:30am, and 8:30am during winter) which travels between 'Riverside' and the central town of County X, and the coach service that provides one coach leaving at noon which travels between 'Riverside' and the capital city of the province. There will be no other public transportation services available after the coach to travel out of 'Riverside' every day. Otherwise, other options are: either take the local private motorbike service which could be risky to be able to leave 'Riverside' on that particular day or stay in 'Riverside' for another night and leave the next morning when there is public transport again. By either means of public transportation I took, the whole journey usually took me about 5 hours to reach home with both time spent on the road and on waiting for transportation.

As for the route I took weekly to return to 'Riverside', most of time I travelled on Monday mornings from the city where my cousin lives as I was staying at her place on the weekend and the journey usually took me about 6 hours in total to reach 'Riverside': firstly, I needed to travel to the coach station in the city from my cousin's place which took me 1 hour; then waited for about 1 hour to get on the coach to the central town of County X, and this part of journey by coach took 2 hours; then waited for another hour for the mini-bus to 'Riverside', and this part of journey by mini-bus took 1 hour. I did not go back home often because I live in the capital city and it will take even longer to travel to 'Riverside'.

5.9.3 Building relationship and trust

As an adult as well as a complete outsider, I was aware it would not be easy to build a trusting relationship with the students and I should not be rushed. I realised simply being friendly and verbally assuring students that I was not an authoritative teacher was not enough to make students feel comfortable and more involved in the research. At first, students were all quite reserved when talking with me and only responded with a few words to my questions. As I was living in the school since the term started, I showed my presence as frequently as possible in different situations and activities, following the school timetable. For example, I sat in classes of different taught subjects in the morning or in the afternoon; I went to do physical exercise in the playground with students during break; I came to the evening classes to study with students; I came to eat in the canteen and I went to buy snacks and drinks in the school shop. In this way, students gradually got familiar with me being around. With time, students started to approach me during the class breaks and began to chat with me at lunch. I sensed they were all curious about me, especially how I felt about living in the school, and many of them felt more at ease to ask me questions directly. I took the opportunity to let students know more about me: I told them who I was, where I came from, what I was doing, how I was doing with my study in a foreign country. By sharing my studying experience abroad and highlighting my student status, it amazingly brought me and the students much closer as they no longer treated me as an authoritative teacher but in some ways equal to them, and they understood 'doing research with them' as something I needed to be able to finish my school task, for which they were very willing to help. This proved to be very helpful in building an equal relationship between me and my informants, and helped them feel much more relaxed when expressing thoughts and feelings.

As the familiarity increased, I used every chance to further explain about my research to students and discuss with them what support I would need from them, as well as what I could do for them. I often invited students to come and visit my dormitory room and showed them how electronic equipment like my computer and the voice-recorder works[25]. In doing so, I hoped to make students aware that doing interview is not something worrying as they will be doing it in a place and with someone they are familiar with and in a way they know how electronic tools will be used. At the same time, I initiated several very short 'mock interviews' with a few students who were willing to 'have a go' first with a few questions asked. I sensed these students felt quite relaxed in the process and were willing to talk more about questions I asked. After that, they very likely would tell their classmates their feelings about this experience; they also had realized that I had not disclosed anything they said to anyone. An outcome of this was students felt less terrified by the activity of interviewing and felt safe to share their ideas with me. Through this process, I established a good rapport with my informants and earned their trust, and with this trusting relationship, I better prepared myself for the in-depth interviewing.

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[25] For ethical considerations, I talked to the home teacher first and asked her permission for inviting students to visit me in my room during their break time. She was aware that this was an ice-breaking strategy for students to feel more familiar and at ease with me, and she also informed other staff about this situation.

Chapter 6 University Non-aspirers and 'The Undecided'

Table 3 Core students (11) included in Chapter 6

Student name	Gender	Family information	Aspiration/Choice for education
Xiaohua	Girl	Parents started working outsidein 2005 when she was 5; Her mother and father have been working outside in turn since 2010 until the time of the research (2015) because her younger brother was born; Parent(s) come home once a year for Chinese New Year Has been living with grandma or one parent	Not going to university; Go to a vocational high school then commence work immediately
Ah Fu	Boy	Parents have been working outside since he was 3 until the time of the research; Parents come home once a year during Chinese New Year Has been living with grandparents	Not decided about attending university; Go to a vocational high school
Bohai (Meimei's twin brother)	Boy	Their father passed away when they were 2; their mother has been working outside since they were 3 until the time of the research; Mother only comes home for Chinese New Year Have been living with grandpa	Not decided about attending university; Go to a vocational high school
Meimei	Girl		Want to finish at least senior high school but not allowed
Ah Dong	Boy	Parents have been working outside since he was in grade 2; Parents come home once a year for Chinese New Year Has been living with grandpa	Not attending university; Go to a vocational high school

Jingjing	Girl	Parents have been working outside since she was about 5 until the time of the research; Parents come home once a year for Chinese New Year Has been living with grandparents	Not attending university; Go to a vocational high school
Yunyun	Girl	Parents have been working outside since she was 5 until the time of the research; Parents come home once a year for Chinese New Year Has been living with grandparents	Not decided about attending university; Go to a general high school
Shilin	Girl	Parents have been working outside since she was about 1 until the time of the research; Parents got divorced when she was 12 and her father got custody of her; Her father only comes home for a couple days every year during Chinese New Year Has been living with grandparents and uncle and aunt	Not decided about attending university; Go to a general high school
Fengfeng	Boy	Parents having been working outside since he was 1 or 2 until the time of the research; Parents come home once a year for Chinese New Year Has been living with grandma	Not decided about attending university; Go to a vocational high school
Xiaoli	Girl	Parent(s) having been working outside since she was a few months old until the time of the research; Her mother passed away when she was 12 (grade 7); Her father comes home once a year for Chinese New Year Has been living with grandparents	Not decided about attending university; Want to go to a vocational high school
Kang	Boy	Parents have been working outside since he was in grade 3 until the time of the research; Parents come home once a year for Chinese	Not attending university;

		New Year Has been living with the family of his aunt	Commence work after junior high school

6.1 Introduction

'University non-aspirers' are students who explicitly expressed that they had no intention to attend university and were eager to commence work as soon as finishing senior high school or even junior high school. 'The undecided' are those who were not yet certain about whether going to university was something they would want to do or, be able to do, in three-years' time when they finished senior high school. These two groups of students are distinct from their university aspiring classmates in that they do not hold a belief that higher education is fundamentally linked with future employment or other life chances, and moreover, school education is questioned and considered by some of them as not useful for future life. For some, school education was considered inadequate for developing and competing in the real world; as a result, higher education and schooling in general are not always highly valued by these students.

Choices regarding further education are largely made by this cohort of students on the basis of being sensible and practical, and going to a vocational high school was overwhelmingly the preferred route for them after junior high school. For most of the university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', opting for further educational was ultimately viewed as a rationalised autonomous decision; however, it is also clear from the data that for some, further education choice-making process was very much accompanied by authoritative family intervention.

Many of the university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' showed a strong desire to make contact with the real world and believed social practice and experience were as important as, or even more important, than higher education. These students perceive themselves to be lacking in knowledge and experience about the real world therefore believe they must prepare themselves, in advance, with social skills and experiences in order to better adapt to society: *'Education is not 100% important because there are many people who have got a good career and a good life but not via high education; the most important thing is to become a capable person, like with excellent work abilities and social skills. For example, one should be good at handling problems, or one should have a certain talent, or one should have experiences and skills that enable them to work well with people in their workplace apart from their expertise. Once you have working abilities and social skills, you will be successful no matter what job you do. But I lack all these abilities and I have no social experience, and having a high academic achievement doesn't guarantee me to become such a capable person.' (Shilin)* Comparing their academic abilities, these students appear to consider social abilities as more important in contributing to their future development.

Whilst many university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' had a clear career goal, they did not seem to feel confident at all about achieving their occupational aspirations. These students for the large part demonstrated a low sense of self-confidence and uncertainty about eventually getting their dream jobs and achieving their ambitions.

This chapter will firstly present findings regarding why this group of students had lower or undecided aspirations for high education; factors discussed by students including their self-perceived academic ability, their perceptions of higher education and school education in

general, and their defined career goals as well as other life plans that relate to their educational aspirations and decisions will be explored in the following sections. The chapter will then present findings of how family plays a role in shaping educational aspirations and choices in the form of case studies of individual students. The chapter will also present findings regarding the school life as well as schooling experience of students in this group, and in particular, how friendship plays a significant role in these left-behind children's lives.

6.2 Academic Performance and Perceptions of Education

It was overwhelmingly stated by the university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' that poor academic performance is the primary reason for not aspiring to higher education. For these students, their perceived low academic ability does appear to be a real hindrance for them in relation to aspiring for higher education. Many students believed that they were not academically capable of being admitted into a general high school, let alone being admitted into a university[26]; as a result, students largely preferred attending a vocational high school when making further educational choices because it required lower academic abilities. It also appeared that for students like Yunyun, Ah Dong and Shilin, their view of not being academically good enough for a high-ranking university meant that they would rather give up university as a choice. This was the biggest factor in their aspirations.

> *I can't make it to university, my academic performance is not good enough, and this is the ultimate reason… I'll go to a vocational high school, my grades are too low to get into a general high school. (Jingjing)*

> *I'm not sure yet if I'll go to university, I don't think my current academic performance is good enough to make it… (Ah Fu)*

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[26]In the Chinese education system, a general high school enrols students who do well in the senior high school entrance examination, and students who attend a general high school usually aim to go to university in three years.

I know I can't get into college… I'd choose to go to a vocational high school, like many other classmates, I want to learn a skill to find a job after because my study performance is poor… I can't get into a general high school given my academic performance, and no matter how hard I try, I still won't make it. (Xiaoli)

I'll definitely finish high school, but if I fail in Gaokao27, I'll give up university and won't try again because it means I'm not academically good enough for university, if I insist, that'd be a waste of time. (Yunyun)

I don't think my academic performance enables me to be admitted into a good general high school, so I can't make it to a top university. I believe going to an average university is not useful, must be a top one, so I'd rather not go to university at all. (Ah Dong)

If I didn't make it to a top university after high school, I don't want to go to university at all, because if I failed in Gaokao, I wouldn't be accepted by top universities, I could only go to an average one or a bad one. I only want to go to a top university, if not, that'd be a waste of money and I can't learn much. (Shilin)

Interestingly, whilst students' lower educational aspirations appeared to be primarily attributed to their self-perceived lower academic abilities, they also appeared to consider their educational choice as a rationalised strategy for a better future. It is clear in the data that students believed that, compared to a general high school, studying in a vocational high school had more advantages as they would focus on developing occupational skills which linked strongly with future employability.

… even though I went to a general high school, I'd be among the low-achieving ones, and I probably had learnt nothing and it's impossible to get into university, so I only got a diploma; eventually I still need to find a job, in that case, I'd better study in a vocational high school because at least I had learnt a skill so it's easier to find a job. (Jingjing)

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27 'Gaokao' is the Chinese saying for the college entrance examination.

I decided to go to a vocational high school. I won't have a good future if I go to an average general high school because I won't get good teaching and discipline there, then I will be just muddling along; plus, I am not interested in those advanced academic knowledge anyway, so going to a vocational high school and learn a skill for employment seems to be a better choice for me. (Ah Dong)

I think I'll choose to go to a vocational high school because I can start learning a skill in there, then after graduation, I can start working and making money… If I go to a general high school, I'd wait until university to learn something that relates to future career… going to a vocational high school seems more suitable for my situation and will more likely to make my dreams come true… (Ah Fu)

It is also perceived by Ah Fu that as a result of learning both occupational skills and general academic knowledge in a vocational high school, he may be more equipped for creating a good future than those who study in a general high school: *'I may develop better than those who go to a general high school in the future, who knows? Because I get to learn a professional skill in high school as well as learning the general academic knowledge; while students in general high schools only learn academic knowledge.'* For him, attending a vocational high school was also strategically calculated to avoid an unfavourable learning context at school and in particular, to gain a greater chance of being admitted by universities if he finally decided to attend university. Ah Fu explained like this:

… I heard that teachers in a general high school teach very fast, I'm afraid I won't be able to follow and will lag behind a lot. I also heard that the grading system for vocational high school students in Gaokao is different from that for general high school students: for vocational high school students, the total score of Gaokao is comprised of written exam score and practical ability exam score; while for general high school students, there is only written exam. For example, if I need a total score of 500 to apply for university, I'm confident I can easily get 200 points in the practical exam because I got a lot of practice from doing housework and farm work at home, then I only need to work on the written exam; but it'd be a lot difficult for me to get 500 points all in the written exam. So if at that time I want to go to university, I'll be more likely to make it if I apply as a vocational high school student. In this way, as long as I want to, I can still get into university, just by a different means.

However, for students like Jingjing, poor academic performance appears to have seriously undermined her self-confidence and as a result, she appears to have developed a negative self-identity. It is clearly felt from her accounts that she regarded herself as an academic failure and she accepted this, it then suggests that she has neither the confidence nor the motivation to aspire to higher education. With such a self of being an academic failure, Jingjing self-excluded herself from universities.

> *I hope I will study well in high school and I can find a good job after graduation… but I'm not confident in myself because I have already become a low-achieving student so I will always be; things like going to university is only an unreachable dream… In the deep inside of my heart, I have no wish to stay in education any more. Because I know it'll be very difficult to improve my academic performance to the same level as before. I deeply regret neglecting my study for some other reasons at that time, as a consequence, I have to accept this reality… Now, I only want to learn a skill then I can start working. Studying is too difficult for me now, I won't succeed, so why bother to pursue? You know, like an escaping and giving up sort of mind.*

What seems to be significant in understanding students' educational aspirations was exploring their perceptions of university education as well as school education in general. There was a common theme among these students that they did not consider higher education as valuable, worthwhile or crucial for their futures. Many of them expressed a view that a good school performance and a higher educational level were not determinants of future employment or other life achievements. Many of these students did not see that receiving a higher education is the approach to achieving life goals; rather, they believed that knowledge, skills and experience they should and could learn from the real world mattered more to their future development. What the real world could provide and equip them with seemed not only to be an extrinsic need of these students to be able to secure a good future, but also seemed to create a sense of confidence for some to achieve a successful future via means other than education.

I don't think academic performance has an important impact on one's future. A good school performance doesn't guarantee a good life in the future…it's not worth staying in education just for a good job… I don't think education is that important to my future because I don't depend on education to build my future, I depend on my hard work and learning from others in the real world… (Xiaohua)

I don't think academic performance has a direct impact on one's future because the ability to adjust the society is also important. I think whether I can well adjust my future social environment has a more important impact on my future than my academic performance… in order to get a good job, receiving school education is far than enough, we must gain experience and learn skills in the real world. (Ah Dong)

It's not guaranteed those who received higher education than me will for sure have a better future than me… many other things also matter, like social contacts, social networks, and your own efforts to learn in the real world… (Kang)

Receiving high education or not doesn't seem too important to my future…I could also develop myself by other means… comparing to school performance, I think a different life experience is more important because it could help me have a life that is very different from the people around me now… (Yunyun)

It also clearly appeared in students' accounts that school education was seen as not effectively contributing to their future as well as not being adequate for developing a good one. This was given as a reason by several students as to why they preferred to go to a vocational high school. For these students, academic knowledge, especially the advanced knowledge they believed they would learn at general high schools, seemed rather irrelevant to their future life; school education in general seemed insufficient and limited in equipping them for future development.

Higher education doesn't seem too important to me, like in general high schools, we will learn some advanced knowledge, like quadratic surd expression, but the advanced academic knowledge doesn't seem to be useful for my future life. (Ah Dong)

I won't say school performance has an absolutely important impact on one's future because lots of knowledge you learnt at school would very likely not be used at all in the real world… in order to get a good job, it's not enough to only study at school… (Fengfeng)

School education can't provide us with individualized strategies as a preparation for the job market, instead, we should enter the real world first to get to know what qualifications or skills are required for employment, then we can make plans to prepare or improve ourselves. (Xiaohua)

Some students also expressed negative feelings about school education owing to an overall unpleasant schooling experience, which was also given as the main reason for not attending university. For example, for university non-aspirers like Xiaohua and Kang, school was perceived as a very oppressive context and studying itself was considered to be too stressful and overwhelming. Xiaohua explicitly stated that having no intention to attend university was ultimately due to her desire to completely escape from the schooling environment as a means of gaining freedom, and freedom for her was very important. Yet, Xiaohua believed university would be the same experience as the school - with no freedom there too so she had no wish to attend it. *'I don't want to go to university, the ultimate reason is I want to escape from schools because there is no freedom in schools; I don't like being restrained when I want to do something… I think I'd still be restrained in university, just like in the junior and senior high school.'* However, university aspirers like Shuang (will be discussed in the following chapter) considered university as a very free place with a greater stress-free learning environment, one which would be completely different from that of the junior and senior high school; and it was this belief that greatly motivated her to pursue it. Why these students should have such contrasting views is not clear. For Kang, who also had no intention of attending university, this was ultimately attributed to his very negative feeling about studying itself. This mostly resulted from a mounting pressure from school work: *'… The ultimate reason is I have no wish to attend university… I feel studying is so annoying,*

especially now we have so much homework and lots of pressure, which makes me more fed up with studying… I began to have a weary mood about studying from grade 8.'

Whilst many of these students shared a view that higher education was not crucial for their futures and even a general school education was insufficient for developing a good future, some did express a sense of uncertainty about how higher education could have an impact on their future. They also expressed a sense of isolation from support and guidance on future planning. Such uncertainty and isolation seemed to become an important hindrance to students in relation to aspiring to university education also.

> *My dad thinks university education is very important to my future, and other people also said the same, but I'm not so sure, I don't know how important university education is and what exactly it could bring me; my dad only told me to study well so it's easier to make money, he never explained me clearly the importance of studying, and no one ever guided me on how to plan for the future, so, well, I'll let nature take its course. (Xiaoli)*

> *I know going to university could help me find a decent job and be better prepared for the society, but I don't have the wish to attend university because I don't even know what university and high education is all about… (Fengfeng)*

And for individuals like Ah Fu, his indecision about his educational choices regarding university education could be understood as largely dependent on his own calculation of whether or not his academic abilities would support him to continue with higher education when it is time to make the final decision. For now, whilst being aware of the potential benefits he could gain by receiving a higher education, Ah Fu did not wish to set an educational goal as a result of simply complying with social expectations; rather, he considered choices must correlate with and be determined by his academic abilities. Ah Fu did view the journey of pursuing high education as *'too tough and difficult'* however, thus

also expressing little confidence in himself and his abilities, which appeared to also explain why he saw himself attending university as uncertain.

> *Well, yes, high education allows me to get a good job and lead a better life so that I can look after my grandma and set up a good example for my younger brother, but I don't agree that our society only appreciates people with high educational qualifications because it'd be so unfair for people, for example, from poor families who can't pursue high education and have to start working after junior high school. For myself, I'll see where I'm capable to reach in education before deciding whether or not pursuing high education, I definitely won't force myself to blindly pursue high education only because that's what is expected by the society... I agree that education can change one's life, but many people including me aren't able to persist for long because studying is too tough and difficult, so the majority would want to stop at some point. (Ah Fu)*

6.3 Career goals, Life Plans, and The Self

As discussed above, students commonly stated they were not academically capable of pursuing higher education, mostly as a result of their poor educational performances and low academic abilities. However, many of them still had a clear career path and/or some other life plans and, in particular, ideas of how to achieve them, which appeared to be matched with their educational aspirations. These students in general aspired to a general non-manual occupation and a better future development; however, they did not primarily associate their occupational aspirations or other life ambitions with high educational achievements. Rather than continuing with an academic education and then attending university, these students, for the large part, opted for the choice of acquiring a vocational training in a vocational high school and then commence work in three years.

Ah Fu is one example whose undecided educational plan, in terms of whether attending university or not was strongly related to his career goal. Ah Fu had a strong desire to become a self-employed chef in the future and this was largely owing to his personal life goal of

becoming a person who was not only able to provide his beloved grandma with a good life but, to also make contributions to society by what he does for a living.

> *I want to become a chef in the future, opening my own restaurant and cooking delicious food. Every time when I see on TV chefs make great food and make people so happy, I get so motivated because I also want to be a person who brings happiness to people… I heard that many people who are trained as a chef in vocational high schools have found jobs easily, so in this way, I could also earn enough money and buy my own house, then I can better look after my grandma and makes her happy, and this will make me very happy… when I become a successful chef, I will help those poor people in the society, like providing them with free food, in this way I'm doing something meaningful and I'll be very happy.*

Ah Fu was clearly against what his parents expected him to do for a job, such as being a manager or an accountant in big companies because jobs like these make good money; and he strongly disagreed with their view that only people with higher academic achievements are capable and useful. This was because he believed '*no matter what you do for a living, as long as you have good qualities, you are someone capable and useful… no matter how much money you have, if you don't help people and contribute to the society, you are worthless'*. However, as far as Ah Fu was concerned, pursuing higher education would very likely keep him away from his dream career and all other plans he made for the future. This appeared to explain why he felt rather unsure about following the educational path leading toward the university. *'I'm not sure if I should attend university eventually, if I choose to do so, that means I'll less likely to realize my dream of being a chef, because people say if you want to be a good chef, you should continue training as soon as you finish high school, not later than that'*.

For students like Xiaohua, even though she was without a specific career goal, she did have a clear overall life plan, in terms of at what level she expected herself and her future life to be;

which for Xiaohua was to be '*ordinary*'. Hence, it is understandable that with this aspiration towards future life, Xiaohua was unlikely to develop a higher-educational pathway.

> *… in order to get jobs, I want to do for the future, at least I need a high school diploma… I think finishing high school should be enough for me to find a good job… I don't know yet what specific job I will do in the future, but I don't agree with my parents, for them, only 'office jobs' are good jobs, like being a general manager, because it's not tiring. I don't have to have jobs like that. I think having an ordinary job is good enough, like most people, going to work in the morning and enjoy life in the evening, being ordinary and having an ordinary life. I don't have a big ambition for life so I don't need to work that hard.*

As discussed earlier, university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' largely considered receiving university education as less crucial for their future development comparing to gaining social knowledge, skills and experiences in the real world, many of them also expressed their individual beliefs and plans, regarding how to pursue their career and self-development in the real, social world. Whilst all showed a strong desire to make contact with the real world, individual students had very personal and varied understandings of the social world they were going to enter and, in particular, their sense of self, in relation to who they want to be and their self-defined personal weaknesses and advantages in achieving future success.

In Shilin's comments regarding the value of higher education presented earlier (see the quotation in 'Introduction' of the chapter), she emphasized the importance of one's working abilities and social skills as the key quality to succeed in future employment. She clearly showed that 'a capable person' and someone with lots of friends were who she wanted to be in the future, and she also expressed a confidence in creating a successful future with her own hard work.

> *… I want to become such a person in the future. Even though I don't make it to university, if I keep working hard, I should also be successful even without a university degree.*

I want to become someone who makes lots of friends, knows more about the world, and has more life experience. I will try to change my personality, not being too shy like now… I can succeed if I practice in life, I try, I experience and I learn up in life, that's how I can become the kind of person I want to be…

Shilin believed she particularly needed to experience leaving home and encountering difficulties and hardships in the real world before being able to achieve her life goal. This was probably because as she had very few experiences going to places even in her local area: *'… in here, I haven't even been to my friends' places, and I haven't been to many other places too'*, she saw herself as having no knowledge about the outside world, especially how to deal with difficulties and problems. Thus, she considered having experience of dealing with difficulties and hardships in the outside world as a very necessary preparation for the future. She also had a clear plan about developing her future self, which appeared to be strongly associated with how she perceived herself to be, as a disadvantaged rural young person compared to her urban counterparts.

I want to get a good job that won't make me do farm work in the sun all day like my parents… but I think I should put myself through the mill first. If I have gone through hardships earlier, then life would be better later, if I have never experienced difficulties or hardships earlier, when I encounter them later, I wouldn't know what to do, so I would prefer to try some sort of tiring jobs or physically demanding jobs first, what I mean by 'hardships' is not working in the field like my parents, but going outside to work. I don't want to stay at home all the time like them, I want to see the outside world, and maybe it is very different from home. I want to go out to do all that… I hope myself to be able to get through all the hardships and I am ready to do it.

Urban kids at our age… would know more stuff and be able to do many things, but we rural kids don't have many ways to know stuff, so we are unknown of many things… we rural people usually don't encounter many complicated issues in life, so we wouldn't know how to deal with issues or problems, but urban people, even kids, they encounter more issues in life then have more ways to solve problems…

It seems that for Shilin, being a 'left-behind child', not only she was physically 'left behind' because of her father's migration, she also felt herself being even more 'left behind' in terms of life knowledge, social experience and ability. It thus could be understood that it is this awareness of being socially isolated and lagged behind that generates an urgent need and a strong desire to enter and to know the real, social world.

Kang had no wish to even continue senior high school, wanting to join the army when he reached 18 and become a police officer or starting his own business in the future. He also planned to do some work before this first though, since he was only 16 at the time of the research. He did not mind what kind of work he would do as long as he could escape from studying at school.

> *Joining the army would be a good choice for me because I'm tall and strong, my physical condition is good. My uncle told me if I established good interpersonal relationships in the army, I'd very likely get promotion to become an officer in there, and this is what happened to him… the only difference is he suggested me at least finishing senior high school, but I don't want to…Now I'm 16, I need to work for 2 years before I can apply to join the army. I'm thinking either going out with my parents and work with them in the same construction site or working in the restaurant where my elder brother is working in another province… it's gonna be hard manual work but I don't mind, I prefer working to studying.*

Kang's career plan seemed to be more related to how he considered social networks and relations to be, as in being crucially important for his future and how he perceived himself to be, as a rather advantaged rural young person. Interestingly, Kang felt assured in his abilities in securing a good future life as he saw himself, as a rural young person, having more advantages than his urban peers thus felt quite confident that he could surpass the

achievements of his urban counterparts who though have a higher educational degree than him.

> *One's social networks and relations are crucially important, you need them to succeed! ... in today's world, one can't succeed relying on their own hard work only; you must have social connections to help and support you in some respects... you need to look for help from friends or colleagues because they will provide you with possible solutions and useful advice... social networks and relations could provide me with many benefits such as shortcuts to success.*

> *... urban kids spend most of time studying indoors, they have little time getting to know the outside world; unlike us, we spend more time in the real world so we gain more knowledge and experience, and having more contact with the real world makes us more open-minded and independent... rural kids not only learn at school, we also have the opportunity to learn in real life; but for urban kids, they only learn what is taught at school from textbooks... as for future development, rural kids have more advantages because by the way we learn, we learn more. I think I will have more advantages in future competitions... I think I will have a more colourful and more affluent life than many of those who have higher education than me.*

Ah Fu had his own goal in relation to who he wanted to be and what he wanted to do in life; he also had his own understanding of how he should develop himself and what 'success' really means.

> *I want to become someone useful for the society, someone who makes contributions to people... I think developing oneself should not only focus on improving their academic performance; more importantly, one should develop themselves to be a good person who makes contributions to the society. In the future, when I become a successful chef, I will help those poor people, like providing them with free food, in this way I'm doing something meaningful and I'll be very happy... Success is not about how rich you are. You may be not rich, but people won't look down upon you because of your good qualities and integrity, this is real success for me.*

Just as Kang, Ah Fu also expressed a strong sense of confidence and assurance in an ability to create a bright future. When commenting on the differences between urban children and rural children, it was clear that although recognizing the economic advantage of urban children, as

a rural child, he did not see himself as inferior to his urban peers; rather, he seemed to be very proud of who he was as he perceived rural children like him as having many good qualities such as being more filial towards parents, being more respectful, and being strong-willed, resilient and independent. Additionally, he also did not view a disadvantaged family background as a barrier but rather a strong driving force for future pursuits.

> *I think urban kids are not as sensible as us, many of them don't like their parents and grandparents and treat them badly. Their family provide them with much better material life, but they don't seem to appreciate and they even hate their parents when their needs are not met. Rural kids feel grateful for what our parents have done for us, we don't take their hard work for granted… although we are now all in adolescence and could get aggressive sometimes, rural kids try hard to restrain and control ourselves, but I heard some urban kids even hit their parents when they get aggressive, such a thing will never happen to us!… Urban people laugh at rural people because we have lower educational level and some of us don't even know how to cross streets in cities, but we don't laugh back at them when they can't distinguish corn from wheat.*

> *Because urban kids have better material life, they are unlikely to be hard working and endure hardships. Unlike them, we live in the countryside, we help family with manual work, so we know what hardship is and we develop a spirit of not being afraid of hardships. So in the future, while many urban kids can't deal with hardships and want to rely on their parents, we rural kids will not give up and will rely on ourselves to keep going. With this spirit, I think we will be much more successful than urban kids… I believe one's disadvantaged family background can become a big motivation that pushes one forward for a better future, whereas one with an advantaged family background could however become a boomerang child who can't be bothered to work.*

Ah Dong instead emphasized the importance of the social environment and considered that living in the city and learning from urban people would enable him to develop better in the future.

> *Urban kids see more modern stuff than us, they set up more far-sighted goals, their living condition is better, and they develop more hobbies and interests… because urban kids have more opportunities in real life to practice the knowledge they learnt at school, there are more activities to develop hobbies and interests in urban schools, so urban people have better qualities. That's why people always want to go to urban areas. If I live in their environment, I could learn their merits and develop better, so I want to go to cities in the future.*

Your social environment, people around you have a major impact on you… when you see someone is better than you, you want to catch up and be better; when you reach one goal, you want to set up a new one and reach higher… when you live in the cities, you will see more people who are a lot better than you, and you will want to compete with them, and learn all their good qualities; you also have more opportunities to be able to see and learn; but if you live in rural places, there's no such an environment to push you to improve and you have much fewer opportunities to learn, so of course you are less competent.

And for Fengfeng, he specially aspired to a self-employed career no matter which specific industry he would eventually get into. He considered his very introverted personal character as well as his lack of social experience to be the major challenge to his dream career path i.e. becoming a self-employed businessman; hence, he designed a clear career path that was primarily determined to make contact with the real world so he could to improve his character and gain social experience. It is interesting to see again for some 'left-behind children' how the self always seems to be at fault and not their social world or their experiences.

I want to find a job in the provincial capital first when I finish school… it must be a sociable job that allows me to make contact with different people, because I'm too introverted and I want to change my character to be more sociable and outgoing. Eventually, I want to start my own business, working for myself rather than for other people, so I also need to get a job and work for several years to learn and gain experience first.

However, despite generally having a clear future path as well as a plan regarding how to achieve aspired goals, it was also evident that some students expressed some sense of low self-confidence and self-doubt about eventually being able to fulfil their formed ambitions.

I think even though I went to a vocational high school, it doesn't guarantee I would stay until graduation. My friends told me the school environment of vocational high school is complicated, it very likely would change me into someone who don't want to stay in education. In this way, I won't be able to get jobs I want to do for the future… (Xiaohua)

I wanted to get a job either being a graphic designer or a kindergarten teacher… but now I only want to be a kindergarten teacher, because my friend Changying, she also wants to be a graphic designer, and her designs are better than mine, I think she is better, and my friends also say I don't have such a talent. (Jingjing)

I'm not sure if I can eventually have my dreaming career because one's personal character has such a big impact on one's development. To start my own business, I must be outgoing and sociable, but I'm just too introverted. (Fengfeng)

6.4 Family

Family is fundamental to understanding these students' either low or uncertain aspirations for higher education. Whilst for some the option of pursuing higher education was inhibited by family economic concerns, for example, as Fengfeng explained:

I don't know if I'll attend university because I'm too old. I'm 17 already and I'm the oldest in my class… if I went to university after senior high school, I'll be about 25 when graduated, hell no, can't wait that long to make money… my parents expect me to go to university, but if so, I'll be a burden for them. I know now they are working hard to make money for me to go to university, but I don't want to be their burden anymore.

For the large part, students' educational choices linked significantly with their family relationships. Students commonly reported a poor relationship with either their parent(s) or grandparent(s) who played a role as the main carer when the parents were working away. In terms of the future, many students reported that their relationships with their family had an impact on their educational choices as well as other life plans; and for some in particular, educational choices had been powerfully imposed on them, with the educational planning process being overly intervened in by their rather authoritarian parent(s) or grandparent(s).

Students often commented on the fact that their parents knew very little about them. Although most of these parents had high expectations for their child in education, they

commonly did not match their expectations with their children's actual academic abilities as well as what they really wanted for their own lives. Moreover, most parents were reported as being rarely involved in their child's education or everyday life in general thus having very limited understanding of their children, their schooling experience or other life experiences. As a result, there had been many misunderstandings, arguments and sometimes conflicts between students and their parents, and students felt it was rather difficult to communicate with their parents

In the following, I present several cases of individual students in which their relationships with their families were explored in a little more depth with more detail. 'Left-behind children' in this group, although they in general report having a difficult relationship with their family, have their own situations and experiences that could explain why their family relationship is difficult. More importantly, how relationships of individual students with their families could impact on students' aspirations was also explored in each of the cases.

Jingjing and Xiaohua are examples of 'left-behind children' who experience a difficult relationship with parents.

6.4.1 Case one – Jingjing

Jingjing was a shy girl with little self-confidence that was mainly attributed to her self-perceived low academic aptitude. She did however use to be a top student in class until the second term of grade 7 when she started a romantic relationship with a boy in school. This relationship affected her study dramatically and was something she terribly regretted because of the expense of her study. Jingjing appeared to have very low self-confidence

and a negative attitude towards her future education[28]. In terms of high school choices, she saw going to a vocational high school as the most practical path for her because she believed graduating from a vocational high school then starting to work was the way she could make the best out of life, considering her current academic aptitude.

Jingjing's parents, were regarded by their daughter as not having genuine concern about her study and she believed they also were rather ignorant of their daughter's experience of a romantic relationship. As a result, they had no awareness of how this might have an impact on her as well as how she could have been helped and supported. They insisted on making her choose a general high school because they did not fully understand and did not seem to want to understand the actual situation of their daughter's study. Jingjing felt she faced great difficulty communicating with her parents and felt really upset as she felt she had not had any practical or emotional support from her parents when making educational choices, that is, they did not discuss choices with her. Whist having made plans for her future, she yet expressed little confidence about eventually being able to achieve her plans.

> *They (parents) always ask me to study hard, but they don't seem to really care about my study because except telling me to study hard, they never asked about detailed information about me... they have high expectations for my education, they want me to study in a general high school, but I know my grades are too low for that, but they just don't believe this is my actual academic level, so they don't believe when I told them I can't make it to a general high school and don't agree with me choosing a vocational high school.*

> *... because I used to perform well in study, then I had a boyfriend and my grades dropped very fast ever since. This relationship affected me a lot and only until recently I finally got over with it, but my parents don't know what happened to me and how much I have changed, they still live in the past and think I am the same as before, and they never tried to understand, though they probably knew I was involved in a relationship, they never helped me get out of*

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[28] For ethical considerations, I have talked with Jingjing's class teacher about her low self-esteem and low self-confidence about her future, and the class teacher said she would soon have a talk with Jingjing and she would also inform Jingjing's parents about this.

> *there… they don't know this is the main reason why I now perform badly in study, I also don't want to tell them the truth because they'd only blame me.*

> *… my parents don't agree with my choice of studying in a vocational high school, which means they don't agree with what I've planned for my future. They only expect me to get into a general high school and then university, but they never guided me or provided me with advice for the future, neither were they willing to listen to my opinions. I tried to communicate and share my real thoughts, they yet thought the reason I chose the vocational high school was because my ex-boyfriend was there. It's absolutely not true! I chose it because it's practical for me, but they kept this misunderstanding so deeply that it's very difficult for us to communicate.*

For Jingjing, the choice of going to a vocational high school and then starting to work was a result of her belief of her academic aptitude being too low to get into a general high school then university; it was also a result of her low self-confidence and being negative about her future development as she saw herself as a failure and believed she had chosen a path to make the best out of life. Jingjing is typically a young person who was in need of parents' guidance, care and help when encountering mistakes and setbacks in life, and more importantly, parents' understanding, encouragement and support that could regain her self-confidence as well as providing more options which could lead to a different educational choice. However, unfortunately, Jingjing's parents not only did not provide any practical or emotional support when she was making educational choices, they also created tension and pressure by imposing their own wishes on her.

6.4.2 Case two - Xiaohua

Xiaohua was a girl who showed no interest in pursuing higher education and was very determined to commence work after finishing education in a vocational high school. As discussed previously, she expected to have an *'average'* future life and considered having a high school diploma was enough for her future employment; also, she viewed universities

as places where she would be as restrained as she was in secondary schools and thus had no wish to attend them. There was also a strong sense of seeking freedom and autonomy in Xiaohua's accounts, and such an aspiration for freedom and autonomy seems to be strongly related to her family, especially her relationship with her mother.

When talking about being a 'left-behind child', Xiaohua expressed how much she wished her parents could be away from home all the time as she felt much happier without them. 'Because no one will *restrict me, I'm free. They wouldn't even let me go shopping with my friends when they are home. I hope they're never at home'.* She described the relationship with her parents like this:

> *My family makes me suffocated. Especially my mom, she doesn't know much about me but she interferes in my life and restricts me way too much, and that's annoying! Well, my dad doesn't seem to care about what I have in mind; my mom on the contrary cares a lot but I'm not willing to share with her because she's always too bossy... my parents don't understand me. Actually, they are my obstacles; our relationship is estranged and I don't want to communicate with them.*

She especially expressed her discontentment with the way her mother intervened in her friendship, which appears to be the root of their tense relationship and very likely the source of her yearning for absolute freedom in the future as she believed she knew herself much better than her parents did. *'... I want to follow myself for choices and decisions. If I think my parents are wrong, I won't defer to them because I know myself better than they do, and I know better what is good for me.'* Although such an intervention demonstrates Xiaohua's mother cares and is concerned about her, Xiaohua strongly disagreed with her mom's surveillance because again she thought her mom lacked understanding of her and did not seem to want to understand her. Clearly, there is misunderstanding and

contradiction between Xiaohua and her mother, but unfortunately, as being 'left behind', Xiaohua does not often have the opportunity to communicate with her mom and improve their mutual understanding of each other.

I've had many arguments and conflicts with my mom when she is home, because I can't agree with the way she supervises me. She has a problem with me hanging out with my friends, she thinks my friends are bad kids only because sometimes I spend a bit more time at their place and come home a bit late, so she thinks only bad kids would keep me that long. I absolutely don't agree! She knows nothing about my friends, how can she judge them like this? Each time if I know I would be home a bit late, I always call her and let her know, but she doesn't understand and always blames me. She doesn't know the importance of friendship to me, she misjudges my friends and asks me to break off with them. We just can't communicate!

In terms of future educational choices, Xiaohua's parents did not provide her with any specific guidance or advice other than deciding a path for her based on some very general and basic information shared among people or simply asking her to follow the teacher's advice. This could be a result of Xiaohua's parents having little cultural capital on which to draw to help her with such choices, considering their own limited educational experiences. However, Xiaohua also felt this was due to her parents' lack of information about her as well as their lack of interest in knowing her own thoughts and supporting her with future plans.

My parents only meet with my class teacher at the beginning of each term, they have few opportunities to get information about my study. So in terms of future education, my mom just took what my class teacher had advised me, which is to take the vocational course for kindergarten teachers… she believed this should be my choice, not based on she knew me and my situation well so she knew this was a good choice for me; rather, it was only based on some general knowledge of being a kindergarten teacher that she heard from people, for example, it's a good choice for girls because it's not a tiring job. However, I don't like to be a kindergarten teacher, though now I don't know exactly what I want to do in the future, and I didn't tell mom my thoughts because she won't listen and will only think from her perspective and think what I thought is wrong… they (parents) didn't give me guidance or suggestions, they only heard information from teachers or other people and they forced me to make my choice based on what they heard. They didn't know my real situation and didn't

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> *ask for my ideas. In general, they didn't take the matter of making plans for my future seriously.*

Xiaohua's rejection of university could be understood by her plan of having an 'ordinary' life that she believed she could have without a university degree. University also did not interest her at all as she believed it to be just another school in which she would have no freedom and autonomy. For Xiaohua, as gaining freedom and autonomy in the future was extremely important and school was a place where she felt very restrained, it is then understandable why she had no aspiration for higher education when unnecessary. Xiaohua's yearning for freedom and autonomy also seemed to be strongly related to her tense relationship with her mother who was believed to have illegitimately intervened in her life given that her mother was lacking understanding of her and did not want to understand her. When making educational choices, Xiaohua was given no specific guidance or support from her parents; and parents lacking understanding of her as well as having no interest in knowing her thoughts was what Xiaohua believed to be the reason for it.

Bohai and Ah Fuare examples of 'left-behind children' who experience a difficult relationship with grandparents who take the role as the main carer and guardian. For them, as being 'left behind', the carer/guardian-child relationship seems more relevant in understanding these young people's educational aspirations and choices.

6.4.3 Case three – Bohai

Bohai lost his father when he was 2 years old. His mother left home to work in a factory when he was just about to start kindergarten and she only comes back for Chinese New

Year. He misses his mother a lot because he finds her a very funny and outgoing person and he enjoys spending time with her when she is home.

Bohai and his twin sister live with their maternal grandfather who is the one who brought them up and has been looking after them since their mother left home. However, the relationship between Bohai and his grandpa has not been an easy one and there were often problems and conflicts between them. Bohai explained that the way his grandpa disciplined him at home annoyed him and how he felt terribly misunderstood and misjudged by his grandpa, which seemed to be mainly due to a lack of communication and understanding between the two of them.

> *My family annoys me a lot, because my grandpa sets too many restrictions for me. He is right to supervise me, but there are things that he doesn't need to supervise me that much as I know what to do and how to do things. He talks too much as if I didn't know anything, and hedoesn't let me go out. I have no freedom to go outside during weekends or holidays, he'd rather let me sleep at home than go outside. I know he concerns about my safety, but it's too extreme![29] So I choose to sneak out and then he reproaches me hard. I don't want to obey my grandpa because I don't like the way he disciplines me.*

> *Because I don't do well in study, then he lost confidence in me. But what he doesn't understand is grades don't always tell how much I have learnt; grades don't represent my capability. For example, in exams of some subjects like Chinese language and History, I deliberately leave exam questions unfinished because they are so boring, I feel like wasting time, but in fact I know all the answers. My grandpa however doesn't know at all about my thoughts like this, he just thinks I made him lose face and I'm useless; he even embarrassed me in front of other relatives, which made me really upset, and there have been constant conflicts between us. Sometimes, I deliberately do poorly in my exams to disappoint him as a revenge.*

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[29] For ethical consideration, I reported this situation to the homeroom teacher. The teacher told me she had been made aware of issues between Bohai and his grandpa for a long time and had continued communicating with the grandpa regularly. It seems to her teacher's intervention was helpful and the grandpa was willing to take some advice.

With respect to educational aspirations in particular, even though Bohai was not yet certain about whether he would attend university or not due to a concern about his family financial condition as well as his academic performance, he was yet very determined to get into high school to stay in education for a bit longer. His choice for continuing education in high school, an academic one or a vocational one, appeared to be essentially motivated by his strong desire to prove himself and to change his grandpa's negative views on him.

> *I will try my best to get a good grade in the senior high school entrance examination because it is very important to me. I want to show my grandpa my real academic aptitude and let him know what he thought about me was wrong... even though I can't get into a general high school, I'll choose to go on education in a vocational high school, because I want to prove myself to my grandpa, because he always thinks I can't achieve anything, I feel continuing in education could in some extent change how he thinks about me.*

Interestingly for Bohai, a poor relationship with his grandpa did not hinder but instead encouraged him to continue education.

6.4.4 Case four – Ah Fu

Like many others, Ah Fu's aspiration for attending university was greatly hindered by his concern about his poor academic performance. He believed with his academic performance he would not even be admitted into a general high school, going to university therefore seemed beyond his reach. For Ah Fu, in particular, the choice of going to a vocational high school was primarily considered as a strategic plan with less risk given that his academic performance was rather unstable. This is because he often experienced mood swings, and whether or not he could get good exam results highly depended on which mood he was in when there was an exam at school. For Ah Fu, such constant mood swings resulted directly from his relationship with his grandfather at home as he clearly described how a tense

relationship between him and his grandfather at home could terribly affect his emotions, which then would badly affect his exam results.

> *I think applying for a general high school is quite risky to me because my exam performance is very unstable… my exam results are tightly linked to my moods, and my moods are strongly affected by my relationship with my grandpa. Very often, after I have a fight with grandpa at home, I feel extremely upset and low, and if at this time there are exams at school, I get very bad results because I have no mood for exams. I think grandpa and I just can't get along with each other because we have arguments and fights very often. When I make a mistake, he'd give me a speech for like 2 hours, I get so fed up, then I talk back, then he talks even more. Things like this happen at least once a month, and it affects my study so much… If not because of my bad mood, my real academic level should be average in my class, but sometimes I could drop to nearly the bottom.*

Hence, for Ah Fu, his poor relationship with his grandfather had a big impact on his choice for high school.

Xiaoli and Meimei are examples of 'left-behind children' who experience a difficult relationship with either parents or grandparents who overwhelmingly pressure their child to do what they want them to do, without considering what the child truly wants for their own life. For these two girls, they felt they were given no autonomy by their family to make choices for their own futures and felt it was extremely difficult to make their voices heard and be provided with understanding and support by their families when they were navigating the future paths. However unwillingly, they both tend to accept their families' wishes as they simply do not know what else to do.

6.4.5 Case five – Xiaoli

Xiaoli's parents left home to work just a few months after she was born. Since then, she has been living with her grandparents and only sees her parents when the Chinese New Year comes. Her mother passed away 2 years ago when she was in grade 7, but she did not feel too sad because she had never been very close to her mom who had left her when she was just an infant. Xiaoli described her father as a very austere dad who was very strict with her and she felt much happier when he was away from home.

In terms of future educational choices, Xiaoli felt her dad had been imposing his own will on her without considering whether his plans were suitable for her or by showing interest in trying to understand what her own choices could be. It seems that plans Xiaoli's dad made for her were either an expectation that was beyond her actual academic aptitude so was doomed to fail or a choice for something that she really did not want to do; nevertheless, he insisted on making her take his decisions.

> *My dad made plans for my education, and he made only one plan, which is going to university, there's no otherwise… My dad doesn't allow me to go to a vocational high school, he only wants me to go to a general high school then get into university because he thinks in this way I can find an easier job… He is very determined to push me to university because he said he was too poor to pursue high education when he was at my age… He asked me to choose the same general high school as Shilin[30] did, but for sure I won't make it… He then decided to let me repeat grade 9 so that I can try next year, but I don't want to do that because I don't want to stay alone while other classmates all have left; plus, there won't be any difference with my study performance even though I repeated one year, it'll still be very poor.*

And Xiaoli seemed to have no choice but to follow her dad's plans because she was too

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[30]A high-achieving student in her class.

afraid to share her real thoughts with him. In addition, she also had no one else in the family who could help her when she was confronting disagreement with her dad[31]. As a result, she felt forced to take the path that her dad had chosen for her, and so felt filled with uncertainty and anxiety because her future was out of her own control.

> *I'm too scared to tell my dad my real thoughts because I'm very scared of him. I think very likely I will do what my dad wants me to do, which is to repeat grade 9, because no matter what, my dad won't change his decision on this. He knows the real level of my academic performance, but he still insists on pushing me to a general high school, and I'd get punished if I couldn't make it; he also often blamed me for not studying hard enough. Now I have no other choice but to listen to my dad, though I don't agree and not willing to do it, I can't change anything... There's no one in the family who could help me, even though my grandparents didn't agree with my dad, my dad is the decision-maker in the family... Although I had repeated grade 9 as my dad wanted, I still won't make it to a general high school next year; what will happen and what will my dad ask me to do then, I have no idea.*

For Xiaoli, misplaced educational expectations were imposed on her by her father and educational choices were made against her own will. As the father was considered as a very authoritative and powerful figure, Xiaoli felt helpless to take control of her own future.

6.4.6 Case six - Meimei

Meimei is Bohai's twin sister. She discussed how she would have liked the option of continuing her education but was simply not able to. Being a girl from a poor rural family, Meimei was not given the opportunity to stay in education after junior high school because her grandpa decided she needed to quit school so that she could share the manual labour at home and support the family. Meimei had a goal and made a plan for her future: *'I want to*

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[31] Due to ethical considerations, I have reported this to Xiaoli's class teacher. The teacher later told me she had talked with Xiaoli's dad on the phone and he agreed to listen to his daughter first. He also would like the teacher to help in case his daughter feels uncomfortable talking with him alone. At the time of the research, I was told Xiaoli's dad would return home to have a meeting with the class teacher on this matter.

take a course in the school that is for future kindergarten teachers, so after three years' *study, I can look for a job as a kindergarten teacher',* so she wanted to stay in education a little longer, at least until senior high school. She was well aware that if she did not continue education, her life would be filled with heavy labour work only, and she would have no chance to create her own, different future. However, she felt she had no sway over her grandpa's decision.

> *Grandpa decided not to let me continue with high school, instead, he wants me to stay at home doing housework and sharing farm work. If I don't go to high school, I can only do manual work at home, or waiting for mom to take me out to where she is working next year, and my life will be surrounded by heavy work only. I want to go to school, a vocational high school, I don't want to do housework or farm work, it's too much and too tiring. Only staying in education could keep me away from heavy manual labour, either at home or working with mom outside; also, education can make me have a better life in the future, like, I want to take a course in the school that is for future kindergarten teachers, so after three years' study, I can look for a job as a kindergarten teacher. But, highly likely, I can't continue school because of my grandpa.*

Whilst for both Meimei and her brother Bohai, family poverty was the primary hindrance to their opportunities for higher education, Meimei was in a somewhat more disadvantaged position when making educational choices because of her gender. Their grandfather, who was the head and so the authority of the family, seemed to hold a deep-rooted belief that boys have more value than girls so only boys in the family should be given the opportunity to receive education; especially when the family could only afford education for one child. Indeed, in rural China, girls are disadvantaged in advancing in education because traditional perception regarding women's role in society and in households means that girls are considered as temporary members of their families as eventually they will marry into other people's households and will not shoulder the responsibility in their own families e.g.

supporting aging parents (Hannum, Kong, & Zhang, 2009; D. Li & Tsang, 2002). Therefore, in the rural Chinese society, families retain a belief that girls are less worthy of education and parents are less likely to spend scarce resources on their daughters' education. Like this, Meimei was destined to become the sacrifice and was given no other options except for working away with her mother.

> *Basically, I'm a sacrifice grandpa made for my brother, he cares more about him and chooses him over me because I'm the girl in the family, and I know it very well… Mom doesn't agree with grandpa, she said it was wrong only letting my brother continue in education; grandpa also did the same thing to her, so she said he had no right to do this to her daughter, and they had a fight. I know mom wants me to stay in education, but she can't win over grandpa, grandpa is the decider. So mom said to me that if I couldn't continue school, she could take me with her and work in the same place, so I won't suffer from housework at home, this is probably the only other option I have.*

Meimei aspired to higher education and had a goal and plan for the future, however, she was not given the opportunity to realise her dream via education as a result of family poverty as well as a deep-rooted gendered culture regarding girls' role and value in the society.

6.5 School and Friends

University non-aspirers and 'the undecided' mostly commented positively on the greatly improved infrastructures and living conditions of their current school.

> *Now the living conditions and facilities of our school are much better than the previous ones. (Ah Fu)*

> *The current school has the best condition. There was even no bounding wall in our last school. (Kang)*

> *This newly built school has much better environment and facility than the old ones. (Jingjing)*

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As 'left-behind children' in a rural community where the transportation service was poor and the school was distant from their homes, they had no choice but to board at school during week days and return home only on the weekends. Like the university aspirers, all of these students spent their school years since primary school or even kindergarten studying and living in the same boarding school, and the majority of them commented positively on their experiences of living in the school. Most students discussed that although the living conditions at home were better than in the school, they still preferred boarding at school, and this was for a number of reasons. Firstly, boarding at school ensured they would not be late for their classes thus it was easier for them to follow the daily school timetable. Secondly, boarding at school was more beneficial to their study because they had more time to spend on studying as time was saved by not having to travel between school and home as well as finding academic help which was missing at home.

> *If I travel between school and home every day, I may be late for classes sometimes, and I have more time for study if I live in the school. (Ah Fu)*

> *I like living in the school, it's convenient because I don't need to spend time cooking… it's better for my study because I have more time to study when I'm at school, I don't spend too much time watching TV at night but go to bed early so I'll study better the next day. (Xiaohua)*

> *I prefer boarding at school. There are 365 days a year and we spend more than 200 days in the school; I feel strongly attached to the school, my teachers and my classmates… because of living in the school, I have more time to study. Also, I can ask for help from teachers and classmates when I have difficulties in school work, but if I am home when that happens, I don't know what to do. (Yunyun)*

> *I prefer living in the school, because there's more time to study. If I walk home every day after school, I'd be too tired to want to study; also, there're friends who can help me with study at school. (Kang)*

I'd choose to board at school, because it saves me a lot time from traveling between school and home. It also benefits my study because when I have questions, I can ask my classmates, but there's no one to ask at home. (Shilin)

Living in the school is good for my study because there're teachers and classmates who I can ask for help at any time when I have questions, but I have to leave the questions aside if I'm home. (Ah Dong)

Thirdly, because of boarding at school, they had their classmates and friends around to share everyday life with. Students strongly expressed their joy, comfort, and deep appreciation of being with their classmates and friends at school, and they considered the companionship, care and support of their classmates and friends as the best part of their school life.

I can stay with my classmates, that's the happiest thing of living in the school. (Jingjing)

I feel so bored at home, but at school I have classmates to have fun with, we play basketball together, life in the school is much more interesting… the happiest thing of living in the school is that I can be with my friends. (Kang)

I'm happy living in the school, especially I can talk and chat with so many friends. (Shilin)

My life in the school is happy, because there're many classmates with me. (Xiaoli)

I like living in the school because all my classmates are here too, I feel lively and happy living and studying with everybody every day, and I can't enjoy this kind of happiness at home 'because there're only me and grandpa. (Ah Dong)

The living condition at home is much better than in the school, but I still want to live in school, because I have my friends here. (Yunyun)

For the university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', friendship was also highly valued and was considered to have played a significant role in their young lives so was extremely precious and important to them. This is because as 'left-behind children', it was their friends that kept them company in everyday school life when parents were not around; and more importantly, it was friends that provided them with the emotional support which for some was largely missing in the family. Students commonly described their friends as someone who understands them best and those who they trust most; they provided understanding and support for each other and were a source of strength, comfort and encouragement to each other. Students like Jingjing, Yunyun and Shilin discussed the importance of friendship to them as follows:

> *My best friend knows me well; she is the one I trust most. I trust her because she keeps my secrets and will never tell anybody. We also have similar family background and experiences, so we have lots in common and we get along very well. I tell her my problems and worries, like each time when I have a fight with my parents, she always comforts me and says that happened to her too. We understand and support each other, and we rely on each other. If without her, I wouldn't have this outgoing personality. My friend is my main support and the source of my strength… my friend also helped me get over with my romantic relationship; she told me to focus on study and not to waste time on that; she gave me lots of comfort and help. (Jingjing)*

> *Friendship gave me so much. I think I can't live without friendship, otherwise, I'd be alone and lonely. Because of friendship, my life is beautiful and happy and full of sunshine. My friends comfort and encourage me when I feel low; they help me to see the bright side of things when I complain, and they bring comfort to my heart. (Yunyun)*

> *Friendship is very important to me. If I have no friends, I'd be very lonely and that would affect my personality, because I wouldn't have so many people to talk to and I wouldn't know how to communicate with people… especially me, a rural kid, I don't communicate much with my family, I usually spend time with friends and I rely on them, so friends are very important to me. (Shilin)*

Students also expressed a much more positive feeling about their teachers in junior high school compared to their primary school teachers. Students recalled corporal punishment was the main method primary school teachers used to discipline them and they all had experienced corporal punishment in primary school very often. Teachers in junior high school always taught and educated them by talking and communicating with them patiently. For many students, the teaching style and the education mode of primary school teachers was an explanation for achieving a bad result in their study and left them with negative memories of their schooling experience.

> *In primary school, we often got punished by teachers, and I felt teachers were so scary at that time. Junior high school teachers never do that to us… It affected my study. In primary school, I was always stressed because I knew if I didn't study well I'd get punished, but because I was too worried about getting punished by the teacher, I couldn't study well. (Ah Fu)*

> *Primary school teachers and junior high school teachers are very different. Primary school teachers punished us when we couldn't work out exercise questions, but junior high school teachers are never like that, they teach us patiently. I like the way junior high school teachers teach us, because if I get punished by teachers, I'd hate them, I'd even hate the subject they teach, and I don't want to learn. (Xiaohua)*

> *Teachers in junior high school are very nice and kind to us, I like them very much. But teachers in primary school were not nice, I don't even want to think about them and my primary school years. (Yunyun)*

However for some, the bad experience with teachers in primary school seems to have caused a longer-term fear for teachers in general. Even though teachers in junior high school were considered to be much nicer and friendlier by students, some of them still tended to avoid asking for academic help from their teachers. They discussed how they only sought help from their classmates and friends when they had difficulties with school work, and would rather leave their problems unsolved than turning to their teachers for support because they were so

afraid of teachers. They particularly worried that they would be criticised for not understanding something that had already been taught by the teacher in class.

> *… when I have problems with homework, I ask classmates when I come to the school. I don't ask my teachers for help because I'm afraid. I've always been afraid of teachers since primary school. (Jingjing)*

> *I ask for help from my classmates when I have difficulties in study. If there're problems even classmates can't help me with, I have to leave them. I 'm too afraid to ask teachers. I'm afraid they'd blame me for not pay attention in class when they were teaching. (Shilin)*

In terms of making educational choices, these students reported the school provided them with no guidance and very little support when they are making plans for senior high school, and they were left alone so felt extremely isolated from sources of information that could assist them in making educational choices and decisions. Even when occasionally information was provided by some teachers in the school relating to certain high school which could potentially be a good choice for these students, the same piece of information of this kind varied from teacher to teacher thus was very confusing for students. It then made it hard to find out which teacher they should listen to. As a result of having no source to gain information and seek support from, either at home or school, these students could only draw on very limited information shared among their classmates and friends to make educational decisions. It is unsurprising then that for some, choices were made by simply guessing or imagining what might be the real situation about the school they then decided to attend. Though realizing how risky this was, they were disadvantaged a second time by also feeling that they had no way for finding out what they could do if they had chosen a wrong school for themselves.

I looked for information by myself. The school didn't provide us guidance on how to select high schools. Sometimes I heard information from some teachers, but they all told us different things, and I didn't know who I should listen to. (Xiaohua)

I asked my friends or looked for information online. I was on my own to find information and make choices. I had little help and support from my family. Most of time I was isolated and helpless, except my friends… Our school didn't provide us with information or guidance when we were making high school choices. Some teachers occasionally told us some information, but it's very limited. We have to rely on ourselves to gain information. If there's no place to look for information, I just chose a school with luck, thinking I'd know what it's really like when I get into it, and many classmates did the same. (Jingjing)

No, I don't know much about the high school I wanted to go. First of all, there's no source of information. Secondly, I don't even know what information I need to know, because I don't know how to assess whether a school is good or not, my parents and teachers never taught me how to assess the level of a school, so I don't know how to make a good choice… I can only ask my classmates for information; teachers didn't tell us much, so basically, I made my choice on my own judgement. (Ah Dong)

I know a little about the vocational high school I want to go, and I know it from my classmates. I can only know from them, and I don't know other means to find information… No one at home can help me and I only have classmates at school to look for help. (Xiaoli)

6.6 Left-behind-ness

I was particularly interested in looking at how being 'left behind' could be considered as impacting on 'left-behind children' included from their own perspective. Students described how things would be different if they were not 'left behind', and made mention in the following areas including: family economic condition, personal character, school performance, relationship with parents, and future plans.

University non-aspirers and 'the undecided' all reported there was a clear economic improvement in their families since their parents went out to work, and this provided them

with better living conditions and most importantly, an opportunity to receive education. Therefore, being 'left behind' seems to have positive consequences for these students. Students in general expressed an understanding towards their parents' choice of working outside and away from the family and considered it right.

> *I guess it's a right choice, because if they didn't go out to work, I might have already starved to death, and I definitely couldn't go to school… the economic benefit is more important. (Xiaohua)*

> *The reason my parents chose to work outside is because they have to make money for me and my brother so that they can afford us to go to university, I understand this very well, because only they go out to work, we can have an opportunity to go to university. (Ah Fu)*

> *Life is better than before, now we have a new house… because they can make more money if they work outside, and they want to make more money to afford my education. (Kang)*

However, many students considered that they would be very different if they had not been 'left behind', and they described their 'could-be' self as a comparison with their present self in terms of personal character, academic performance, relationship with parents, and future plans.

Most of these students also believed that they would develop a much more outgoing character and would know better how to get along with people if they had their parents around from when they were young. Students commonly expressed how being 'left behind' had caused them a strong sense of emotional loss that was largely due to the situation of having no parents around to share their innermost thoughts and feelings with and to help them with negative emotions. Sometimes, with many negative feelings and emotions piling up over a long period of time, such as worries about exams and friends and, often feeling like there is nowhere to go to ease the mind, many students expressed they were laden with worries and

anxieties but had formed a habit of keeping all these problems to themselves and therefore often faced difficulty dealing with emotions by themselves.

> *Yeah, I'd be different; I'd be more outgoing and cheerful... because my parents went out to work, I feel so lonely at home, I don't feel the care and love from them; and if I have things on mind and want to talk to someone, I have to keep them and wait, because I only want to share them with my parents, but I don't want to tell them on the phone, I want to talk to them face to face, so I can only tell them all the things I have kept when they are back home. (Kang)*

> *If my parents never left me, I'd become more outgoing and I'd be better getting along with people. I could tell them everything. But because they went out to work, I missed the care and love from them, and I've become very introverted. I don't want to share my thoughts and feelings with other people so I keep them all to myself. I don't talk much, especially at home because I don't want my grandparents to notice there's something bothering me because I think they won't be patient to hear me like my parents. Though my grandparents brought me up, I don't feel the same kind of intimacy with them, which only exists between me and my parents... because for a long time I have no one to share what's on my mind; my parents are always busy working, and when I have them on the phone, they often tell me they are tired so they have no time for me... I don't know how to adjust my bad moods; it takes me a long time to get rid of them. (Ah Fu)*

For Ah Dong in particular, having no parents at home caused him a strong sense of insecurity and helpless. As a 'left-behind child', he felt he was greatly lacking emotional support from his parents, support he believed would provide him with a great deal of courage and motivation to face difficulties and actively work out problems. Without parents around, Ah Dong saw himself having no one to rely on in life except his old grandpa, and it was something he worried about, especially his grandpa was sick and there were no one else at home to share with him the burden of the housework and farm work.

> *I'd be more outgoing, because I feel there's nothing that can't be done when my parents are home, I feel so secure and relaxed. When my parents are not home, I have a feeling that no one is here to support me, and it doesn't help just by calling them. Especially when my grandpa is ill, I feel my world collapsed, I feel so scared and helpless, because there's so much housework and farm work to do at home but there's no one but me and grandpa.*

Students also felt they would do much better in study and their academic performance would be improved if their parents had never left them. For most of them, even though their parents were not able to provide them with academic support such as helping them with homework, their parents could provide more parental supervision which could help them become more efficient and organized with their school work. Some also believed there would be more parental involvement in their study as their parents were able to support them by checking homework as well as providing extra learning materials.

> *If dad and mom were home, my study would be better, because I won't be lazy like now. Mom would supervise me strictly and could also teach me and support me with many other things. (Jingjing)*

> *… even though mom often hits me when I can't work out questions in my homework, having her around still benefits my study because she could supervise me and I'd study hard because I don't want to be hit by her, and like this, I'd have pressure and motivation to study better. Unlike now, no one supervises me so I just play and waste time. (Meimei)*

> *It'd be different. If my parents were around they'd ensure I finish homework first and would constantly urge me to go to study. Without them around, I play as much as I want because I know there's no one to supervise me. (Ah Fu)*

> *My study would be a lot better, because when they (parents) are home, they strictly supervise me to finish homework on time and they don't allow me to watch TV or play with my phone for too long, and I listen to them, so it gives me more time to study, grandpa doesn't do that. They also buy exercise books for me if I tell them I have difficulty in some subjects, grandpa doesn't do that, either. Most importantly, if they were home, I'd definitely spend less time playing computer games in the internet cafe, they'd control me, and I know playing computer games affects my study a lot. (Ah Dong)*

Kang in particular, believed he would not have been so determined to want to leave education as soon as possible if his parents were around. This was because with parental involvement in his education, Kang would feel much more motivated in completing school work and would have a much better school performance thus would feel much more confident to stay in

education. He also believed even though he had somehow lost his enthusiasm for studying, his parents could have helped him by trying to understand why he had such thoughts and then helped him find a solution to eliminate those negative feelings. However, for Kang, not only did he feel he had no one to offer understanding, support or encouragement when he was going through difficulties, it meant he was then forced to take his parents' ideas for future choices.

> *… because they (parents) are not around, there's no one checking homework for me, and I don't feel motivated so I don't want to do homework… If mom and dad never left me, I think I'd want to go to high school, because my academic performance would be much better and I'd feel more confident to get into high school, and I'd really hope to get into high school. If my parents were always with me, I wouldn't dislike studying that much and want to leave school like now… When I told them I didn't want to stay in education, my dad just asks me to listen to him and forces me to continue school; he never tries to understand my thoughts and reasons… if they noticed my problem and helped me find a solution, I very likely wouldn't have had so many negative feelings about school and studying.*

Students especially commented on how their relationships with their parents would be different if they were not 'left-behind'. All of them believed they would be able to develop a much better relationship with at least one of their parents because there would be more communication between them; as a result, their parents would know and understand them better, and they would also be able to defer.

> *If mom and dad stayed with me, they could understand me better, they would know why I had those thoughts, and I would not be in conflict with them like now. (Kang)*

> *If mom was with me all the time, I would now feel more at ease with her strict parenting style, and I would listen to her, because I was used to her way of disciplining me. Then, we won't have so many arguments like now. (Xiaohua)*

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However, some students also claimed that even though their relationships with their parents would be improved a lot if their parents did not leave them to work away, there would always be a gap between them and their parents because they thought their parents could not understand them fully.

> *My parents know probably 10% of me. All they know is that I'm alive and I need money to go to school, nothing else. As for what kind of person I am, they know very little... without the geographical distance, they probably could know 50% of me. If they were always around, they still could only know 50% of me. (Yunyun)*

> *My parents and I, we don't know each other very well. I only get the chance to know them when they are home. The conversation between me and mom is just she criticizing me of doing something wrong, not for the purpose of communication. My dad and I barely have any interaction; he occasionally asks about my information. They know about 60% of me; they could know another 20% more if they stayed around, but there is still 20% of me they just don't understand! I tried to communicate with them but it didn't work. (Jingjing)*

In terms of future plans, many of these students claimed that having parents around would provide them with different futures as their parents could offer more advice and guidance that will help them making choices concerning their future plans, and in particular, parents could understand their educational plans, for example going to a vocational high school, thus would support their choices.

> *If they were always around, they'd know better about my study, and they'd help me find more choices. (Yunyun)*

> *My parents haven't talked about my future plans with me. If they were with me, they probably have already made plans for me. They should have understood and supported my choice of going to a vocational high school, but because they are away and busy with their work, they don't even have time talking to me, let alone making plans for me or giving me advice, I'm on my own. (Jingjing)*

> *If they (parents) were always around me, they'd not just listen to my teacher's advice about my future because they think my teacher knows me better than they do. They'd help me with plans and give me advice on the basis of knowing my real situation, I'd also communicate and discuss with them, and then things would turn out very different. (Xiaohua)*

6.7 Chapter Summary

University non-aspirers and 'the undecided' in this chapter in general do not highly value school education and do not see higher education necessary. Their rejection or indecision of university education and preferred post-compulsory educational choice of going to a vocational high school can be understood as a rational response to their perceived low academic attainment level as well as a viable route for future career goals and other life plans. Whilst students share a strong desire to enter the real social world as a result of their shared belief that social knowledge, experiences and skills are more relevant and important for their futures, they have very individualized beliefs and plans regarding how to achieve their respective ambitions; and this can be understood by their very personal and varied understandings of the social world as well as their self in terms of advantages and weaknesses.

Families of these students and in particular, their complicated relationships with their parent(s) or grandparent(s) play a significant role in shaping their educational aspirations and choices. This group of students is distinguished by having a tense relationship with their families which is mainly the result of their families having no involvement in their life so having very little understanding of them, their education and their many other life experiences. For many students, further educational aspirations and choices are understood as linking directly with such a tense family relationship. And for some, educational choice is understood as being made for them and powerfully imposed on them by their authoritarian family members.

Students in this group also consider classmates and friends as the best part of their school life as it is their companionship that provides them with lots of joy, comfort and support. Friendship is highly valued and deemed precious and important by these students because

friends not only provide academic help but also is the main source of emotional support that provides understanding, trust, strength and courage. In addition, peers and friends is also the main source of information for these students when they are making further educational choices. Although students in this group express a much more positive feeling about their teachers in junior high school compared to their primary school teachers, some of them yet have kept a general impression of teachers that is fearful and forbidding; as a consequence, they always deliberately avoid asking help from their teachers. When making plans and choices for senior high school, these students are left alone to make their decisions with very limited source of information shared among classmates and friends as the school provides no guidance and very little support.

Finally, university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' in this chapter view their 'left-behind-ness' as being compensated by a clearly improved family economic condition and the opportunity to stay and continue in education. Interestingly, by comparing their 'could-be' self with their present self, most of students in this group believe they would have developed a much more outgoing personal character if their parents were present in their life. Many students also believe they could do much better academically if they had parents around because parents would provide more supervision and monitoring that could help them organize their study more efficiently as well as being more involved in their learning in the form of checking homework and providing additional learning materials. Although all of them believe their relationships with their parent(s) would be a lot improved if they were not 'left behind', many of them also believe parents will never be able to understand them fully. In terms of future plans and choices however, students mostly believe there will be more guidance and advice provided by their parents so they could have a different future, and more

importantly, parents would understand their educational choices so would support their aspirations.

Chapter 7 University Aspirers

Table 4 Core students (6) included in Chapter 7

Student name	Gender	Family information	Aspiration/Choice for education
Mingwei	Boy	Parents started working outside when he was 8 months old until the time of the research; Since he was left as an infant, he did not meet his parents again until 8; After that, parents come home once a year or once in two years; Has been living with grandparents	Attend university; Go to a general high school
Changying	Girl	Parents started working outside after she was just born until the time of the research; Parents come home once a year during Chinese New Year; Has been living with grandma	Attend university; Go to a vocational high school
Fangfang	Girl	Parents first left home for work when she was 8, but soon after her younger sister was born, both of her parents stayed at home for 2 years (2008-2010); since then, only one parent works outside until the time of the research; Has been living with one parent or grandma	Attend university; Go to a general high school
Dandan	Girl	Parents started working outside when she was born for a few months until the time of the research; Parents sometimes come home for Chinese New Year Has been living with grandparents	Attend university; Go to a general high school
Huifang	Girl	Parents started working outside when she was 1; Mom came home when she was in grade 8 and dad comes home once a year during Chinese New Year; Has been living with grandma or one parent	Attend university Go to a general high school

Luli	Girl	Parents went outside to work when she was in grade 1 (2006); Parents came back in 2008 and went out again in early 2015 until the time of the research; Living with grandparents when parents were away	Attend university; Go to a general high school

7.1 Introduction

'University aspirers' in this study are those who explicitly expressed that going to university was something they definitely wanted to do when they finished the senior high school study. These students valued higher education highly because they held an explicit belief that there was a clear correlation between higher education and future life chances. For these students, going to university is a determined goal in life, and the most frequent answer given for going to university was: '*so I can find a good job in the future*'. These students believed deeply in the idea that going to university and obtaining the educational qualification was how their future employment could be secured.

I want to go to university because I want to get higher education… because it's easier to find jobs and it's easier to find good jobs. (Mingwei)

Because going to university means I can find a good job in the future… because I will get a degree, a diploma. (Changying)

The reason why I want to go to university is that in this way I can find a good job in the future. (Dandan)

Whilst most of these university aspirers had a clear intended future career path and viewed pursuing a higher education at university as the route to achieve their goals, for some, non-manual jobs are defined as 'a good job' and getting one of these jobs was the only reason for attending university.

University aspirers shared a future self that was characterized as someone with both good personal qualities and abilities. They considered that a great personal effort in higher education and strong personal spirits was the means of achieving this future self. They also demonstrated a very positive present self as even though they acknowledged their family-endowed disadvantages, they were also aware of their own merits and were rather ambitious and confident about creating a good future by themselves.

This chapter will firstly present findings regarding why students in this group aspired to high education; factors discussed by students including their perceptions of higher education and their sense of self which relate to their educational aspirations and decisions will be explored in the following sections. This chapter will then present findings about the role of family in students' schooling experience as well as aspiration development. This chapter will also present findings regarding how the school life, school performance, teachers and in particular, classmates and friends play an important role in these left-behind children's education and other aspects of life.

7.2 Perceptions of Higher Education

University aspirers in this study valued education highly and considered university education crucial for securing future employment. The majority of them had a clearly defined career path and saw higher education as the route to fulfil their career goals. Clearly, for these students, higher education was viewed instrumentally, as a means to an end.

> *I need a university degree to be able to realize my dream. I've got several dreaming occupations in mind, such as doctor or lawyer, and they both require at least a university degree, so I'll definitely go to university. (Luli)*

> *I want to be a paediatrician in the future; this is my dream… So I should study well; I should finish all the education I need to until university. (Huifang)*

> *I want to go to university, a medical university, because I want to be a doctor in the future. (Fangfang)*

> *I want to be a graphic designer, because I like designing things; or a police officer, because I've always admired policewomen… I think both of occupations require higher education and a good academic performance. I'm not sure what specific qualification each of them requires, but a senior high school diploma is far not enough. (Changying)*

For some of them, it seems that a general hope of getting 'a good job' was the only reason for attending university.

> *University education brings me academic qualifications which enable me to find an easier job… Except for getting a good job, I don't know what else university can bring me… I just know I should go to university. (Dandan)*

University aspirers frequently mentioned that they wanted to have 'a good job' in the future; and they broadly defined 'a good job' as a job that does not require heavy manual labour thus is not physically demanding. Students often took doing farm work as an example of what

they thought to be the opposite of 'a good job' i.e. the work with which they and their family are most familiar. For these students, a good job is the opposite of the experiences of work so far; experiences that seem to be marked by hardship. This is likely because as rural residents in China who can mainly rely on doing farm work to maintain their livelihood from generation to generation, these students understand how difficult it is for their families to try to make a living by doing farm work; work which requires exhausting physical labour but gets little economic return. They themselves not only have to share the workload of heavy farm work from a young age to support the family like all other rural children in China, but also as 'left-behind children', have to do much heavier farm work as their parents are not home to share the workload. For these students as well as their parents, they have only had experiences of doing manual labour, either as farm work at home or working outside, and these experiences were filled with toil and hardship. Thus, on one hand, it is understandable that these students aspire for a job in the future that will not require heavy physical labour, based on their experiences in life; on the other hand, as they and their family have little knowledge about non-manual jobs in general, it is also understandable that they could define anything other than doing manual labour as 'a good job'.

> *Anything other than doing farm work is a good job; a good job should not make me tired. (Mingwei)*

> *A job that doesn't make you suffer, such as doing manual labour. My family and I all agree that so long as it is not manual labour, it is a good job. (Changying)*

More specifically, university aspirers viewed higher education as offering enhanced job prospects and security because it was seen as providing qualities and advantages that would enable them to be more competitive in the future job market.

> *Having more education means, you have more knowledge and skills, and that will make you better. For example, if you are looking for a job, and people ask you*

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what diploma you have, you say you only finished primary school or junior high school, that won't work, people won't want you. (Changying)

Having education makes me acquire more knowledge, and knowledge makes me more capable of handling my job in the future. (Luli)

I don't agree with what people said that education was not important because there are people who make a good money without having much education. Education is definitely important; those people who seem to make a good money now won't be forever that lucky, because it is after all a society that values knowledge a lot. So long as I gain knowledge and skills via education, I will have a lasting job and will make more money in the future. (Fangfang)

Higher education was also seen as a means of gaining a higher social status by getting a higher-status job, demonstrating a larger possession of cultural capital during social interactions, and having more opportunities to make a living other than being a farmer. It was also a means for achieving a sense of social respect.

People with a higher educational level can get a better job, you know, the kind that you sit in the office and don't need to do manual work; but people with a lower educational level can only make money by doing manual work... more education gives you more knowledge, and when you speak, you show you are at a higher level, for example, primary school teachers and junior high school teachers, they show they are at different levels when they speak, if you have less education, when you talk to people, you wouldn't understand the vocabulary or the topic. (Fangfang)

If you have more education, then you have more opportunities to make a living, if you have less education, then you have fewer opportunities to make a living. (Huifang)

Interestingly, university education was also considered by some to have the potential for offering a different experience, one of being immersed in a stress-free learning environment, which would be a big difference from that experienced in the secondary school. It was also

considered to be able to provide an opportunity for self-development and self-improvement.

Freedom was also a theme that emerged in discussions of university education.

> *Going to university is my dream because people say there would be no study pressure in the university, you do your study by yourself, it's very free, and this is what university attracts me most… I imagine it (university) is a place where I would feel very free… I have a cousin, though she herself didn't make it to university, some of her old classmates did, she said those old classmates all became very different, and she said 'it seems true that people change when they go to university'; she didn't tell me how her old classmates had changed, but I believe what she said was true, so I really want to see whether I would change in the university too. My cousin also encouraged me a lot, it is because she didn't go to university and now she really wishes she had, she saw all her old classmates who went to university had changed so much, so she believes university must be a very good place, so she hopes I can make it. (Changying)*

Clearly, the primary reason for students aspiring for university is a secure future employment. Higher education is seen as instrumental in making a good income and gaining a higher social status by having a non-manual career. In this sense, a hope of attaining economic improvement and upward social mobility appears to be the extrinsic motivation for these students' educational aspiration as they all have poor family background and low social status.

7.3 The self

For these university aspirers, a future self was one that embodies a person with good qualities and great abilities who will make a contribution to society. Great personal efforts, especially in education, as well as strong personal spirits were believed to be the means of becoming such a future self. Self-confidence was also clearly exhibited by these students.

> *HY: What kind of person do you want to become in the future?*
>
> *Huifang: A person with a warm heart and of good quality. A good quality and capability, I think the former is more important, and I want myself to become someone like that, and I have confidence in myself.*
>
> *Mingwei: I want to become someone who is helpful and useful for the society in the future.*

Changying: I want to become someone who shows an outstanding performance in studying and working, someone excellent!

HY: How will you become the person who you want to become?

Huifang: By studying hard and being a good student.

Mingwei: By studying hard and being a high academic achiever.

Changying: I think I can become such a person as long as I am persistent and hard-working.

As a future self was being explored, the present self was also revealed when some of the students were expressing their views on the difference between children from the rural community and children from the urban community. These students were aware of their distinct social disadvantages, as a result of their family background when comparing themselves to their urban peers, in terms of material and educational resources. They were however also aware of their own merits. For them, family background was not considered as a determinant of a future life because of their strong belief in their own efforts of creating a good future. Nevertheless, their distinct family-endowed social disadvantages of having less support and opportunity for self-development and success achieving was also perceived.

We rural kids are better than the urban kids because they are too spoiled and bad-tempered. Though they may get better education than us because they have more opportunities to receive education so they could better develop themselves, we rural kids don't have such opportunities… it is because the family, urban kids have richer parents who provide them with better opportunities for education, but urban kids could also become very wilful because of their more affluent parents… I don't think this family difference has a major impact on our future; your family background doesn't deicide your future, your hard work does. Even though you live in a wealthy urban family, if you don't work hard and don't study well, you will be a useless person in the future, but if you work hard enough, even though you are from a poor rural family, you can still have a good future. (Fangfang)

Urban kids have better material conditions than rural kids, but unlike us, they don't know thrift, we do because we know where rice comes from… I think (the difference) is due to our different living environments, because our parents have different jobs and different income… I don't think this difference has a big impact on me, well, yeah, our food and clothing are less good, but in terms of studying, we are studying at school just like the urban kids. Though we don't have

advanced teaching equipment, we still learn knowledge in class. But in terms of future development, I'm not too sure, because I heard urban kids who didn't study well can still get into a good high school they wanted to go by paying more money, but it's impossible for us, we can't afford to pay more, so if we didn't make it to a good high school, we can't go, so an urban kid could have another chance to become a good student in a good high school and then have a good future, but a rural kid won't have such a second chance therefore could only go to a less-good school and receive less-good education then have a less-good future, that's how these two people end up with two different lives… In today's society, people with family that has money or power will get more preferential treatments, so they succeed more easily. (Changying)

Perceptions of 'the self' discussed above relate to a very positive self-identity that demonstrates both the ambition and the confidence of these university aspirers. The awareness of having a disadvantaged family background does not seem to hinder or limit aspirations for a better future as it was not viewed as a factor that determines whether one could achieve their dreams and goals. Rather, for these students, it is one's own effort and hard work that decides the future. Thus, a clear belief and faith in meritocracy was evident. What appears to explain why these students had a particular aspiration for university was a strong belief in relying on their own effort and hard work to pursue a good future. For these students, the idea that higher education as a path in which one's own efforts and hard work would pay off was clear. For these students, having no advantaged family background to rely on, relying on their own effort to achieve higher in education seems to be a secure path for a good future. Thus, their ambitions can be seen as very individualistic, in terms of how they see these being achieved.

7.4 Family

Family is a very important aspect to look at in order to better understand these university aspirers' schooling experiences, and in particular, how family exerted an impact on their aspirations.

7.4.1 The role of parents and carers

The parents of university aspirers all had high expectations for their child in terms of education. These were expressed to their child ensuring that the young people understood why receiving a higher education is important. Just as in Fuller's study (2009; 2014) most of the parents used themselves and their own life as an example to show the importance of doing well in education. It seems that parents' expectation and their experience of working outside gave students the motivation to want to study hard for a better future.

> *They told me there were many people living together in their workplace, and the living condition was not good... The reason why my parents told me this is to encourage me to study well, then I won't have this kind of life in the future... When I don't feel motivated in studying, then I think of my parents, then I said to myself that I must study hard. (Luli)*

> *They hope me to study well so I can have a good job in the future, so I won't be like them, doing hard work away from home. (Mingwei)*

> *They all have high expectation for me, they all expect me to study well and get into a top senior high school and a top university... because they think their life is not good, and it's all because they didn't study well, and they want me to have a better life so I won't lead a hard life like them. My mom always says to me: 'you must study hard, look at me, because my educational level is so low that I couldn't spell one single English word when working in a factory outside'. When I hear this, I swear I must study hard... (Fangfang)*

Whilst having high expectations for their child, parents of these university aspirers in general were not able to offer academic help as their overall educational level was low. Nevertheless, most parents showed great concern about their child's study and asked frequently on the phone about their exam results when working outside; they also gave their child simple advice such as reminding them to seek for help when having difficulties in study or to be more careful in exams. In addition, parents also provided encouragement which seemed to have become a big motive for the child to study better. Students commonly felt positive and

appreciated about their parents' advice and encouragement, and considered support like this from their parents as a great help.

> *They often tell me on the phone to 'study hard' or 'put more efforts'. My dad especially asks me things like 'How's your exam?' 'Do you have difficulties with those exam questions? If you do, ask someone to help you. If they are not too difficult, try hard by yourself and work them out, don't be careless in exams'. I find it's helpful because it's advice and also like a reminder. (Mingwei)*

> *When I get bad results in exams, though my dad doesn't say anything, he doesn't blame me either; my mom comforts me and encourages me… I think it helps me a lot. I think it's good that my mom doesn't blame me, because this makes me want to study better; if she blamed me, I'd feel bad and wouldn't want to study. (Luli)*

> *Yes, they often encourage me to learn from classmates who study well, and encouragement like this helps me a lot because I didn't perform well in grade 7, but now I've improved a lot. (Huifang)*

However, unlike students discussed above, Changying did not view simple advice given by her parents as helpful because asking teachers for help was the only piece of advice her parents provided regarding her education when they were working outside and they did not show any interest in knowing what specific help and support their daughter might need. Changying reported that because her parents had a private relationship with her class teacher, they therefore only collected information about her study from the teacher rather than communicating with herself directly. It seems that for Changying's parents, as a result of having a private relationship with the family of Changying's class teacher, the class teacher not only becomes the exclusive source from which they obtain information regarding their daughter's education, teachers are also the only source that they advise Changying to seek help from when she needs support in study. However, what they had no awareness of was that this private parent-teacher relationship was viewed by their daughter as very stressful and discomforting; and more importantly, due to no direct communication and information

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exchanging or updating with their daughter, Changying's parents did not seem to have gained all the facts relating to Changying's study, which resulted in their misplaced expectation.

> *They never ask information about my study directly from me, they always call my class teacher instead because they are friends of her family. But I don't like having this kind of private connection with my class teacher, because that means I have to meet her and all her family during New Year, and that makes me really uncomfortable... Most of time, they only tell me to ask help from my teachers, but they never asked me what help I needed, and they seem not to know how my study really is because they all expect me to apply for the JMG high school, but I know I won't be admitted. (Changying)*

Those caring for these university aspirers while their parents are working away are grandparents. For these students, grandparents took care of their daily life when they were younger, and as they have become teenagers, most of them not only now take care of themselves in daily life but, also take care of some of housework as well as farm work at home. The grandparents were also not able to offer academic help as most of them were illiterate. Most of the students were given full autonomy in time management and school task completion at home. But for some, there was more supervision given by the grandfather whose supervision style was somewhat rigid and authoritarian.

> *My grandpa, he often sits next to me to monitor when I do homework... they (grandparents) are the same with my parents, asking me to study all the time and don't give me time to watch TV. And my grandpa always says things like 'you must study hard because your parents were working very hard outside, otherwise you would let them down...', I'm fed up hearing this because I know it very well, I don't need him to tell me that again and again. (Luli)*

> *My grandpa decides whether I can go out to play or not. He usually doesn't let me go out and would be angry if I didn't listen to him, so I always ask his permission first when I want to go out. (Mingwei)*

In terms of making plans for future education and occupation, although attending university was certain and most of them had a clear career goal, it was also clear from the data that these university aspirers commonly expressed a sense of extreme isolation from any source of knowledge and information within the family, knowledge that could assist and guide them when making educational and occupational choices. In addition, there was nobody in the family who had an interest in them developing a future career that was about anything more than securing a good income. This sense of isolation was largely attributed to a lack of parental involvement. One of the explanations for this could be that these parents had no or very little knowledge and experience themselves with regard to pursuing education after junior high school as well as acquiring an occupation that is not manual labour-related; i.e. parents having no or very little cultural capital thus not able to provide guidance and help for their child regarding further educational plans and future occupational choices. Yet, it also appears that some of these parents did not seem to have much concern about plans or choices their child would make for their futures as they neither showed an interest in asking their child about their ideas nor showed any interest in understanding why their child had chosen a specific career path and what kind of support they might need. Rather, they did not engage at all and left their child to make all the plans and decisions completely on their own; and even though they did provide advice relating to potential career choices, it was only superficial knowledge or they did not provide explanations for why they suggested certain occupations for their child that could help the child shape ideas and make more informed choices.

Hence, it seems that for these 'left-behind children', they were extremely isolated when making educational and occupational choices. This was not only due to a lack of parental involvement that was commonly a result of parents having limited cultural capital as research indicates, it was also due to a great deal of parents' neglect and unawareness regarding what

the child really needed to be able to make crucial life choices as well as how important these choices and plans were to the child in such a critical time of life. It is also evident that for some 'left-behind children' like Dandan, parents had no opportunity to be involved or provide support simply because of the geographical distance.

These are all my own ideas, my parents didn't help me, they said once they wanted me to be a doctor or a nurse, and they told me I didn't need to worry about having no jobs when I'm old if I were a doctor or a nurse, but I don't want it, they then never mentioned it. I haven't discussed my ideas with them, they never asked me anyway, they said it's all up to me; and they didn't provide me with other information about future plans. (Changying)

All the plans I have made so far are my own ideas, my parents never involved in or helped me with plan-making; what they have given me as a suggestion is potential jobs I could do, such as being a doctor, a chef or a teacher. They chose these jobs for me is just because they have heard information from my cousins that such jobs make good money, that's all! They never considered whether these jobs actually suit me or which job would be suitable for me based on my interest or personality. Being a paediatrician is purely my own wish, I just want to help those sick kids, but I don't really know if this is a suitable occupation for me or are there any other requirements for this occupation... they'd say it's all up to me, whatever I'll choose, they have no opinion. I hope they could provide some opinions or suggestions, not just leaving me to rely on myself completely, but I guess they're probably not able to do that because that's beyond their ability, because they never collect relevant information by themselves, they only heard from other people occasionally, a bit of this, a bit of that. (Huifang)

My family let me make plans myself and don't intervene too much. Plus, my parents only come home for New Year, so there's little time for us to meet, let alone what little time they could help me with future plans. They are too far away so to offer their help... I haven't made up my mind about specific future plans, but whatever plans I will make, they will be my own ideas and decisions... they once asked me to consider going to a medical school to be a nurse, but I didn't agree, I don't want to be a nurse, so they never mentioned it again, they leave me to come up with ideas and choose by myself. I didn't know why they wanted me to become a nurse, they never told me the reason, it was only their advice, and I rejected it.... I don't know which path I should choose, I am lost and unable to make a decision, it's quite hard for us at this age to make a good choice for our life, because we don't know anything, then how could we be able to make a choice that will be good for us? (Dandan)

7.4.2 Parent-child relationships

As 'left-behind children', these university aspirers all appeared to have a somewhat complicated relationship with their parents. Yet, the parents-child relationship also appears to vary among individual students thus seems to have different impacts on shaping individual students' other aspirations (e.g. future destination or potential job choice) although they shared the same aspiration for university. The following case studies explore these in a little more depth:

7.4.2.1 Case one: Luli - who defers to parents and responsibility

Luli has aspirations for higher education and intends to get into a general high school after finishing junior high school. After university, she hopes to get a job immediately so that she could make money to support the family and take care of her parents so her parents do not need to work anymore. She did not plan to pursue higher education after university such as a Master or a PhD, and she did not plan to live away from home in the future. Luli explained that this was because she is the elder child in the family[32] and she understood and accepted that it would be her responsibility rather than her younger sister's to take care of their parents in the future. *'... grandpa said to mom once I should only marry to a local guy, because I have a younger sister, grandpa wants me to live close to my parents in the future so I can take care of them when they get old... I accept this because it's my responsibility as the elder kid.'*

Luli and her sister are now living with their grandparents. Luli's parents went out for the first time in 2006 when she was in grade 1, and they came back and stayed for several

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[32] Luli has a sister who is 9 years younger than her and is in the kindergarten class in the same school at the time of the research.

years to build their house which was damaged by the earthquake in 2008, and until March 2015, they went out for work again. For Luli, the relationship with her parents has always had its issues and difficulties. She recalled their relationship before and after her parents returned home as follows:

> *When they first left me in 2006, I cried a lot when I missed them. It feels like they've never existed in my childhood and I can't recall anything about them back then… They seemed so unknown to me, because I didn't spend much time with them. When I grow older, I tried to recall the days when I was with them, I can't remember anything…When they first came back in 2008, I felt they were very cold to me… my dad, every time I tried to talk to him, he didn't smile, and sometimes he didn't even respond… During their stay at home at that time, they had been working on the new house in the daytime and came back home in the evening, and I stayed at school from Monday to Friday, only came home on the weekend, we were both busy, so we didn't spend much time together... I tried to talk to my dad, he didn't smile, and often didn't talk back. I guess it's because I've grown up, and there's a gap between us. I didn't know how to talk to him. When my mom was not home, I didn't want to stay in the same room with my dad because we were just sitting and watching TV, no talking… My mom is better than dad… Since she's back in 2008, we had been getting along quite well. She was interested in knowing how my time was at school. She asked many questions about my school life and my study and I told her the truth and in detail… I don't mind sharing my school life and my study with her because she's like a friend, but I wouldn't share my personal feelings with her, and I never told her about my inner thoughts. Sometimes when she was criticizing me, I really wanted to ask her why you are treating me like this? I didn't do anything wrong', but I wouldn't dare to say… Because she's mom, it's not right to contradict her when she is trying to educate me; but I don't know why I just don't want to tell her my real thoughts and feelings.*

Luli expressed feeling happier after her parents left home again in early 2015. She felt she was finally able to arrange her study in a way she believed to be the most suitable for her, and will no longer be supervised by her parents in their way. Instead, she will study without prodding and believed she will have a better academic performance. Hence, she thinks it is a right choice that her parents go out for work but for not necessarily obvious reasons; i.e. financial improvement for the family.

Because their way is not right. When they are home, they don't give me time to relax, they always urge me to study. When they are home, I have to study all day and have

no time to play. After they're gone, I make my own plans and timetable. I know when to study and when to watch TV. I think this is the most suitable way for me… Yes, it's a right choice. I don't need to bear their way of supervising my study if they're not home, I would study myself and this improves my study. Also, they can earn more money for me to go to school and improve our life.

For Luli, the biggest issue for her relationship with her parents is that they do not know her enough in many respects, and she believed this was because her parents had not been around since she was little. As she has grown up now, it becomes much more difficult for her to communicate with them; even though parents are around when for example they come back for the Chinese New Year, she does not want to share things with them anymore. Because of a sense of her parents' lack of understanding about her, their relationship felt critical, one of blaming and reproaching from the parents. Luli seemed to have lost hope in expecting any changes from her parents that could improve their relationship. She recalls like this:

> *They never helped me with my study, only blames and criticizes me… In their eyes, I study badly, and they always compare me with someone whose study is much worse than me, and they think they are better than me. But they don't know the truth of my performance and theirs, this really pisses me off, and it made me feel so bad and discouraged. Apart from study, they also think other kids are better than me in many aspects, and they just assumed it was true without evidence… I think this is really bad, it gave me bad feelings and bad influences… When things like this happens, I listen to music, then I will forget about it soon. Many times when my mom reproaches me, I feel sad, but only a few drops of tears, soon I won't think about it because I get used to this, they're just like this… I don't think talking to them would help, they'll never change, so I'd rather not say anything.*

In term of future plans, although choosing to attending university, Luli does not seem to have the freedom to choose for herself as her mother appeared as an authoritative parent who has already made all the plans and choices for her daughter. Instead of fighting for her freedom to be able to choose, Luli decided to defer to her mother simply because she was

being obedient and showing respect to her parents, which is both cultural and expected.

> *Their plan for me is: go to high school then university. Mom has already chosen a university for me – the University of S; she said then come back and get married. She's already made decisions for me, because she said this clearly whatever (school) I choose for you, you have to go'… I overall agree with her decisions, after all she is my mother, I should listen to her, and I should respect her decisions because she is the elder… because they are my parents, I can't argue with them, it's a misbehaviour doing that, so even though they are wrong, I would take it.*

Although for Luli, deferring to parents was culturally expected, an authoritative parent who made all the future decisions for her as well as her poor parent-child relationship due to parents' lack of understanding about her did appear to limit her aspiration for education beyond university as well as opportunity for geographical mobility.

7.4.2.2 Case two: Fangfang - who has emotional support from the parents

Fangfang has high aspirations for the future. She is very determined to go to university as she wants to become a doctor, and she has a yearning to work and live in big cities and go to many more places in the world.

Fangfang's parents first left home for work when she was 8, but soon after her younger sister was born, both of her parents stayed at home for 2 years; after that, only one parent works outside and the other stays at home, except for about half-a-year time when she was in grade 6 when both of her parents were working away. Fangfang described her parents as being *'both respectful and strict'* as they provided her some autonomy in daily life, but were strict with her study. She also said her mother in particular was very concerned about her study, and both of her parents had been involved in her education.

When mom was working outside, she called me every week telling me to study well, read more books, finish homework on time, and whether I need any extra study materials. And when my dad was staying at home, he was my main supervisor. He asked me when I would do homework, when I would read books, and what kind of books I were reading. When he found I was reading something not related to my study - those fun books, he would criticize me and urge me to read books that are helpful for my study.

Fangfang has a good relationship with her mother. She described they two as being just like friends and she tells her mother everything because her mother understands her well. The relationship with her dad is not as close as with her mom because she has always been a little scared of her dad since childhood, so she does not often speak to him. Fangfang's parents allowed her freedom in making future plans and did not intervene much. However, she discussed her ideas with both of her parents, and they showed lots of emotional support and encouragement: *'I have discussed my ideas with them, they supported me a lot, and they reminded me to put real efforts, not just words.'* For Fangfang, such emotional support from her parents seems to not only provide self-confidence but more importantly comfort, security, and persistence which is then likely to foster a much higher aspiration as she knows her family will always be supportive.

It feels like my family are my friends, no matter what happens, they will always be my side encouraging me and supporting me.

For Fangfang, because of parents being emotionally supportive and especially having a good relationship with her mom, she felt very encouraged and had ambitious goals for also future occupation and destination.

7.4.2.3 Case three: Mingwei - who is completely on his own

Mingwei has aspirations for higher education and has the ambition to climb as high as he can in education. For him, that he will go to university is the only certainty because he believes strongly that there is a clear correlation between higher education and employment security. However, he has only developed a rather broad and superficial idea of a future 'good job', which is non-manual and not physically tiring, and also provides a good income.

For Mingwei, he clearly hopes to avoid doing tiring manual work like his dad, and unless he makes it to university, following his dad and doing what he does seems to be the only alternative. He has some doubts, at least some confusions about whether going to university is prerequisite for getting a job with a good income because his parents have told him stories about some people who do not receive higher education yet still find a well-paid job, though it is manual work. However, his doubts and confusions remained unanswered.

> *If I didn't make it to university, I very likely will go out to work with my dad, doing the same kind of work what he does. I don't want that; I want something not too tiring… I think getting higher education is the route to a good future, but I don't understand why some people who don't have much education can still find a good job. My dad told me there was a kid, a bit older than me, working with them in the same construction site, and he makes a good earning every year by tying up the concrete iron bars. My dad said if I didn't study well, he would make me do the same kind of job, but of course he expects me to study well so I can get a better job.*

The relationship between Mingwei and his parents, especially his mother, has not been easy. His parents left home for work when he was only 8 months old, and he did not meet his parents again until he was 8. Since primary school, his parents have never shown much interest in being involved in his education or offering any support. He described his

relationship with his mother as bad because she is very strict with him. The relationship with his dad is better because his dad is not too strict but, his dad also rarely speaks to him. Thus, Mingwei lacks any real source of emotional comfort and support from his parents. He did mention though that his mother is the one who teaches him many things, although he does not listen to her, especially when she is not home. In terms of making future plans, he reported there was absolutely no parental involvement or guidance or advice. He has now chosen a general high school he wants to get into after junior high school, aside from knowing this is his plan, his parents expressed no opinion on this matter.

HY: Have your parents got involved in your plan-making?
Mingwei: No.

HY: Have they expressed their opinions?
Mingwei: No.

HY: Have they given you any advice?
Mingwei: No.

HY: Do they know about your plans?
Mingwei: Yes, they know I want to go to that high school, but they don't have an opinion.

HY: Do they agree with you?
Mingwei: Don't know if they agree or not, just no opinion.

HY: Do you think your parents would intervene with your decisions?
Mingwei: No.

HY: What about your plans after high school, have you parents given any thoughts or advice?
Mingwei: No.

> *HY: Have you ever talked about this together? Like what school you should go? What major you should choose?*
>
> *Mingwei: No.*

For Mingwei, it is difficult to build a strong connection with his parents because of his early and long-term separation them. Although he had the ambition for university, there was no parental involvement in his education and he received no support, practical or emotional, from his parents.

7.5 School and Friends

School is a key aspect to look at in order to understand the aspirations of 'left-behind children', their schooling experiences as well as how school factors, in particular friends and teachers, impact on their aspirations and choices.

7.5.1 School life and friendship

Just like any student who goes to a boarding school[33] in China, school is the place where students spend the bulk of their time living and studying. For Chinese 'left-behind children', school life is particularly important as not only these young people spend most of their time living and studying at school since a very young age, school is also their second home and their attachment to their teachers and classmates tend to be much closer and stronger than to their working-away parents.

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[33] As discussed in the chapter of 'Research Context', the concept of 'boarding school' in China is different from that in the UK.

University aspirers in this study all explicitly expressed positive comments on the improvement in facilities and resources of their school since it had been relocated and rebuilt from 2011 to 2013. Students discussed how the environment, facilities and living conditions of this newly built school were much better than the previous ones[34]. For example, as Changying stated:

> *It's much better than before. In the old schools, we used to bring food to the school and cook by ourselves, sometimes we had to eat stale food... Our last school was very small and the living condition there was very poor. Now there is much more space in the current school and there are more plants, so the school environment is much nicer; we also have a computer room now.*

Whilst an improved school environment was foremost in the comments of these university aspirers, a clearly positive remark about the school was further identified in students' narratives concerning their school life and schooling experiences, especially as a result of going to a boarding school. Among 'left-behind children' who aspired to university in this study, regardless of the fact that students in Riverside did not have a choice between boarding at school on weekdays and going home after school every day, a long travelling distance from home to school and poor transportation service in the countryside meant that boarding at school was largely preferable to returning home after school every day.

Nearly all these university aspirers told me that they had had a long history of studying in the same boarding school[35], and they preferred living in the school. The unanimously shared answer among students for having such a preference was because they could '*be with classmates*'. It appears that although the local context leaves these young people no choice

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[34] See 'School History' in 'Research Context' chapter.
[35] This school has both the primary school sector and the junior high school sector, and it has always been a boarding school.

but to go to a boarding school, the companionship of peers makes the fact of going to a boarding school desirable and preferable.

> *I have been in this boarding school since I was very young, I like it… I'd choose to go to a boarding school so that I can hang out with my classmates, that's the main reason. (Mingwei)*

> *I like living in the school, I get used to it. I feel less conformable at home because I don't have much to talk about with my parents, life at home is boring. But at school, I am with classmates and we talk and laugh, it's more fun. (Fangfang)*

Most university aspirers shared their positive experiences when asked about their life in the school. Their positive school experiences were again primarily attributed to the companionship and support of peers, not only in everyday life but also in study. It is evident that for these 'left-behind children', being with classmates and friends at school constitutes the best part of their school life for two main reasons. Firstly, classmates and friends provide them with a lot of emotional support to ease feelings of loneliness and isolation, and secondly, classmates and friends provide them with academic support they would otherwise have difficulty finding. For example, Mingwei mentioned these two aspects of support when discussing his school life.

> *Life in the school is good. The best part is that I can be with my classmates; we do everything together and we talk about all kinds of stuff, so I don't feel lonely and isolated… I study both at home and at school, but if I have questions when studying at home, there is no help; but when I'm at school, I can easily find help from my classmates.*

Luli also confirmed studying at school with classmates made her feel more motivated than studying at home because she was always alone at home. Peer companionship therefore also seems to promote motivation and initiative for individuals that then could improve their academic performance and develop their aspirations.

The best part of living in the school is I can be with my classmates… The atmosphere of studying is much better at school as all of us studying together, but there is only me studying at home so I feel lonely and less motivated.

In students' narratives, there is a strong sense of attachment and appreciation expressed towards their friends in almost every aspect relating to the school life. Understandably, as all the 'left-behind children' in this study have spent almost all their school years living and studying together, their relationship with all the familiarity, intimacy, attachment and trust that has built up over time is likely to be strong and important. As Fangfang stated, *'because of my friends, my school life is great. We have laughs and tears, and we spent so many unforgettable days together. Now we are about to graduate, I'm sad to know we are about to say goodbye. Friendship gives me so much, in daily life as well as in study, I am loath to part with my friends.'* The role of classmates and friends also appears to be important in developing their aspirations and providing support as a main source of information when making choices for the senior high school study.

In terms of academic help, classmates and friends was mentioned unanimously by these university aspirers to be the only real source of support they would willingly turn to at school. I asked students why they did not ask teachers for help, the most frequent answer given was they were afraid of their teachers. In Chinese culture, as teachers are seen as an authority figure (Eng, 2012), it is not surprising to know that Chinese students would feel intimidated in front of their teachers. However, what is clear in the data is that students deliberately avoided approaching teaching staff for academic help as a result of a fear of teachers' criticism and blame in particular, which I will discuss more in the following section regarding teachers.

For these students, their classmates and friends always offered help and support to each other when they had difficulties completing school work, not only at school where they stayed together, but also at home: when sometimes they used their phones to communicate and discuss homework. Students like Dandan and Huifang regarded classmates and friends as a very important factor that enabled them to make improvements in academic performance in their view. Dandan attributed her progress to her classmates' consistent help and support: *'I have made a big progress since grade 8… my classmates always offer lots of support and help, so my academic performance has improved a lot.'* And for Huifang, her progress appears to be more related to the good influence of those high-achieving students in her class: *'I have improved a lot since grade 8… grade 8 is a crucial stage so I began to follow those high-achievers in my class and learn from them.'* Those high-achieving classmates appeared to act as good role-model examples for Huifang in her education and helped to create an atmosphere in which good academic performances were valued and higher aspirations were shared within a group.

Being with classmates and friends also provided Huifang the opportunity to expand her knowledge and information about the outside world as well as generating bigger motivations for studying. Huifang described these below:

> *My classmates and my good friends help me a lot with my study. They help me patiently when I have difficulties, and I soon work out the problems. I ask them for help as soon as I have problems with school work… I like spending time with them, we often discuss and communicate together, this makes me get to know lots of knowledge and information. I also get lots of motivation from them, like sometimes we have a lot of homework and we have to stay up at night; it's only because we are together, I then have the motivation to do it; otherwise, I'd be lazy and bored if I'm alone at home… In order to help me improve, my friends even come to my home from time to time during holidays to urge me to study.*

The importance of role models from peers was also identified in Changying's account regarding how a positive classmate figure had an impact on developing the ambition and the confidence that reflect a positive self-identity. Taking Luli as her role model, Changying developed a strong sense of admiration towards Luli's personal spirit which she believed to be the core reason for Luli's achievement. Accompanied by admiration, Changying also appears to have developed a great deal of motivation, confidence as well as trust from Luli that appeared to have helped shape her own aspiration regarding how she sees her future ambitions being achieved, that is – a good future can only be determined by one's own effort, which was discussed in the previous section.

> *Luli is the one I admire in my class. I think she is very brave because she seems not to be afraid of any difficulty. Her study performance was not good before, but now she is the fourth in the class, and that's all because of her hard work and effort. I want to become someone like her, so I also need to work hard and put lots of efforts for the future.*

When making educational choices in terms of which senior high school they should go to, classmates and friends became the main source of support for these university aspirers. Many students stated that they gained most of the information about potential high schools from their classmates or old friends; they also shared and exchanged information with each other. In this way, students relied on each other to make further educational choices.

> *I got all the information about the vocational high school from one friend who went to the same school herself; and for most of other information, I got from my classmates. (Changying)*

> *I heard from my classmates that last year's admission score of school M was 360, I don't know how accurate this information is, but this is the only information I can get, and we all make plans according to this single piece of information… I trust my classmates though… (Huifang)*

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Thus, for these university aspirers, classmates and friends played an important role in their schooling experience. Classmates and friends not only was the only source from which academic help and support were acquired, they also created a secure peer group with role models and good peer influence. This peer group with good peer influence then brought about positive results for individuals including making academic improvement, expanding knowledge and information, motivation, and valuing personal effort and hard work .It also appears important in shaping aspirations as Changying's case demonstrated above and providing support for many students in terms of senior high school choices which was also discussed above. Furthermore, friendship was also considered to be extremely valuable and irreplaceable in these young people's lives. It was discussed by students that classmates and friends with shared backgrounds and experience of being a 'left-behind child' greatly helped them as 'left-behind children' because the friendship established a strong emotional bond and a sense of security among these students that was otherwise missing. By providing understanding, comfort and support as well as great care and love for each other in every aspect of life, some friends were considered to even surpass the role of parents. In the following narratives of Huifang and Dandan, the significance of friendship was well described.

> *When I got into junior high school, I felt friends was the best part in life, and I didn't feel too attached to my parents. My good friends not only help me with my study, they also take care of me in daily life at school... Friendship means a lot to me. It reduces my pain of not having parents around and makes my life so much more beautiful. (Huifang)*

> *Living in the school largely eases my pain of not having parents around. All of us live and study together, everybody is sincere, we comfort and support each other as we are all from the same background and have the same experience of being 'left behind'. It's so much better than being at home alone. If I lived at home, my grandparents would remind me of my parents, which makes me sad; but since I'm*

at school with my classmates, I don't think of those sad things… Friends are very important to me. Without friends and friendship, there's nothing precious in my life. Friends have taught me many things; friendship makes me feel the warmth and kindness of friends, that's something can't even be replaced by parents. The reason I cherish friendship so much is not because my parents' absence, it is because friendship gives me things that my parents can't give… (Dandan)

7.5.2 Academic performance and senior high school choices

Despite the perceived positive schooling experiences of these university aspirers in relation to friendship discussed above, these students overall were much less positive and confident about their academic performance. Although there are students like Mingwei and Luli who were among the high-ranking students in the class and students like Huifang and Dandan who have made clear academic improvement, students all reported in the interview that the level of their academic performance was 'average' or 'lower than average' and considered their current academic performance as 'not good' or 'worse'. Students mainly attributed the cause of their academic results to themselves and their own reasons. For example, Changying was one of several students who saw herself being lazier and less dedicated to school work as the main reason for the decline in academic performance: *'my academic performance is not good and it's worse than it was in grade 7… I think it's because I become lazier and spend less time studying, like we have more homework now, but I don't finish all of them before class… I spend more time playing than studying in grade 9. I used to study more at home before, but now I play first and don't do homework until Sunday evening.'* And for Mingwei, whilst acknowledging the main reason for not getting good marks in exams was due to a lack of interest in some subjects like English, he also gave his explanation for reckoning the level of his academic performance to be just 'lower than average' regardless of being ranked quite high in his class.

> *I think the level of my academic performance is lower than average. I really think my performance is not good, because in my class, there is a more than one*

hundred-mark gap between the student who takes the first place and the one who is second, and there is even a bigger mark gap among the subsequent places. Ranking is just an order, there is a wide variation in students' real scores. I think only the student who takes the first place in the class can be called someone who performs well academically, others are all the same, not very well.

This 'gap' was also identified by Fangfang.

I heard students in other schools can get 150 marks in maths, but the highest score of maths in our class is only 109, so there is a huge gap. My maths is poor, and the average maths score of our class is low, so the gap between me and those top students in other schools is even bigger.

Unlike university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', academic performance does not seem to be considered by these university aspirers as a determinant of pursuing high education in the future. However, for some university aspirers, academic performance does appear to be the key factor in making the more immediate post-16 choices for senior high school. To illustrate, when deciding which schooling path to choose between a general high school and a vocational high school, Changying and Fangfang informed me that it all depended on to which school they were more likely to be admitted according to their grades. For Changying, she chose to go to a vocational high school because in her own estimation, she had no chance to be admitted to a general high school, and even though she was lucky to be admitted, she would have a lot of pressure and would feel more and more frustrated with classmates all performing better than her; as a consequence, she probably could not graduate. Similarly, Fangfang's choice of going to a less competitive general high school was also due to the consideration of her academic performance as well as the possible pressure she might face if choosing a more competitive school.

I think according to my grades, I have a bigger chance to get into school M… I of course would like to go to school J as it is a very popular high school in the area,

and I heard the teaching quality there is very good, but I'm afraid I have very little chance. (Fangfang)

It is interesting here to see that the students saw failure as the result of themselves only; they did not look at their lives of being 'left-behind children', their poverty, their school and did not consider that society has disadvantaged them. Thus, it seems for these students, lower aspiration for post-compulsory education is the consequence of their own academic failure as well as their personal incapability of adapting to a more challenging learning environment such as a general high school.

7.5.3 Teachers and senior high school choices

Although being less positive and confident about their academic performance, these university aspirers showed a much more positive feeling about teaching and teachers in junior high school. By comparing their teachers in primary school with teachers in junior high school, students expressed greater respect and appreciation towards their junior high school teachers with whom they had a much better schooling experience. It is evident in the data that many students had a rather negative experience in primary school years. For example, as Dandan stated, her experience in primary school was very much related to teachers' poor teaching skill and teaching style as well as the instability of teachers. She recalled like this:

> *Junior high school teachers are different from primary school teachers. Primary school teachers only taught us to learn by rote, even for subjects like maths; they also often criticized us harshly when we made mistakes, this was their teaching style. Also, we changed subject teachers every year in primary school and it's very difficult to follow different teachers. But for junior school teachers, they focus on guiding us to understand and learn, and they don't criticize us harshly, they are very patient and nice.*

Also, for students including Luli, Huifang and Dandan, their academic improvement was all attributed to having better teachers in junior high school.

> *I do much better now than in primary school because we have better teachers now… (Luli)*

> *… because we had new teachers in grade 8, and this is very helpful for me… (Huifang)*

> *… we had new teachers in grade 8 and they are still teaching us… I've improved a lot since grade 8 because teachers are more stable and the teaching quality is much better. (Dandan)*

For students like Fangfang, the bad experience with teachers in primary school not only became a big hindrance to learning progress at that time, it also seems to have caused a long-term fear of being punished by teachers, which, as mentioned in the previous section, appears to explain why some students still avoided approaching their teachers and only turned to classmates and friends for academic help even though they had been in a much less tense learning environment and had had better teachers since junior high school.

> *… primary teachers were very scary, they punished us when we made mistakes, we were so scared that we didn't want to study… the more we were punished by the teacher, the less we were willing to learn. We got so nervous and scared in class worrying getting punished, how could we learn well?... Even now I don't go to the teachers for help when having difficulty in studying. I fear I would still get punished if I didn't understand after the teacher had explained me my question.*

As a comparison with the primary school experience, university aspirers in this study expressed a general satisfaction with their junior high school teachers and with the experience they have had in the school. In particular, the class teacher (it is called *ban zhu ren* in Chinese) was cited by students to be the one who cared a lot for them and by whom they were

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provided with support when facing difficulty making senior high school choices. For example, Mingwei mentioned their *ban zhu ren* cared a lot about their study and offered a lot of her help: *'our ban zhu ren Mrs Yue who is also our maths teacher, not only she teaches very well, she also cares about how we do in other subjects. She often asks us if we have difficulty doing homework, or if there're questions we can't work out, and she helps us'.* Dandan also expressed gratitude to her *ban zhu ren* and regarded her as important as her parents: *'... most of time, it is teachers that teach and educate us as we spend much less time with family members, especially parents… I've already placed my ban zhu ren Mrs Yue in the position of my parents, because she taught me a lot of things, not only subject knowledge but also life wisdoms, so I get to know the world and become the person like today'.*

More importantly, Mrs Yue appears to be the only support in the school that students could and should turn to when making senior high school choices. This is because taking the role as the *ban zhu ren*, Mrs Yue was responsible for helping her students make senior high school choices. Besides, a *ban zhu ren* like Mrs Yue is involved in every aspect of their students' school life so is believed to have gained more knowledge and a better understanding than other teaching staff about their students. Hence, many of these university aspirers had full trust in their *ban zhu ren* Mrs Yue and decided to listen to her when making choices between a general high school and a vocational high school[36]. For example, in Changying's case as mentioned earlier, before deciding to go to a vocational high school, she had so many concerns and worries that she could not make her mind. Changying's parents were disappointed to know that she had considered going to a vocational school without trying to understand why she had such a thought. This was because for Changying's parents,

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[36] In China, in terms of ranking, a vocational high school is considered as lower than a general high school as the former mainly leads to employment after high school and the latter leads to higher education.

vocational high schools are bad schools where only low-achieving students would go to. Therefore, if their daughter went there, they would lose face. Later on, Changying's parents stopped discussing this matter with her completely and showed no interest to involve any more. Even though Changying did not directly go to her *ban zhu ren* Mrs Yue for advice when making decisions, she did pay attention to what Mrs Yue told them in class as both information and advice. In the end, she decided to follow Mrs Yue's advice as she said, *'after all, Mrs Yue is more far-sighted and I trust her'*.

Indeed, several university aspirers had felt concerned and anxious that choosing a vocational high school may affect their plans to attend university. They were worried that they would be regarded as low-achieving students in high school thus would ultimately lose the confidence and the ambition for university. Fortunately, Mrs Yue found this problem and reassured her students that as long as they worked hard, they could still get into university. It could therefore be understood that with the trust in their *ban zhu ren,* students regained their confidence in securing their educational aspirations.

However, in terms of future career choices, these university aspirers appeared to be, again, completely 'left behind' and isolated by their school and teachers to make plans and decisions all by themselves.

> *HY: Did your school provide you with information, suggestion or consultation when making future plans?*

> *Changying: Never. I really hope they could do that, but no.*

> *HY: What about your teachers?*

Changying: Teachers only focus on pushing us to get to senior high schools, they also didn't provide specific advice for us, like, for example, potential occupations.

Huifang: ... teachers don't help us with career choices, it also never crossed my mind to seek advice and help from the teachers, all the plans were made by myself.

This is very likely due to a fact that the majority of Chinese rural schools are still not able to provide student service on campus relating to career guidance as a result of a shortage of funding as well as staffing. And for most teaching staff in Chinese rural schools serving in the stage of compulsory education, the school entrance rate into the higher-level educational institution such as the senior high school is considered to be the priority as it largely determines the result of their job assessment. Therefore, in this social context, although attending university is certain, rural schools like 'Riverside' provide no support for their students like these university aspirers in this study to further develop their occupational aspirations.

7.6 Left-behind-ness

Like university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', university aspirers also reported a clear family economic improvement as the main motivator and a positive consequence of being 'left behind'. For them too, the result of their parents working away was an improved family economic condition which meant they were able to stay and continue in education; these students thus also considered parents working away as the right choice for themselves and their families.

Yes, it's a right choice, otherwise I wouldn't be able to go to school. (Changying)

The right side is it eases the financial pressure for the family because we were poor, and if they didn't go out to make money, I wouldn't be able to go to school now. (Dandan)

They go out to make money, so that I can go to school; if they didn't go out to work, we would have financial problems. After they went out to work, I clearly feel our living condition has improved, we've got better food, better clothes, and our house looks much better… Yeah, it's right, because we need more money to live. (Huifang)

Interestingly, most of these students believed that they would have developed into the opposite character of their current selves, a worse version of themselves, if their parents had never left them. Students attributed having a cheerful and outgoing character to the fact that their parents had not been around. Their current freedoms would have been largely restricted by parents and thus a cheerful character would not be developed.

If they were always around, I would be in the mental hospital now, because I would become very depressed and wouldn't be so cheerful like now. (Luli)

I wouldn't be as cheerful as I am today. I think having my parents around would restrain the development of my cheerful character, because they would be extremely strict with me, asking me to study at home only, and won't let me go out to play with my friends. This is not what I imagined, it's what happens when they come back every year… When they are away, my grandparents let me hang out with my friends, so I can talk with my friends, that's why I have a cheerful personality now. (Dandan)

However, many of them believed their school performance would be better with parents around because their parents could have offered them academic help in primary school meaning a better academic foundation, or at least one parent could have been a strict supervisor thus they would have spent more time studying.

If my parents were around all the time, they could've helped me with my study in primary school, but in fact, as I was living with my grandma, and she is illiterate, so she couldn't help me at that time. If they were around all the time, they could also communicate with my teachers much more often to get information about me. But, grandma can't do that either. (Huifang)

If mom were home, I had to study on the weekend and she would supervise me very strictly. Since she is not always home, I arrange my own time so I'm very free. If my mom were around she would strictly control my study time, then my study would be better. (Changying)

For some, there would be no difference with their school performance whether their parents are around or not because the parents were seen as not able to provide much academic help, or having no interest in involving in their education.

My study should be the same with or without them because they wouldn't help me with my school work... they are able to do that, but it seems they don't want to even though they are home. (Mingwei)

And in Luli's case discussed earlier, as she expressed parents' poor supervision style had resulted in her having bad academic performance when her parents were at home, she thus believed her school performance would be much better with parental absence.

Many of the university aspirers also believed the relationships with their parents, especially the mother, would be a lot better if their mothers had always been with them. This is because having parents around would have resulted in more mutual communication and better understanding as well as more parental care and love felt by the students.

If they were around, they would show more their care and love to me, I would be able to know them more and we would be much closer. (Changying)

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> *I think if mom were always around, our relationship would be better because we would talk more and communicate more. (Luli)*

However, not all students believed their relationships with their parents would be different as a result of parents being present. For Huifang, parents' overall lack of interest in communicating and being involved led to a tense parent-child relationship which was considered to have likely been the same.

> *My relationship with them would be the same, because they rarely communicate with me no matter they are around or not. They don't seem to want to communicate with me. (Huifang)*

In terms of future plans, as mentioned in the previous section, all students expressed a sense of being emotionally 'left behind' and isolated from knowledge, information as well as parental involvement regarding educational and occupational choices. Hence, most students believed there would be no difference making future plans with or without parents around as in either case, they will be left to make choices and plans on their own. However, for some, there was such a thing as too much parental involvement, where plans and choices for the future were made by the parent rather than the student. Changying described well how she had got the independence to choose her own path.

> *If mom were home all the time, she would definitely force me to choose the school she wants me to go to. But since she is not around all the time, she can only talk about it on the phone. She's unable to force me from far away so she is more willing to compromise, therefore I get my independence to choose. (Changying)*

For these university aspirers, being 'left behind' was compensated by the improved family economic condition that allowed them to stay and continue in education, but it was at the

expense of feeling extremely unsupported and alone. Whilst many students believed they had developed a much more positive personal character as a result of their 'left-behind-ness'; and their future plans in particular, that being 'left behind' was even beneficial as it secured their independence and free will, there was still a strong sense of loneliness and of making the best of life's circumstances, despite the bravado.

7.7 Chapter Summary

The primary reason for university aspirers attending university in this study was for a secure future employment. Higher education is viewed instrumentally as a route to a non-manual career accompanied by a good income and a higher social status. Considering students' poor family background and low social status, a general hope of attaining economic improvement and social mobility thus becomes the extrinsic motivation for their educational aspiration. University aspirers also demonstrate a very positive and individualized notion of the self. Whilst students acknowledge their distinct social disadvantages, they show a clear belief and faith in meritocracy and, in particular themselves. For them, having no advantaged family background do not hinder or limit their aspirations because they believe firmly that relying on their own effort to achieve higher in education is a secure path for a good future.

Parents of these university aspirers have high expectations for their child's education and ensure the young generation to understand the importance of doing well in education by sharing their own experiences. Parents' expectations as well as life experiences marked by hardship become a big motivation for these students to strive for a better future via education. Whilst these parents are unable to offer academic support, most of them show great concern for their child's school performance. They also often provide simple advice and

encouragement on the phone to motivate their children's learning while they are working outside, and it is positively felt by most students as supportive and helpful. Nonetheless, there is no parental guidance provided for these students when they are making future plans. Even though having developed the aspiration for university, all these university aspirers express an extreme sense of isolation, practically and emotionally. In addition, as 'left-behind children', complicated but varied relationships of these university aspirers with their parent(s) seem to be able to further differentiate aspirations beyond their shared aspiration for university.

Classmates and friends have constituted the best part of these university aspirers' school life and schooling experience. It is peer companionship and friendship that provide these 'left-behind children' with emotional comfort, academic support, knowledge and information about the unknown world, as well as a role-model-driven motivation to achieve higher in education and in future life. Despite feeling similarly less confident and positive about their academic performance, university aspirers differentiate from other students in terms of their firm believe in pursuing higher education. However, academic performance does appear to be the key factor that limits some university aspirers' aspirations when making choices for the senior high school study. Whilst students have a negative experience during primary school years, they have a much better experience in junior high school and are satisfied with their junior high school teachers. In particular, the *ban zhu ren* Mrs Yue who is given full respect and trust by students is the only support for students when making senior high school choices. More importantly, the information and advice provide by Mrs Yue seem also to provide direction and confidence for these university aspirers to proceed with their educational aspirations.

Finally, university aspirers in this chapter agree with university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' on that their 'left-behind-ness' is being compensated by the improved family economic condition and the opportunity to stay in education, and as beneficial for developing a more cheerful character and securing independence and free will to decide their future. Yet, some students acknowledge they could have a better school performance and a closer relationship with parent(s) if they were not 'left behind'. Nonetheless, students still largely express a strong sense of loneliness and in particular, a sense of making the best of life's circumstances with bravado.

Chapter 8 Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This study set out to explore differences in aspirations for higher education of Chinese 'left-behind children' included in this research. I sought to explore students' aspirations in relation to their schooling experiences within the context of being 'left behind', and wanted to understand and explain why some of these young people, despite sharing many similar social characteristics, aspire to a higher education whilst others do not, and in particular, how 'left-behind-ness' impacts on these young people's educational experiences and aspirations. I tried to understand students' aspirations in relation to their socio-economic situation, but also wanted to explore how issues of sense of the self and sense of emotional isolation could impact on aspirations.

The research questions of this study are:

1.   What are the future education aspirations of 'left-behind children' in the final year of junior high school?

2.   What factors impact on these educational aspirations and if they differ, why are they different?

3.   How does being 'left behind' impact on the educational experiences and aspirations of the 'left-behind children' included?

This study is framed within macro sociological theories to understand aspirations. Initially informed by Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, I deductively adopted his concept of 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' to see if these would help understand aspirations of 'left-

behind children' who are from a very disadvantaged social background in the Chinese society. Cultural reproduction theory, presents a powerful explanatory framework for understanding academic attainment and aspirations; it is also supported with a large body of research that demonstrates parents' class-based cultural capital has a direct bearing on children's academic attainment as well as the capability of parents to engage with their children's education. However, 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' as macro explanatory tools are not always useful in explaining variations in educational aspirations among Chinese 'left-behind children' who share a similar social background. In addition, the deterministic nature of Bourdieu's notion of habitus, that aspiration is a result of class shaped dispositions and values, does not seem to be echoed in the Chinese context given that Chinese 'left-behind children' as well as their parents in this study, do not lack aspirations towards higher education. In fact, parents of students in the study all have high expectations for their child to achieve a higher education. What soon became clear to me is that the importance of individual differences and complexity cannot be ignored, and more individual influencing factors are just as important too. In order to make sense of the aspirations of students in this study, I explored ambition in relation to students' relationships with their families, perceptions of their school and friends as well as their schooling experiences over time. As Rational Action Theory suggests, for individuals from disadvantaged families, making choices that are considered as rational and adequate to meet individual life goals is what shapes educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' in the study. Family social capital, with an emphasis on connections and relations between individual students and their families is also of significant importance in understanding aspirations of 'left-behind children' in this study. I also attempted to understand aspiration by exploring a student's subjective interpretation of 'the self'. By considering how 'left-behind children' understand themselves and the ways they reflectively make sense of themselves, I was able to get some sense of the underlying mechanisms behind

students' ambitions for the future that could explain the variation in pursuing higher education.

Data of this study was collected via a series of individual interviews. The interviews were guided by a list of questions which are semi-structured but are very open-ended. Core participants of this study were 17 students (6 boys and 11 girls) in the same class who were in their last year of junior high school (age 14-16) and were in different academic settings (high-achieving, average, and low-achieving). Interviews were conducted as flexible and conversational and questions were asked in relation to ambitions, choices or plans for the future; information about students themselves and their family; personal history of being a 'left-behind child'; and perceptions of the school as well as school life experiences. Face-to-face interviews lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour each and were all carried out at school. Some students were interviewed more than once as a result of new information emerging for further investigation.

In this study, university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', and university aspirers are primarily differentiated by their differential attitudes towards higher education as well as schooling in general. While the university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' in general do not value school education highly and do not see university education as necessary, university aspirers view higher education instrumentally as a route to economic improvement and upward social mobility and show a clear trust in meritocracy. For university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', their rejection or indecision of university attendance as well as preferred post-compulsory choice of going to a vocational high school is a rational response to a view that university is unattainable for them as their academic ability is perceived as very low; yet

university aspirers, despite feeling similarly less confident about their academic performance, maintain an ambition for attending university as they firmly believe that relying on their own effort to achieve higher in education is a secure path for a good future. Comparing to university aspirers who demonstrate a strong faith in meritocracy, university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' share a strong desire to enter, what they see as, the real social world instead. Their beliefs and plans with respect to how to achieve their developed future goals are very individualized because they have very personal and varied understandings of the social world as well as how they see themselves in terms of personal advantages and weaknesses.

Family plays a significant role in shaping student aspirations in this study. What is distinct for university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' is that educational aspirations appear to be linked strongly with loose family connections as well as authoritarian family members. But for university aspirers, parents' expectations as well as life experiences marked by hardship become a big motivation for themselves to strive for a better future via education, and most of them feel positive about parents' concern for their school performance while working outside as well as simple advice and encouragement provided by parents on the phone to motivate learning. However, despite this, all these university aspirers share in common with the non-aspirers, express an extreme sense of isolation as even though having developed an aspiration for university, there is no parental involvement, advice or support provided as guidance when making future plans. In addition, varied relationships of these university aspirers with their parents further differentiate ambitions beyond a shared aspiration for university.

Although the school provides no guidance and very little support with respect to educational choices as well as occupational preparation, university aspirers are able to gain support from their peers as well as their home teacher which promotes motivation and confidence to pursue a higher education, while university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' are left alone to make decisions only with limited source of information circulated among classmates and friends. 'Left-behind children' in the study all see their 'left-behind-ness' as being compensated by a clearly improved family financial situation and their opportunity to stay in education. However, university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' feel they could have more positive personal changes if they were not 'left behind'; in particular, they believe there would be more guidance and advice provided by parents when making future plans and choices so they may have a different future, and parents would also support their aspirations as a result of having gained a better understanding about them. University aspirers, while some also acknowledge they could have a better school performance and a closer relationship with parents, being 'left behind' is viewed by some as beneficial for securing independence and freedom to decide the future. Overall though, university aspirers largely express a strong sense of loneliness and in particular, a sense of making the best of life's circumstances with bravado.

In the rest of this chapter I shall discuss what the results of this research suggest are important in understanding the educational experiences and aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' included in this study.

8.2 Attitudes and Rationality

In this study, educational aspirations appear to link strongly with students' attitudes towards higher education, particularly in terms of how students understand their places within the educational system and how useful higher education as well as school education, are evaluated in students' future plans.

Academic attainment level is important in understanding how students identify themselves within the educational system, which appears to be the principal determinant of whether higher education is seen as a feasible route for the future from their perspective. Students' rejection or indecision of a university education in the study appears to be a direct response to students' understanding of self and their position within the educational system i.e. students recognize their low position in the educational system reflected by their low attainment level thus, identify themselves as those who will not succeed in pursuing higher education. This attitude must be understood in the context of Chinese education system. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Chinese education system is highly selective, with the key feature of being exceedingly exam-centric. Examinations take a central role in Chinese students' lives and attaining a high score in exams is important for students at all school ages. In terms of attending university, there is a 'one exam determines all' criterion; the score of the National College Entrance Examination ('*gaokao*' in Chinese) alone determines the chance of a student going to university as well as by what level of university the student can be accepted into. As a consequence of this highly exam-oriented education system via '*gaokao*', it is highly likely that teachers, as well as parents, only value students with high exam scores and leave students with low levels of attainment feeling disregarded and undervalued. This was certainly how some of the students in this study felt. Therefore, under this cultural atmosphere, academic attainment level is important to understanding how students identify

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their academic location within the educational system, and more importantly, it can be clearly understood why it has a significant impact on students' self-esteem and self-confidence as low-achieving students. Although confidence was not measured empirically, it is still a relevant consideration when considering the very low levels of self-confidence many of the university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' appear to display in relation to academic pursuit.

However, academic attainment does not always predict attitudes towards higher education as Fuller (2009) found. For example, not all students reject higher education as the result of poor academic performance and in particular, university aspirers in this study, despite feeling similarly less confident about their academic ability, had an ambition for attending university. In this study, how useful education is considered by students for their futures as well as the degree of a student's belief in their ability to achieve also appeared to impact on attitudes.

The general view of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' towards university education is that it is not valuable, worthwhile or crucial for the future, and there was a common view that a good school performance and higher educational levels do not guarantee a good future. Instead, in order to develop a successful future, knowledge, skills and experience, obtained from the real world, are believed to be more important to contributing to their future development than receiving a higher education. As a result, students share a strong desire to make contact with the outside world and believe they should seek career development as well as self-development in the real world rather than via a higher level of schooling. These views were also evident on the views that students had on their school education, with many feeling that it was not relevant or sufficient in equipping them for the future, this also mirrored their view of school as an unpleasant personal experience.

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In contrast, university aspirers value higher education highly and this appears to connect with their faith in its value: not only did they consider university education to be instrumental in securing future employment, they also valued higher education as being able to help with their competitiveness in the future job market, attain upward social mobility, provide a different schooling experience as well as an environment for self-improvement.

Students' educational aspirations in this study can be considered as a rational choice for a secure future as they are calculating where the biggest costs and benefits are for them via the different routes, which is, attending a vocational high school or a general high school. Whilst as the Rational Action Theory suggests, students in the study were found to act autonomously in choosing means to pursue their goals and are able to evaluate options available to them as well as the probability of pursuing them (Goldthorpe, 2010), what seems extremely useful in exploring and understanding student evaluations of their likelihood of success when deciding a viable future educational path in this study is to look at the *'psychological dimension'*(p. 156) of students' cost-benefit evaluation as Fuller's research also illustrates (Fuller, 2009), that is, how some students feel more confident in their abilities to 'make it'. This aspect of evaluation and decision making is found to be of more relevance in student choices of future educational paths in this study, rather than economic factors they may consider.

It is then understandable that a vocational high school with a focus on the occupational skill training is more favourable to university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' in this study as not only students consider it to be more advantageous to future employability in comparison with a general high school with academic courses that are riskier, they also feel more confident

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that they can make it. The choice of attending a vocational high school is also the result of a rational analysis made by individual students (for example Ah Fu) in terms of how this option is more beneficial for his future development, that is, he can learn both the occupational skills and the academic knowledge in senior high school, and this gives him more confidence in believing he may have a bigger chance of being admitted by university if he later decides to continue in education. In addition, Ah Fu's indecision of attending university is also the result of his own evaluation of whether this is a viable route for the future on the basis of his academic ability as he believes educational ambitions must match his actual attainment level and for now, as his attainment level does not support an ambition for university, he thus does not feel too confident in the idea of applying for university. For university aspirers, however, it is worth noting that choosing to go to university is also a rational choice for these students. This is because these students also made their evaluations regarding what they see as providing a viable route for a secure future; unlike university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', they evaluated attending university and obtaining a higher educational qualification as having the biggest benefits for pursuing their futures in which attaining economic improvement and social mobility is the goal.

8.3 Family, Cultural Capital and Habitus

Limited family economic capital i.e. poverty is no doubt a determinant of student uncertain aspiration for higher education in this study (in the case of Fengfeng, Bohai and Meimei), just as a range of literature in chapter 2 demonstrated. Considering the role of theory in explaining how family background impacts aspirations, the concept of cultural capital does appear relevant for this study. This is because cultural capital, when drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualization and application, i.e. something endowed on children by their families that facilitates academic attainment and supports a more advantaged position for achieving

educational success, appears to be lacking in the schooling of Chinese 'left-behind children' as, not only do they inherit little cultural capital (knowledge, resources and skills) from their families due to the families' low educational levels, there is also little parental involvement in their education, as their parents are working away.

As Western academics (DiMaggio, 1982; Reay, 2004a, 2005; Sullivan, 2001) have illustrated a linkage between family cultural capital constitutive of parents' cultural resources and children's educational attainment, Chinese researchers (Qiu & Xiao, 2012; Wu, 2008) also suggest theories of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu can be usefully applied to the Chinese context. In particular, as Wu (2008)points out in the context of China where educational success is one of the few ways of upward social mobility, *'cultural capital is not more beneficial to those from high-status families but is equally important for everyone who holds it'* (p. 222), children, especial those from lower-status families in China, thus need more cultural capital to be able to succeed in school and later in life. Evidence in this study, although it is not aiming to demonstrate causation between family cultural capital and student academic attainment, does indicate that cultural capital appears important in understanding the educational aspirations of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided'. While not measured directly, it seems reasonable to assume that it is of primary importance in understanding why these students do not choose to go to university. As a result, Chinese 'left-behind children' are at a distinct disadvantage educationally; not only are they disadvantaged as a result of being from poor and disadvantaged families, they also lack the presence of family to offer regular support and encouragement. Hence, many of them had no confidence and hope in attending university and some, although having an ambition, chose a path that was very likely to fail.

However, in light of Goldthorpe's (2007a) critiques of Bourdieu's assertion that family is the only site for the acquisition of cultural capital (1980, cited in Goldthorpe, 2007a), evidence of university aspirers in this study also shows that the nature of cultural capital is not fixed, it is highly likely that students were able to acquire cultural capital via their schooling, most notably from their classmates and friends. It was apparent, on an individual level, that many university aspirers gained academic support from classmates and friends by different means (study together at school or discuss about school work by phone at home) and this effectively helped them tackle homework problems and make academic improvements. Some students (in the case of Huifang) were also able to not only make great academic progress by following and learning abilities and skills from the high-achieving students in the class, but were also able to expand their knowledge and information about the unknown world. University aspirers in this study appeared to be academically more confident in aspiring higher in education, and supportive networks of friends appeared important to this.

Cultural capital also appears to take a less significant role than cultural reproduction theory suggests when considering how families impact on their children's education. In this research, evidence of university aspirers shows the perception of parents' concern, interest and encouragement had a positive impact on students' learning. In particular, the perception of parental expectation alongside parents' experience of hardship in life was a big motive for university aspirers in the study to want to perform better in study and achieve higher in education. As Bourdieu (1977a) implies, parents' high expectations have direct impacts on their children's educational aspirations. This study also suggests despite acknowledging parents' lack of knowledge and experience in assisting them with educational pursuit, parents'

high expectations for their children to change life via education appeared to matter more with university aspirers' decision to participate in higher education.

That students' perception of parents' high expectations for their education found in this study also casts some doubts on Bourdieu's deterministic view that the value families place on their children's education is the result of class-based dispositions and habitus. Despite the fact that I did not talk to parents directly, it was evident parents of 'left-behind children' in this study did not appear to value higher education any less from the children's perspective. Instead, they all had a firm expectation for their children to attend university, and the cost of pursuing higher education did not appear to be a hindrance to these parents' expectations. Meanwhile, whilst Chinese researchers (L. Gao, 2011; Sheng, 2014) support Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital with evidence showing that Chinese parents' expectations regarding their children's higher education associate highly with parents' educational background, parents' low educational level as well as a lack of experience of higher education do not always constrain parents' higher educational expectations for their children, as in the case of parents of 'left-behind children' in this study. What appears to be more relevant is to understand the concept of habitus in the specific Chinese society as Chinese parents, especially those with a low socio-economic background (e.g. in poor rural areas) often realise their inferior economic and social situation and understand success in education is the most viable way for their children to achieve good life, with upward social mobility via a culture that is 'one exam determines all'[37]. Therefore, it could be argued that it is parents' understanding of the importance of educational qualifications in securing future employment in the competitive labour market enhanced by their own life experience marked by inferiority and hardship, rather than their possession of cultural capital, that enables some rural Chinese parents (I am

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[37] The 'one exam' refers to the National College Entrance Examination (*'gaokao'* in Chinese).

not suggesting all parents) to form a high expectation for their children's education, which then influences students' aspirations.

In addition, when considering family cultural capital in the form of parental school involvement and how it positively associates with both attainment and aspiration as research has indicated (L. Gao, 2011; Gillies, 2005; Lareau, 1997; Reay, 2005), Chinese 'left-behind children' in this study are additionally disadvantaged given that there was also very little parental involvement provided directly in either their learning or their educational choice-making discussion. Whilst research suggests that Chinese parents with a lower socioeconomic status, and little cultural capital, are less likely to engage with their children's college planning thus are less likely to exert positive influences on the college choice process (L. Gao, 2011), this research also acknowledges that little parental involvement in the education of young people does not only result from parents having little cultural capital, it also appears to associate with cultural differences in the way parental involvement in education is understood. Western understandings of the role of parents in education looks very much in relation to the ways in which they support learning, both within the home and within school. It is worth noting though, that parental involvement in education is culturally different, in terms of the role of parents as parental participation and involvement in schooling in China is not as required and emphasized as it is in the West. In addition, being 'left behind' also means that parental involvement is limited as a consequence of geographical distance and parent-child separation which make it impossible for some parents to participate and engage.

8.4 Family, Emotional Support and Sense of Isolation

In this study, families present as particularly significant to understanding the aspirations of students when considering how relationships between 'left-behind children' and their families impact on individual aspirations. Drawing on Coleman's conceptualization of family social capital (1988) and its importance in promoting educational outcomes explored in research (Byun et al., 2012; Croll, 2004; Israel et al., 2001), this study supports those findings by showing that a lack of family social capital resulting from loose family connections and an absence of a familial emotion network, as a consequence of parents' migration are strongly inferred as being associated with educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children'. This is because without a strong family connection between children and parents, parental communication or monitoring, or high parental expectations in particular, does not appear to be able to exert positive influences on educational aspirations. As discussed earlier, although I did not interview parents or family members, students' perceptions of their families in the study showed their parents all had a high expectation for their education i.e. attending university, which, in light of what research suggests – the value parents attach to their children's educational success significantly play into the formation of their children's educational aspirations and expectations (Bergerson, 2009; L. Gao, 2011; Sheng, 2014), should have positively shaped students' aspirations for higher education. However, the value of parents' expectations as a very positive type of family resource did not appear to be impact most of students in this study (i.e. university non-aspirers and 'the undecided').This appeared to strongly relate to students' perceptions of having a very loose connection with their parents and in particular a long-term emotional separation from their parents as a result of parental long-term absence, as well as having a difficult relationship with the grandparents who took the role as the carer during the years of parents' working-away.

This sense of disconnection and a lack of emotional connection with the family was most evident amongst those students who were university non-aspirers and 'the undecided'. This group of students particularly perceived themselves as having a rather difficult relationship with their families. This was due to the fact that most of time, there was little opportunity for them to directly interact and communicate with their parents, and their parents had little opportunity to participate in their life. In addition, their grandparents - as the substitute guardian, with low educational levels, as well a significant generation gap - were seen by their grandchildren to have failed in developing a successful interactive relationship with them, other than providing basic daily care or adopting a discipline style that was rigid and authoritarian. Indeed, very significant to this research was students' common perception of parents/carers having very limited understanding about them, including their schooling experience and other life experiences. This was believed by these young people, to be the result of their families having no interest or making any effort in wanting to understand them.

From student comments, parents as well as other family members rarely provided guidance, support, encouragement or understanding for those who showed no or uncertain aspiration for higher education in the study. When a student was encountering mistakes and setbacks in life (in the case of Jingjing), not only were parents ignorant of what she had been through and so were unable to offer practical or emotional support that could have helped her overcome difficulties in the first place, they also created bigger tension and pressures by imposing their own wishes on her educational choices. As a result, not only Jingjing showed low self-esteem and self-confidence, she was also very negative about the future and felt extremely upset because it was so very difficult to communicate with the parents. Similarly, when a young person whose mother forcefully separated her from her friends and both parents showed no interest in their child's own hopes about the future (in the case of Xiaohua), it is then

understandable that a general yearning for freedom and autonomy was what determined some young people's ambitions. More particularly, the interaction between families that are marked by restrictions, misunderstanding, a lack of communication and understanding (in the case of Bohai) led to some feeling terribly frustrated and determined to continue in education, in the hopes of changing the negative views and gain some sense of trust and respect from the family.

Moreover, for students who showed extreme uncertainty about the future, family relationships appeared to be more highly authoritarian i.e. the parent or the carer was described as a very authoritarian figure who gave their children no autonomy to choose their own futures, than those were had clearer plans. As a consequence, a daughter (in the case of Xiaoli) whose father appeared to impose misplaced educational expectations on her without basic understanding of her actual academic aptitude and made educational decisions against her own will, created uncertainty and anxiety because her future was beyond her own control. This sense of extreme uncertainty about the future also appeared to be related to a student's gender (as in the case of Meimei). As research consistently finds (Hannuma, Kong Peggy, & Yuping, 2009; Mahmud & Amin, 2006; Rothchild, 2006), educational experiences and outcomes of girls in poor households in developing countries are very much affected by traditional cultural attitudes about family responsibilities and gender roles, according to which, girls are considered as less worthy of education.

Coleman's theory suggests social capital within the family is a resource that enables children to gain educational success. Particularly, Coleman identifies that the intergenerational relationships between children and parents should be developed intensely via parents'

physical presence in the family, their attention to their children, as well as parents' expectations for their children's education (Edwards, Franklin, & Holland, 2003).He specifically points out even though parents are physically present in the family, if there is not a strong connection and relationship between a child and parents, the child's education will not benefit no matter what and how much human capital the parents have (Coleman, 1988). Coleman especially attributes the lack of family social capital to a *'structural deficiency'*(1988, p. S111) in modern families, for example, the single-parent family or the nuclear family in which one or both parents work outside resulting in the absence of parents during the day. In light of these ideas, while exploring the context of rural China within families of 'left-behind children' - in which one or both parents work far away from home resulting in the long-term absence of parents for years, this research indicates that it is highly likely that the impact on the education of 'left-behind children' as a result of parents' long-term absence in the family is significant. As Coleman (1988) also suggests the human capital possessed by parents must be complemented by social capital embodied in strong family connections to promote educational achievements, Chinese 'left-behind children' are thus doubly disadvantaged. This is because the human capital and the social capital that assist in promoting educational outcomes, in particular, aspiring higher in education, are both largely missing in these students' families: first, because of the social disadvantage of families, that leads them to work away, and second, by the absence of this parents from the lives of their children.

For university aspirers however, although also describing their relationships with parents as complicated, with issues and difficulties, some parents were reported to have provided emotional encouragement and support regardless of the geographical distance that did not appear to be the case for 'the undecided' and non-aspirers. For example, for some (in the case

of Fangfang), the parent-child relationship presented as parents allowing autonomy as well as providing emotional support and this appeared to impact positively on student's aspirations, not only for higher education but also for future career. This young person appeared to have a high level of self-confidence and a stronger sense of family belonging. Whilst some parents of these aspirers were also described as being critical and over controlling (in the case of Luli) or being too strict and not engaged with the process of their child's future planning (in the case of Mingwei), family connections appeared to be less detrimental to attitudes and aspirations of university aspirers in the study. This is because, as a result of a cultural belief that children should defer to parents to show respect, individuals like Luli thus were willing to follow the mother's plan – i.e. pursue higher education. Or arguably there is a possibility that no parental intervention instead allows students themselves to gain full autonomy for educational choices– i.e. attend university, individuals like Mingwei thus were able to make autonomous future decisions.

Despite that family relationships and the role of parents or carers appear to impact on aspirations of students included in varying degrees, for all 'left-behind children' in this study, the level of emotional support these young people perceive they receive from their families is very low. Just as other capitals existed in the family, parents especially mothers can also provide their children with another form of capital i.e. emotional capital, which has been found to also have an impact on educational outcomes. The idea of emotional capital, as discussed and used by several academics including Fuller (2009, 2014), Helga Nowotny, Patricia Allatt and Diane Reay to explore the process of parental involvement in education (Gillies, 2006), is conceptualized as significant emotional resources within families generated via parents', especially mothers', emotional investment in supporting children's schooling that children could draw upon to advance in education (Reay, 2000). Such emotional

resources encompass '*emotionally valued assets and skills, love and affection, expenditure of time, attention, care and concern*' (Allatt, 1993, cited in Reay, 2004b, p. 61)as well as emotional engagement and support (Reay, 2004b). The concept of emotional capital is understood as mainly transmitted from mothers to children and has revealed some class specific inequalities in relation to maternal engagement with children's education. This is because working class mothers, constrained by their material and social contexts, have difficulties in providing the same level of emotional capital as middle class mothers through their involvement in education (Gillies, 2006; Reay, 2004b).

Drawing on the concept of emotional capital and linking it to this research, students' perceptions of the role of parents play in their education suggest that 'left-behind children' included have little emotional resource from families to draw on, especially when making educational plans and choices. Emotional capital, which as conceptualized to be emotional encouragement, support, confidence and interest, invested by at least one important family member (Fuller, 2009), appears to be missing in the lives of most of these young people. Although parents were not interviewed as part of this study, it is clear that apart from Fangfang's parents who were reported to have provided their child with emotional encouragement and support when making future choices and had a positive impact on aspirations, the absolute majority of students felt their parents were not interested in engaging with their future-planning process except to tell them the path they wanted them to take. As a consequence, 'left-behind children' in this study, either aspiring for higher education or not, overwhelmingly expressed a sense of real isolation from any source of support within the family. This sense of isolation was directly seen by students as caused by the absence of parental emotional support and arguably, such isolation is not helpful in promoting self-confidence and self-esteem or encouraging a sense of self-efficacy and autonomy, as research

acknowledges (Fuller, 2009). I therefore suggest what seems to ultimately spotlight the disadvantage of Chinese 'left-behind children' is how they have been emotionally/psychologically 'left behind'; and as well as they are physically 'left behind', so they are doubly disadvantaged.

8.5 The Self

Whilst this research is framed within macro sociological theories to understand aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children', data offered in the study suggests future choices are also greatly informed by these young people's sense of self. In explaining differential educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' included, it is individual student's personal belief reflected by their perceived sense of self that appears significant.

Bandura (1994)discusses how different senses of self-efficacy exert very different influences on people's achievements and well-being across the lifespan. In terms of academic development, personal efficacy beliefs are believed to contribute significantly to promoting individuals' academic achievements as well as raising academic aspirations (Bandura, 1995). In exploring these ideas within ambitions for higher education, my results are consistent with other findings (Fuller, 2009, 2014; Fuller & Macfadyen, 2011) that indicate that a student's higher sense of educational self-efficacy, reflected by a confidence and belief in an ability to succeed, is an important explanatory factor behind higher aspiration. To illustrate, for university aspirers in the study, the value of schooling and trust in the value of educational credentials were demonstrated explicitly in terms of what these students saw as the route for realising the future person they wanted to be; that is, in order to become a person with good qualities and great abilities, who will make a contribution to society. It was clear that

university aspirers in the study valued hard work and held a firm belief in relying on their own effort to create a good future via education; they also expressed confidence in their abilities and merits thus felt assured in succeeding in educational pursuits. In contrast, however, a lower sense of educational self-efficacy, reflected by a lack of confidence and belief in a capability to manage academic demands or master difficulties and challenges in the schooling process, was evident in the comments of university non-aspirers (in the case of Jingjing and Kang) and 'the undecided' (in the case of Ah Fu) in relation to their 'educational-self', they thus were less assured in pursuing higher education because success was less clear.

For university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', whilst some students' lower educational aspirations were clearly informed by their less strong sense of educational self-efficacy compared to their university-aspiring classmates, what specifically should be understood from the data is that many of these students' aspirations were also strongly associated with their personal biographies and values. As Watts and Bridges' study (2006) illustrated, young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have their own aspirations that reflect the lives and lifestyles they value, and their rejection of High Education is simply because they do not see HE is necessary for what they aspire to. Indeed, this research indicates that the reason for many of these 'left-behind children' not to engage in or feel uncertain about university education is because they have their own plans and goals for the future and attending university is not seen as a route they need to take for what they want to achieve in their lives. Data presented showed that university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' not only shared a view that gaining social knowledge, skills and experience in the real world was more important for their future development than receiving university education, they also had individualized beliefs and plans regarding how to achieve their ambitions as a result of their

personal and varied perceptions and understandings of the social world, as well as their defined selves in terms of personal advantages and weaknesses. As what Watts and Bridges (2006) further point out in their research illuminating a re-definition of 'higher' aspirations within a broader set of human and social values that does not conflate higher aspirations with higher education, I also suggest that there should be an alternative reading of 'lower' aspirations among Chinese 'left-behind children'. This is because different aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' included   appear to be underpinned by their personal life stories and views, and I argue these personal aspirations should not be recognized as low or even inferior just because they are not directed towards pathways of HE as 'higher' aspirations can also be other things, for example, aiming to provide a good life for grandparents as a return for their care and love, which is with no doubt an honourable life goal.

Despite there is clearly a difference in terms of educational self-efficacy between the two groups of students as discussed above, many university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' also appeared to demonstrate a strong sense of self-efficacy reflected by a confidence and belief in achieving their desired futures. What is worth pointing out here is that students of the two groups are in common in terms of having a strong sense of an ability to create their own futures, but as their levels of feeling confident and believing in themselves in succeeding in academic pursuits were different, they thus developed different educational aspirations. It is also worth noting that students of the two groups both demonstrate a robust and resilient sense of efficacy reflected by their perceptions of how to achieve their goals, academically-oriented or not; and this kind of self-efficacy is very likely established by these young people's shared desire to improve their lives as well as shared work ethic i.e. hard work,

effort and persistence, as what their parents have already shown them by choosing to out-migrate to earn a better life rather than staying home and being poor.

8.6 Community, School and Friends

Coleman (1987) also discussed the important role social capital beyond the family i.e. in the community, plays in supporting education for the younger generation. It has been noted that supportive social connections among parents and between parents and other members in a community can generate greater levels of social capital that provide young people in it with positive norms and values towards education (Coleman, 1987; Israel et al., 2001). In exploring educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children', it is worth bearing in mind that Coleman's notion of community social capital existed in strong community links is largely missing in the community in which these young people are living as a result of adults out-migration. Because of long-term migration, there is little chance for parents to create and sustain a supportive and cohesive social network with other parents or with other community members, their children who are 'left behind' in the community are therefore not provided with social capital acquired through connection and interaction with neighbourhood adults to support their education. In particular, parental members' migration results in parents having no involvement within school, which when considering Putnam's notion of civic engagement(Putman, 2000) in relation to education (Fuller, 2009), suggests that social capital emerged through a trusting relationship between parent and institution which then enables the transference of the ethos of school (e.g. a high value on education) to home is apparently not available for 'left-behind children'.

Apart from having no access to higher community social capital, 'left-behind children' included also had very little access to higher school social capital considering the resource level of their school and the teachers. All students reported that they had no access to school-based programs or services for further education preparation or career planning as 'Riverside' is a rural school and has no provision for these resources. Nor were they offered guidance or support by their teachers or receive any sense of expectations or encouragement from their teachers – teachers were described as only completing teaching tasks. In addition, students commonly reported having had unpleasant experiences with their previous teachers and tended to deliberately avoid approaching teachers in general. Hence, as research illustrates the importance of school context as well as the importance of teachers who are supportive and express their educational expectations for students in determining and shaping young people's future choices (Byun et al., 2012; Foskett et al., 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2011), Chinese 'left-behind children' in this study are clearly in possession of a very low level of social capital, reflected by having no access to supportive social networks in their school. Thus, although in some ways they actually seemed very aspirational, they are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of developing aspirations for themselves,

Whilst in the study teachers were reported to be less supportive of students' future choice-making, the homeroom teacher however (*ban zhu ren* in Chinese) were commonly noted by university aspirers as the only source of support when making further education choices and the one to whom they gave their respect and trust. In explaining why many university aspirers secured the ambition for higher education, their trust in the homeroom teacher appears to be important. Although the reason why support from the homeroom teacher was not felt by all students in the same class is unclear, university aspirers appear to be more trusting and this ability to trust in their teacher seems to create social capital that has positive influences on

educational aspirations. It is possible that because of having trust in the homeroom teacher, university aspirers tend to feel more confident in speaking to teachers in general, they thus may be more often assisted in study and so perform better academically. They may also have more occasions to gain knowledge and information in relation to future development from the teachers. Teachers, on the other side, as having more communication with these students, also tend to know them better thus are more likely to enhance their trust in the value of higher education as well as providing guidance and advice that support their ambition for university.

Peer companionship and friendship, however, were extremely important, academically, socially and emotionally, for all 'left-behind children' in this study. Strong emotional ties and attachment established via friendships that provide love, comfort and understanding become the source of security, strength, trust and encouragement - a replacement of what is missing in the family - were specifically noted amongst all these young people. Previous studies have indicated that peers and friends play an important role in supporting and shaping students' educational choices. For example, Mangan, Adnett, and Davies (2001) suggest friends were a useful source of information for Year 11 students when making decisions for post-compulsory education. Brooks (2003) also found when young people were making specific and feasible HE choices regarding courses and institutions, their peers and friends played a more important role than their families in informing their decisions. In consistent with research that indicates the significant impact of peers and friends on shaping young people's aspirations (Brooks, 2003; Mangan et al., 2001; Thomas & Webber, 2009), this study also offers evidence of the role that peer network has in shaping educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' who have an ambition for university. It was noted by university aspirers that their high-achieving friends were good influences on them and by taking their friends as role models and staying with them, these students tend to create a network in which a good

cultural atmosphere and positive attitudes and values towards learning are circulated. As a result, this network with good peer influences appears to generate motivation which then has a positive consequence for aspirations. In understanding differential educational aspirations between the two groups of students, it is this academic-oriented influence exerted by the friend network to which university aspirers connect that appears to be important as this kind of positive peer influence did not seem to be available for university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' among their friends.

As my data shows, for all 'left-behind children' in the study, friends were their main source of support they can draw on when making educational choices and as there was very limited information available to share with each other in their friend network, this likely had a bearing on these young people's aspirations. What this research in particular indicates is that as 'left-behind children' have little support provided by their families and the school, they tend to have a need to stay close to their friends, especially when they are making educational choices. However, as their friends are also 'left-behind children' and arguably, friends only have the skills and cultural capital they can inherit from their families, these young people all lack sources of knowledge and information to make informed decisions and choices for the future. This research demonstrates that there is a lack of alternative sources of choices for all these 'left-behind children', academically ambitious or not, in terms of educational support. And as discussed earlier, these students are not only physically 'left behind', they are also emotionally 'left behind'; they struggle to build a close and strong relationship with adults (parents and teachers) and their educational choices are framed within a small peer group in which their friends are also very disadvantaged and lack of support. As a result, they are self-reliant in seeking educational support and they are on their own to navigate their futures.

8.7 Left-behind-ness

One of the main interests of this study is to look at how being 'left behind', as a distinct social characteristic of socially disadvantaged children, impacts on their educational aspirations. Exploring this impact by drawing on students' own perceptions, I have looked at how being 'left behind' has had an impact on these young people's educational experiences and ambitions, and I suggest 'left-behind-ness' does appear to play a role in shaping aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children'.

What should be first of all noted is that all 'left-behind children' included recognized a clear economic benefit brought by their parents' migration and acknowledged the prime importance of an improved family economic condition in enabling them to stay in education as well as receive more education if they wish. It is then evident that there are positive economic-related consequences of these young people from being 'left behind'. I am by no means suggesting that poverty is no longer a problem for these young people, particularly as some of them still expressed a concern for their families' financial situation when considering higher education. Nevertheless, what could be inferred is that for these young people, although they are still living in rural areas of China, their family economic condition is less detrimental to developing an aspiration for higher education as it could have been otherwise.

However, 'left-behind-ness' appears to have very particular consequences in terms of students being less supported practically and emotionally by their parents than they could be if they were not physically absent. This is particularly important in understanding the educational aspirations of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' in the study. I will

discuss in more detail below by focusing on three main aspects mentioned by students when comparing how they see themselves currently with how they think they could be if not 'left behind'.

Firstly, regarding academic performance, as discussed previously, the reason for this group of students rejecting or feeling uncertain about university education was primarily associated with their perceived low academic attainment level. Students mostly believed they could have achieved a better academic performance as a result of being provided with more parental supervision, interest and participation in schooling because of parents' presence at home. As the importance of parental involvement in their children's success in education has long been demonstrated by research (Lareau, 1997), it is inferable that while parents of these 'left-behind children' are less capable of offering practical academic help considering their low educational level, they could still effectively be involved in their children's education in the form of monitoring and supervising, which, as students believed, could help them be more efficient and organized with school work as well as make them feel more motivated in learning.

Secondly, regarding character and relationship with parents, university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' mostly described themselves as less outgoing and less cheerful than they believed they could be and believed that if, not 'left behind', their relationships with at least one parent would be a lot better. What is particularly intriguing is that these 'left-behind children' generally expressed a strong sense of emotional loss as a result of parents not being around to gain understanding of their thoughts as well as help them manage negative feelings, and as these young people have to deal with emotions by themselves for years, they believe they

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have gradually turned quite introverted. In terms of parent-child relationship, students considered that improved relationships with parents would result from more communication between them and, in particular, a possibility that their parents would know and understand them better if they were not 'left behind'. Considering a poor family relationship and a loose parent-child connection reported by most of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' and how this parent-child relationship resulted from parents of 'left-behind children' having little time, attention, understanding and support for their children was significantly associated with educational aspirations as discussed previously, 'left-behind-ness' then does appear relevant to aspirations of this group of 'left-behind children'.

Lastly, regarding future choices. I have demonstrated that all 'left-behind children' in the study are extremely isolated from sources of information and support with respect to future choice-making. Yet, many students of this group believed parents' presence could offer them different futures as there would be more advice and guidance given by parents that could enable them to make more informed decisions about future plans. Therefore, it can be suggested that from a student perspective, their situation of isolation and helplessness can be alleviated by having parents around as parents serve as an important source of support available at home. 'Left-behind-ness' hence again appears relevant to educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' included.

In comparison, university aspirers in the study however expressed some opposite views when describing their sense of self regarding the same three aspects discussed above and more importantly, students' perceived the other version of themselves does not seem to lead to a fundamental difference in educational aspirations compared to what they have developed. To

illustrate, in terms of academic performance, many students of this group also believed they would perform much better academically as they saw themselves being able to lay a better academic foundation with parents' help since primary school, if not being 'left behind' Some however believed their school performance would not be any different whether parents were around or working outside because their parents would be the same, neither providing academic help nor showing interest in their education. Nevertheless, as indicated previously that academic performance was not considered by university aspirers as a determinant of pursuing higher education. Whilst 'left-behind-ness', may have consequences for the academic attainment level of these 'left-behind children', this does not appear very relevant to their ambitions for higher education and for some, their parents' absence enabled freedom to make choices, unconstrained by parents' influence and interference.

When commenting on 'the self' in terms of personal character and relationship with parents, interestingly, students of this group mostly attributed their current outgoing and cheerful character to the fact of not having parents around - which was believed to have given the freedom to spend time with friends. However, many of them also believed their relationships with, especially their mothers, would be improved as parents' presence would lead to more communication and understanding between them. However, as parental relationships in particular were discussed earlier in this chapter to have played a less crucial role in shaping attitudes and aspirations of university aspirers in the study, the impact of 'left-behind-ness' on parent-child relation appears to affect the educational aspirations of this group of 'left-behind children' to a lesser degree.

Finally, in terms of future plans, other differences between the groups were that university aspirers mostly did not share the view that a parents' presence would prevent them from feeling isolated and unsupported. Moreover, 'left-behind-ness' was considered by some to be somewhat beneficial for securing their autonomy and freedom when making future choices. Hence, 'left-behind-ness' does not appear to have exerted a decisive influence on the educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' of this group.

8.8 Chapter Summary

In conclusion, in explaining the differential educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' included, I suggest that 'left-behind-ness' plays a much more influential part in shaping aspirations of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' in this study. However, it is worth noting that the impact of being 'left behind' is significant for both groups of students in terms of the lack of support and emotional isolation they experience. It is inevitable that this will have important consequences on their education. However, whether being 'left behind' had a bigger impact than poverty on education is not clear.

Theory helps to provide an explanation for how educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' included are formed and why educational aspirations of these young people are different. However, evidence of this study also casts some doubts on some theoretical perspectives and in particular indicates that there are cultural nuances when applying some mainly western-contextualized theoretical ideas to the Chinese context.

In theoretical terms, choosing to go to university or not are both rational choices made by students for a secure future based on their own calculation of risks and benefits among different routes available to them as well as the possibility of realising them, as the Rational Action Theory suggests, but the difference is that the risks and benefits are evaluated differently by students of the two groups. The Cultural Reproduction Theory, in particular the concept of cultural capital is also relevant when considering the impact of a lack of family cultural capital as a result of parents' low educational level as well as little parental involvement in schooling on the educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children'. However, this study also shows the nature of cultural capital is not fixed as university aspirers are able to acquire cultural capital via supportive networks of friends at school, and the perception of parents' concern, interest, and especially parents' high expectations appears to matter more with university aspirers' decision to pursue higher education. This research also acknowledges a cultural difference when considering parental involvement in education as a source of cultural capital as the role of parents in schooling in China is not the same as it is in the West. When drawing on Bourdieu's view of how class-based dispositions and habitus impact on young people's education, this study suggests the idea of habitus should be re-considered in the specific Chinese society. The concept of social capital is particularly relevant for understanding the significant impact of family relationships that did not appear very strong on aspirations of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', whereas family relationships appeared to be less detrimental to aspirations of university aspirers. When further linking the concept of emotional capital to the role of parents play in the education of 'left-behind children' included, this study is able to demonstrate a sense of real isolation from any source of support within the family as a result of the absence of parents' emotional support, and suggest how arguably this sense of isolation could have an impact on aspirations. In addition, Bandura's ideas of self-efficacy are also echoed by this study in the way that

different senses of educational self-efficacy can exert different influences on students' educational aspirations.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

9.1 Conclusion

This research aimed at finding out what 'left-behind children' in the final stage of compulsory education in China aspired for their future education and sought to explain the factors that appeared to matter in the shaping of the educational aspirations of 'left-behind children' included in this study, from their own perspective. In order to understand how educational aspirations were developed and why there were differences in aspirations among 'left-behind children', I have looked at some macro patterns associated with their social background using important theoretical concepts within a sociological framework, and have explored how experiences in the family and in school, their relationships with adults and peers, as well as their understandings of themselves and the social world they are living in, has impacted on their attitudes to education and aspirations. I also sought to explore how 'left-behind-ness' as a distinct social characteristic of 'left-behind children' might be seen to have impacted on their educational experiences and aspirations. In the following sections, I firstly restate the research questions of this study and present a synthesis of the findings. I then will discuss the contributions to knowledge as well as the limitations and implications of this study.

This study sought to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the future education aspirations of 'left-behind children' in the final year of junior high school?

2. What factors impact on these educational aspirations and if they differ, why are they different?

3. How does being 'left behind' impact on the educational experiences and aspirations of the 'left-behind children' included?

The 'Left-behind children' included in this research were in their last year of Compulsory Schooling and had different educational aspirations. Some of them want to attend university in the future and so had mostly decided to go to a general high school for further secondary education – these were categorized as university aspirers. Others did not want to attend university in the future or had not yet decided what they wanted to do, and so choose to go to a vocational high school for further secondary education – these were categorized as university non-aspirers and 'the undecided'.

In exploring educational aspirations, it is firstly a student's understanding of their position within the education system and a student's perception of how useful higher education is for their future that appear to be relevant. In this research, academic attainment level was what some students were primarily drawing on to identify themselves within the Chinese education context and consequently appeared to be a key determinant of whether higher education was seen as a feasible route from these students' perspective. In understanding aspirations of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided', their rejection or indecision of university education appears to be a direct response to their perceived low academic ability, as perceived by themselves. Students' perception of a low position in the academic hierarchy appeared to explain their low levels of self-confidence in relation to higher academic pursuit within the Chinese education system. However, academic attainment level did not always predict university aspirations, as university aspirers in this study, despite feeling less than confident about their academic ability, still had an ambition for attending university. Attitudes towards higher education and perceptions of the value of higher education on individual's future development was what appeared to be of primary importance in trying to understand what differentiated the university aspirations of students included. A key difference appeared to be that university aspirers viewed higher education instrumentally - as

a route to economic improvement and upward social mobility. They believed that achieving higher in education was a secure path for a good future. Whereas, university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' in general do not see higher education as necessary or worthwhile because knowledge, skill and experience gained from the real social world was believed to be more valuable for future development.

As discussed in the previous chapter, educational aspirations can clearly be understood as a rational choice for all students. This is because for the purpose of achieving a secure future, students choose the path they consider will offer the means to pursue and then achieve their goals. In exploring how educational choices are evaluated and then made, I suggest that whilst some students' indecision is clearly determined by their constrained family economic resources, what seems more important than finances is how possible future educational paths are as well as how they assess their likelihood of success; how confident they feel in their abilities to 'make it'. In theoretical terms, educational aspirations of students in this study are all clearly rational, and in explaining why aspirations and choices are different, the difference appears to be that the risks and benefits for creating a desired future are evaluated differently by individual students of the two groups.

In exploring the role of family in shaping aspirations of 'left-behind children' in this study, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and how this type of family capital can facilitate educational success appears useful in understanding aspirations, even though it is not directly measured in this research. It could be argued that Chinese 'left-behind children' included in this study not only inherit little cultural resource from their families due to the families' low educational levels – as theory predicts, but also because there is also little parental

involvement in the lives and the schooling of these children, as their parents are working away. 'Left-behind children' are arguably at a distinct disadvantage educationally, first, because of poverty and second, because their parents are absent. Whilst it is important to make clear that 'confidence' was not measured empirically in this study, it is something that was inferred through the analysis of students' narratives. In explaining why many of students in this study appeared to have little or no confidence in their abilities to attend university and some choose a path that is very likely to fail, it seems reasonable to assume that cultural capital matters considering its potential in assisting a child to succeed in education with more academic knowledge and skills as well as greater confidence and higher ambitions. However, Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital does not appear to adequately explain the aspirations of 'left-behind children' who aim high. In line with Goldthorpe's critiques of Bourdieu's assertion that family is the only site for the acquisition of cultural capital (Goldthorpe, 2007a), university aspirers in this research are able to acquire cultural capital via schooling, most notably from supportive networks of classmates and friends, they thus appear to have other important sources than might help explain why some feel more confident in aspiring higher in education.

However, university aspirers' perception of parents' concern, interest and encouragement appear to have a positive impact on their learning and in particular, their confidence and motivation for higher education. While these students acknowledge their parents' lack of knowledge and experience in assisting them with educational pursuits, it is parents' expectation for them to aim high, parents' beliefs of social mobility via education, as well as parents' own experience of hardship and its impact on their experiences of family, that appears to matter with these students' decisions to pursue higher education.

When exploring aspirations of 'left-behind children', this research casts some doubts on Bourdieu's deterministic view that the value families place on their children's education is the result of class-based dispositions and habitus. As in the case of parents of 'left-behind children' included, parents' low educational level as well as a lack of experience of higher education do not appear to constrain parents' high expectations for their children's education and, the cost of pursuing higher education does not appear to be a hindrance to these parents' expectations. However, where Bourdieu is useful is in the ways that poverty can impact on families and in the resources families have to support their children. The results of this research also lead me to suggest that the idea of habitus should be re-considered specifically to different cultural contexts – in this case, in the Chinese society. These rural parents' understanding of the importance of educational qualifications in securing future employment in the competitive labour market has been enhanced by their own life experience marked by inferiority and hardship, rather than their possession of cultural capital that is what enables them to form high expectations for their children's education, which then shapes young people's aspirations. Thus, parental involvement and its importance as a cultural resource is also context specific. I strongly argue that when considering family cultural capital in the form of parental school involvement, there are cultural differences between Western societies and China in terms of the role of parents in education, and in the case of 'left-behind children', geographical distance and parent-child separation also make it impossible for some parents to participate and engage.

Coleman's conceptualization of family social capital also appears useful in understanding aspirations in this study. A lack of family social capital resulting from loose family

connections and an absence of a familial emotion network, as a consequence of parents' migration are strongly inferred as being associated with educational aspirations of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided'. Difficult relationship between a student and a key adult figure in the family who appears to be highly authoritarian is very much related to aspirations of those who show extreme uncertainty about the future. In comparison, for university aspirers, although also describing their relationships with parents as complicated, with issues and difficulties, family relationships and the role of parents/carers appear to be less detrimental to attitudes and aspirations of these students. This is because they either have received more emotional support from parents thus appear to have a stronger sense of family belonging, or, at least are autonomous in making future decisions, which is neither the case for university non-aspirers and 'the undecided'. Moreover, social capital gained outside of the family appears also relevant in explaining different aspirations in the study. University aspirers appear to be able to gain support from their connections with the homeroom teacher and especially their friends which is helpful in promoting motivation and confidence to pursue a higher education, while university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' are mostly left alone to make decisions only with limited source of information shared within the friend network. Although peer support and friendship are extremely important for all 'left-behind children' in this study, friends being the main source of support when making educational choices suggests there is a lack of alternative sources of choices for all these 'left-behind children', academically ambitious or not, in terms of educational support, and this likely has a bearing on these young people's aspirations.

When linking the concept of emotional capital to aspirations in this research, emotional investment within families in supporting children's schooling that children could draw upon

to advance in education (Reay, 2000) appears to be largely missing for most of these young people included in the process of making educational plans and choices. For 'left-behind children' in this study, a sense of real isolation from any source of support within the family is seen as directly caused by the absence of parental emotional support, and such isolation has important consequences for education. Whilst family cultural capital supports a child's education with knowledge, skills and abilities, emotional capital invested by parental encouragement, support, confidence and interest cultivates a strong sense of belonging, assurance and security for a child, which arguably is significant in promoting self-confidence and self-esteem or encouraging a sense of self-efficacy and autonomy, as research acknowledges (Fuller, 2009). I therefore suggest it is being emotionally 'left behind' that ultimately is the specific the disadvantage of Chinese 'left-behind children', as opposed to the disadvantages associated with poverty alone.

In this study, educational aspirations and future choices are also greatly informed by young people's sense of self. In explaining the different aspirations of 'left-behind children' included, it is individual student's personal belief of their educational self-efficacy that appears significant. What specifically should be understood from the aspirations of university non-aspirers and 'the undecided' is that many of these students' aspirations are also strongly associated with their very personal and varied understandings of the social world and how they see themselves in terms of personal advantages and weaknesses, as well as their personal biographies and values. I suggest these personal aspirations should not be recognized as low or even inferior just because they are not directed towards pathways of HE as 'higher' aspirations can also be other things.

In exploring how being 'left behind' might be considered as impacting on aspirations, despite positive economic-related consequences of being 'left-behind children' - as family economic condition is less detrimental for these young people as it could have been otherwise - , 'left-behind-ness' appears to have very particular consequences in terms of how a student is supported through these important formative years. 'Left-behind children' are less supported by parents, practically and emotionally; they are left to fend for themselves from young ages and have few sources of nurture and emotional support besides those friends in similar situations. I conclude that in this research, whilst some Western theoretical ideas of social class appear useful for explaining macro patterns in terms of how social background influences aspirations of 'left-behind children' in the Chinese context, they have limitations in explaining differences in attitudes and ambitions of students within this particular group, and that specific cultural features of poverty and disadvantage are not captured within these theories.

I also conclude that in this research, Chinese 'left-behind children' are self-reliant in seeking educational support. They struggle to build close and strong relationships with adults and they lack resources provided by the family and the community (including the school) that could assist them in education. Their educational choices are framed within a small peer group in which their classmates and friends are from the same disadvantaged background and also lack of support. They are therefore not only physically 'left behind', but more strikingly are emotionally 'left behind' in their rural home place.

9.2 Contributions to Knowledge

By exploring educational aspirations of Chinese 'left-behind children' from their own perspectives through the interplay of social context alongside individual perceptions and experiences, this research contributes by:

1. Shedding light on individual experiences of being a 'left-behind child' and providing more detailed understanding of Chinese left-behind children's educational experiences and challenges through a qualitative in-depth case study. Research this far has tended to be quantitative and focused on outcomes, as opposed to the experiences of the young people themselves.

2. Transferring Western theories to the Chinese context and demonstrating cultural nuances that these theories do not capture when applying them in the East, thereby broadening theoretical applications and understanding of the role of theory in explaining and framework research within the field of social disadvantage.

3. Proposing 'left-behind-ness' as a core social characteristic of 'left-behind children' to capture its distinctive impacts on these young people's education, as well as offering insight that being 'left behind' is not necessarily educationally detrimental, in terms of aspirations.

4. Extending knowledge regarding 'left-behind children's' needs for educational and emotional support so as to inform both policy and schools.

9.3 Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

This research has several limitations. First, it is a small qualitative study and is very context-specific as it was conducted in a specific rural village of China. Therefore, its findings cannot be generalized. However, the findings emerging from this study may likely be useful for exploring other contexts, at least as a starting point. Future research with a larger study in different geographical regions would help attain a more comprehensive understanding of left-behind children's educational experiences and aspirations.

Second, this study only included 'left-behind children' as informants and did not compare with other groups of students including non- 'left behind', non-poor or urban children. Therefore, it is impossible to know whether, in the shaping of educational aspirations, it is the status of being 'left behind', 'being poor' or 'being rural' that has a bigger influence. It would be interesting to conduct comparative research in the future among students with different socio-economic characteristics to further identify the impact of 'left-behind-ness'.

Third, this study has mainly focused on students' experiences and perspectives to understand aspirations. Further studies should also include perspectives of parents, carers, and school teachers in order to inform the design and implementation of policy and service for 'left-behind children' that could more fully address their needs in education and better support them in pursuit of further and higher education.

Finally, this study did not look at comparing aspirations amongst different levels of attainment. Whilst this was initially planned as part of the research design, the low attainment

of the case school overall meant that this was not possible. Therefore, this research is unable to explain how far aspirations are shaped by prior attainment, poverty or 'left-behind-ness'. This would therefore be an interesting area for further study.

9.4 Implications of the Research

By providing a more detailed understanding of 'left-behind children' educational aspirations, this research suggests the following implications:

1. It is clear that 'left-behind children' in this study were not provided with any practical assistance by the school with finding out information about further and higher education or assistance with career planning and preparation. These students were on their own navigating their futures without any informed guidance and advice. It is strongly suggested that there should be some school-based support programmes with designated staff available on campus that could direct and assist students when making educational and occupational choices. With support and guidance, students could acquire more reliable information about entry requirements for senior high school applications as well as college and university admissions, and could also get more practical help and more detailed guidance in terms of how to find and secure a path that meets both their interest and their actual attainment level. As illustrated in the thesis, many of non-aspirers and 'the undecided' had no awareness of the fact that there are different levels of university in China with different enrolment requirements and it is possible for them to be admitted by university as long as they choose one in the right level; however unfortunately, they simply gave up on university as they believed there was no way they could make it. Such school-based support placement is not only an urgent need for 'left-behind children', in fact, it is what is largely

missing for students in all rural areas of China. Therefore, it is urged that government should allocate greater funding in rural areas to help rural schools provide and develop resources and services for their students.

2. In understanding left-behind children's educational experiences and aspirations, it is striking how emotionally isolated they were and how much emotional loss they appeared to experience not only because of parents' physical separation but also due to an emotional distance from their teachers. Given the central role of school and teachers in these young people's lives, I suggest having a teacher to offer a listening ear and to discuss worries and concerns is extremely important for these 'left-behind children'. If teachers were more available for emotional assistance and support, these young people may feel much less isolated as, although their parents are working away, they would know they had teachers around who want to engage with their lives and will provide care and love when they need them. Such sense of emotional security would arguably also be very helpful in promoting their self-confidence and self-esteem which may then would raise their aspirations for themselves. Of course, such a level of engagement and support requires more time, energy as well as skills from the teachers and given the already heavy workload of Chinese teachers, it seems rather unrealistic to just expect the teachers to do this without greater funding and resource provision in school, and more importantly, some radical changes of the traditional Chinese cultural expectation with regards to teachers' responsibility and job satisfaction i.e. delving into teaching techniques and methods mainly to raise students' exam scores. It will then be necessary for the government to design and implement some specific policy schemes in rural areas, which not only could allocate more resources to promote the quality of education and teaching training, but also would

enable teachers to meet both the intellectual and the psycho/emotional needs of 'left-behind children' as well as many other disadvantaged rural students across China.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for Student Information

Name：

Student number:

A. Student background information & school experiences

1. Are you:
   A boy
   A girl

2. Your age:
   10-12
   13-15
>15

3. Who do you live with? (can tick more than one)
   Both parents
   Mother only
   Father only
   Grandparents
   Others
   My own

4. Where do you live at the moment?
   In village
   In town

5. Do you have siblings?
   Yes (if yes, how many? _____)
   No

6. What do your parents mostly do?   Father   Mother
   Farming in the village
   Working in the village, but not farming
   (Specify_____)
   Working away
   No jobs
   Others (Specify_____)
   Do not know

7. Where are your parents working at the moment? Father   Mother
   In the village you are living
   In the town you are living
   Other cities in the same province

Other provinces
Others
Do not know

8. How important is it to you to do well at school?
Very important
Quite important
Not important

9. How important is it to your family that you do well at school?
Very important
Quite important
Not important
Do not know

10. What do you think of your performance in school tests so far?
Excellent
Good
Average
Poor
Very poor

11. Is your school performance better or worse than in the past?
Worse than before
No difference
Better than before
Do not know

12. What do you usually do when you have difficulties with homework?
Ask my parents
Ask another family member
Ask my friends
Ask teachers
Try to solve by myself
Do nothing

13. How do you arrange your study? (you can tick more than one)
I only study at school
I study at home after school
I go to private classes at weekends or during holidays
Others_____

14. Do you have many friends at school?
Yes, a few
Yes, a lot
No, not many
No, very few

15. How important are your friends to you?
Very important

Quite important
Not important

B. Future plans

16. Do you want to leave school after your SHSEEs (Senior high school entrance exam) or do you plan to carry on in education, for example in general high school or vocational high school?
Leave education/training
Stay in education/training
Not sure yet

17. If you were to leave school after your SHSEEs, what might you do?
_____

18. If you were to choose to stay on at school, why would you do this?
_____

19. Would you go to university?
Yes
No
Not sure yet

20. If yes to Q19l why is that? (Tick up to 2)
So I can get a better job
Want to be well-educated
Friends would go
Parents/Carers want me to go
Not sure what university is
Other reasons_____

21. If no to Q19, why is that? (Tick up to 2)
Better to get a job and earn money immediately
Being well-educated is not important to me
Won't do well enough to go university
Parents/Carers don't want me to go
Too expensive to go to university
Other reasons_____

22. What kind of job would you like to do when you finish school?
_____

23. Do you think you will get your desired job in the future?
Yes
No
Not sure

24. What qualifications do you think you will need to get your desired job?

None
High school diploma
University degree
Something else _____
Not sure

25. What do you think about the following statements?

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
How well I do at school makes a big difference to how I get on with life			
If I try hard enough you can always get what I want in life			
It is worth staying on at school to get a better job			
I expect to get a good job in the future			
People often get ahead just by luck			
If I don't stay in education, I might regret later			
How well I do at school makes no difference to how I get on with life			

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

<u>The first interview:</u>

1. Basic information about the family and parental migration
   Based on information given in the questionnaire, follow up with specific questions on

   - family structure
   - family members
   - routines
   - arrangements for study and leisure at home

2. Parental migration
   - the length of migration
   - job
   - destination

3. 'How are you connected with your migrant parent(s)?'
   - the method of distance communication
   - the return of migrant parent(s) and the reunion at home
   - how parents involve in schooling and life?
   - students' feelings about these experiences

4. 'What do you think about the school and the school life?'
   Include questions exploring

   - students' feelings about their school, school staff and the school life
   - feelings about boarding schools, such as, 'How do you feel about living in the school from Monday to Friday?', 'Is the way of living in the school from Mon to Fri different from the way of living in your home? Why they are different? How different?', 'Which would you prefer: living in the school from Mon to Fri, and go home on weekends or go home every day? Why?'

<u>The second interview:</u>

Go in-depth exploring students' life experiences with long-term parental migration

- students' childhood experiences and feelings
- current life experiences and feelings
- relationships with carers
- relationships with parents

- family's role in education and others
- impacts of parental migration
- (then move on to exploring) perceptions regarding the differences in life with or without parent(s) home, such as, 'How would you imagine yourself being like now if your parents had never left you? Would there be any difference in life?'

The third interview:

'What are your goals, plans and hopes for the future (near and far off)? Why do you

have such ideas?'

- Educational goals and plans
- Occupational goals and plans
- Other life goals and plans
- Views about the society e.g. the education system, the future job market, the definition of success

Appendix 3: Information Sheet and Consent Form (For the Local Education Department)

Research Project: <u>How does being 'left behind' by the migrating parents impact on the educational experiences and aspirations of young people in a rural village of China?</u>

Student Researcher: Yang Hong

Dear Officer,

I am a doctoral student studying in the Institute of Education, University of Reading, UK. I am writing to ask for permission to undertake a research study for my PhD project, which is about how being 'left behind' impacts on the educational experiences and aspirations of students in a junior high school in your county.

What is the study?

The study aims to investigate the educational experiences of young people who are 'left behind' by their migrating parents in a rural junior high school and the impact of these young people being 'left behind' might have on their educational aspirations. It hopes to extend the understanding of what the educational experiences of 'left-behind children' are in the context of rural China, and how their status of being 'left behind' impact on their educational experiences and aspirations. Hence, it could make recommendations regarding how schools, teachers, parents or carers can best support these young people to obtain better academic performance and nurture higher educational aspirations.

Why has this county been chosen?

The county has been chosen because it is reported that students who are 'left behind' by their migrating parent(s) account for around 60% of the total number of students in almost every local school in the county. Given the prevalence of 'left-behind children' in the area, the county government has made many attempts to address issues regarding minimizing the negative impacts of being 'left behind' on the educational outcomes of these students. Due to many of the innovative and fruitful endeavours to better support the rural 'left behind' students in the area, your county has been known as one of the pioneering areas in China where much practice is making to improve the learning condition for students 'left behind'. Hence, your area would be a perfect filed work choice for a study like mine.

How a school for the study is chosen?

According to the legal requirements for data collection of research studies in the domain of education in China, the local education department should be contacted at the first place, providing the general information of the study undertaking. Then, permission must be asked from the local education department before contacting other educational organizations at any level in the area, such as schools. In the case of my study, I am looking for a rural junior high school in the county, where it has a large proportion of students who fall under the category of 'left-behind children'. Hence, I need the permission and help from your department to identify such a school for my study.

It is entirely up to you whether you give permission to a school to participate. You may also withdraw your consent to the school's participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting Yang Hong, Tel: 07549266320(UK), 008613982382083 (China), Email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What will happen if a school takes part?

With your agreement, I will be living in the local community where the chosen school belongs for about 4- 6 months. By immersing myself in the field work area, I could have enough time to learn and understand people's life in the area, know more people and let people know me as well so as to gain their trust.

The school's participation would involve me carrying out observations in classes and other school activities, and interviews with students. It would also allow me to look at some school records including students' exam scores and so on. During my observations in classes and other school activities, most of the time, I would be sitting at a corner watching students' behaviours and taking notes, but sometimes, I may need to take photos or video-recording some activities. All of my work will be undertaken on the premise that no normal teaching procedure in the school is affected. In my interviews with students, I would ask questions relating to their experiences at home and at school, as well as their future plans and aspirations. The interviews will be audio recorded. Interviews will be conducted in after-school time or weekends, in a place where is convenient to students, to minimise disruption.

If you agree to the school's participation, I will seek further consent from the school principle, teachers, parents/carers and the students themselves.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information given by participants in the study will remain confidential and will only be seen by me, the student researcher (Yang Hong) and her supervisors (Dr Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. None of the county, the school, teachers, parents/carers or the students will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. In some circumstances where there is concern about the student's welfare, appropriate agencies will be contacted.

Given that the existing research studies regarding issues of 'left-behind children' in rural China are to a large extent quantitative, in which mainly statistical depictions of the issue are provided, I anticipate, on the basis of the previous studies, the findings of this qualitative study will be useful for educators as well as policy makers in endeavouring to better support children and young people 'left behind' in rural China.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking the county, the school, the students, the teachers or parents/carers to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be given pseudonyms and will be referred to by that pseudonym in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national or international conferences, and in written reports or articles. I can send you electronic copies of these publications if you wish.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard the school's data.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Dr Carol Fuller, University of Reading; Tel: +44 (0) 118 378 2662, email: c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Yang Hong

Tel: 07549266320, 008613982382083, email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

I sincerely hope that you will approve of my study in your county. If you do, please complete the attached consent form and return it (via email or sealed letter) to Yang Hong.

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

Thank you for your time.

<u>Local Education Department Consent Form</u>

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of officer: _____

Name of the educational department: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

I consent to the participation of a school in my county in the project as outlined in the ☐
Information Sheet

Name of officer: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 4: School Principle Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Project: How does being 'left behind' by the migrating parents impact on the educational experiences and aspirations of students in a rural village of China?

Student Researcher: Yang Hong

Dear Principle,

I am writing to invite your school to take part in a research study about how being 'left behind' impacts on the educational experiences and aspirations of students in your school.

What is the study?

The study aims to investigate the educational experiences of students who are 'left behind' by their migrating parents in your school and the impact of these young people being 'left behind' might have on their educational experiences and aspirations. It hopes to extend the understanding of what the educational experiences of the 'left-behind children' are in the context of rural China, and how their status of being 'left behind' impact on their educational aspirations. Hence, it could make recommendations regarding how schools, teachers, parents or carers can best support these young people to obtain better academic performance and nurture higher educational aspirations.

Why has this school been chosen to take part?

Your school has been chosen because it is one of the junior middle schools in the chosen county where around 60% of the students are children who are 'left behind' by their migrating parent(s). Besides, the county government has made many attempts to address issues regarding minimizing the negative impacts of being 'left behind' on the educational outcomes of these young students. Hence, the participation of your school in the study would be a significant support for the local government's endeavour to address those issues.

Does the school have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you give permission for the school to participate. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting Yang Hong, Tel: +4407549266320 (UK), 008613982382083 (China), email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What will happen if the school takes part?

With your agreement, firstly, I will need to look at the students' registration records so as to select students who are 'left behind' as participants of my study. I also need to have information about the students' test scores or other records that can reflect their academic performance. Secondly, after inviting the students to participate and acquiring their consent, I will carry out observations in class as well as in some school activities, and then I will interview students. During my observations in class and in school activities, most of the time, I will be sitting at a corner watching students' behaviours and taking notes. This may involve some filming/photographs, if appropriate. My observations aim to find out what the normal everyday school life of students is like, how students behave and interact in class, do students who are identified as 'left-behind children' exhibit any particular behaviours or conducts in the school, and so on. Sometimes, if necessary, I will also need to take photos or video-record for some activities, with prior permission. All of my work will be undertaken on the premise that no normal teaching procedure in the school is affected. In my interviews with students, I will ask questions relating to their experiences at home and at school, their future plans and aspirations. Interviews will be audio recorded and will be conducted in after-school time or on weekends, in a place where is convenient for the students, to minimise disruption.

All the necessary information as well as procedures of the study will be provided for parents or carers before conducting the research, and any question or concern raised during the study will be addressed properly.

If you agree to the school's participation, I will seek further consent from teachers, parents/carers and the students themselves.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information given by participants in the study will remain confidential and will only be seen by the researcher (Yang Hong) and her supervisors (Dr Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. None of you, the teachers, the studentsor the school will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the school.

Participants in similar studies have found it interesting to take part. We anticipate that the findings of the study will be useful for teachers and educators in endeavouring to better support children and young people 'left-behind' in rural China.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No

identifiers linking you, the students, the teachers or the school to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be given pseudonyms and will be referred to by that pseudonym in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national or international conferences, and in written reports or articles. I can send you electronic copies of these publications if you wish. In some circumstances where there is concern about the student's welfare, appropriate agencies will be contacted.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard the school's data.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Dr Carol Fuller, University of Reading; Tel: +44 (0) 118 378 2662, email: c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Yang Hong

Tel: + (44) 07549266320, 008613982382083, email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

I do hope that you will agree to your participation in the study. If you do, please complete the attached consent form and return it (via email or sealed letter) to Yang Hong.

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

Thank you for your time.

School Principle Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of Principle: _____

Name of the school: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

I consent to the involvement of my school in the project as outlined in the Information ☐
Sheet

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 5: Information and Consent Form (main carer or parent)

A Brief Introduction of Research

My name is Yang Hong. I am a PhD student from the University of Reading. I am here to collect data for my PhD research. My research is about left-behind children's educational experiences and aspirations. With information regarding students' schooling experiences, challenges and problems, people in the local education department and teachers in the school could identify and better support the needs of 'left-behind children' in your area. As you are the legal guardian of the child in the family, on behalf of his/her parents, I am asking for your permission to invite your child to take part in the study.

What is the study?

The study is about the school education experiences and aspirations of 'left-behind children' in junior secondary school in your area.

Why has my child been chosen to take part?

Your child has been invited to take part in the study because your child's school has expressed an interest in being involved in the study and believes this study will be beneficial for the students.

Does my child have to take part?

It is absolutely your decision whether you want your child to participate or not. You can change your mind at any time during the project, and neither you nor your child will take any responsibility for this and there will be no consequence taken by you and your child. If you do not want your child to be in the study any more, just contact me or tell your child's homeroom teacher. (I will give my Chinese mobile number to the carer so they can contact me directly)

What will happen if my child takes part?

Your child will have regular classes and take part in other school activities as usual. There will be no disruption of normal teaching and learning procedures. I will be sitting in the class, observe and note down something I find very interesting, for example, what your child does in a math class, or how he or she manages to answer a question asked by the teacher in an English class, and so on. Sometimes, classes may be filmed or photographed. Also, I will

arrange a time and place which is convenient for your child and have a conversation with him or her. During the talk, I will ask some questions about your child's experiences in school and feelings about the school life. Our conversation will be audio-recorded, it will probably last for 30 minutes each time, and because I am required to must have your permission before recording the conversation with your child, you will need to tick the box on the last page of this sheet if you agree (If you do not tick, it means you do not agree). With your consent, I will also need to look at some examination records of your child. In addition, your child may be invited to a have a discussion with other students in the school; it is a chance for them to share stories about school life as well as studying experiences. This discussion session will also be arranged in a time and place convenient for the students, and it will probably last for an hour or so; with your consent, it will be audio-recorded.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information given by your child in the study will remain confidential and will only be seen by the researcher (Yang Hong) and her supervisors (Dr Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. Neither you nor your child will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about your child will not be shared with the school.

We think the findings of the study will be useful for teachers and educators in endeavouring to better support 'left-behind children' in rural China.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you, your child or the school to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. I will transcribe the recordings from interviews and anonymise them before analysing the results. Children will be given pseudonyms and will be referred to by that pseudonym in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national or international conferences, and in written reports and articles. I can send you electronic copies of these publications if you wish.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if I/ my child change our mind?

You/your child can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, your child can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard your child's data.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can directly contact Dr Carol Fuller, University of Reading; Tel: +44 (0) 118 378 2662, email: c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Miss Yang Hong, Tel: 008613982382083, Email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

I do hope that you will agree to your child's participation in the study and to your involvement in it. If you do, please complete the attached consent form.

Thank you for your time.

<u>Parent/Carer Consent Form</u>

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of my child and me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of child: _____

Name of carer/parent: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

I consent to the observation of my child in class and other school activities and the photographing or video-recording of my child taking part in them if needed

☐

I consent to the school giving Miss Yang Hong details of my child's grades in school examinations

☐

I consent to my child being interviewed by Miss Yang Hong and the audio-recording of the process

☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 6: Student Information sheet and Consent form

Hi everyone!

My name is Yang. I am a PhD student from the University of Reading in the UK. I am here in your school to finish a research project with your help. Since you are now in the last year of junior high school, I would like to know what are your plans or decisions for future education. I am also interested to know what other aspirations you have, for example, future career or other life plans, and would like to discuss with you why you have those aspirations. What you can help me with is to share with me your experiences, thoughts and ideas. In this way, we are doing this research project together!

So, I want to invite you to join me in this research. At first, I will join you in some of the lessons you take at school in order to learn what a normal class is like in your school, what students and teachers do in these lessons, and what other activities you have at school. Then, I will do an interview with you, that is, you and I will have a chat and we discuss topics that relates to your experiences at home and at school. The interview will take about 30 to 60 minutes maximum each time, and you can decide when and where you want to do it. If you agree, I'd like to audio record our conversations for later use, but you can say no if you are not comfortable with it. It would be great if you also like to contact me via cell phones or any social networking tools you are using to share ideas with me.

I want to assure you that all the information you shared with me will only be seen by me and my supervisors in my university. We will never disclose your answers to your school, your teachers, your classmates or your parents and carers, unless the information you give me involves harm or crime. Your real names or any of your personal information will not be shown when I am writing the thesis or any other publications. You do not need to worry because taking part in the study will not influence your grades at all. Instead, the findings of the study will be useful for teachers to find the best ways to support you with your study, and many more other students like you may also be better supported in other places.

It is your decision whether you want to participate or not and you can decide to quit the interview at any time. You can refuse to answer my questions if you do not want to. If you agree to participate, please fill in the following consent form.

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can directly contact Dr Carol Fuller, University of Reading; Tel: +44 (0) 118 378 2662; Email: c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

If you would like more information, please contact Yang Hong

Tel: 07549266320 (UK), 008613982382083(China), Email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

Thank you for your time.

Student Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

I understand that it is my choice to help Miss Yang Hong with this project and that I can stop at any time, without giving a reason and that it won't have any effect on my grades.

I have received a copy of the Consent Form.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

I am willing to take part in an observation where Miss Yang Hong will take notes

and I consent to the filming/photographing in the process.   ☐

I am willing to take part in an interview with Miss Yang Hong and I consent to the audio
recording in the process.   ☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 7: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form

Research Project: <u>How does being 'left behind' by the migrating parents impact on the educational experiences and aspirations of young people in a rural village of China?</u>

Student Researcher: Yang Hong

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about how being 'left behind' impacts on the educational experiences and aspirations of students in your school.

What is the study?

The study aims to investigate the educational experiences of children who are 'left behind' by their migrating parents in your school and the impact of these young people being 'left behind' might have on their educational experiences and aspirations. It hopes to extend the understanding of what the educational experiences of 'left-behind children' are in the context of rural China, and how their status of being 'left behind' impact on their educational experiences and aspirations. Hence, it could make recommendations regarding how schools, teachers, parents or carers can best support these young people to nurture higher educational aspirations.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

It has become a great concern and the centre of interest for many educators at home and abroad to address the educational needs of students 'left behind' in rural China in order to minimise the negative effect of parental absence on their education. By conducting a study which aims to explore in-depth their educational experiences and aspirations within the real educational situations in their local areas, many factors or forces that were unseen or overlooked could now be identified which play an important role in these young people's educational journey. You have been invited to take part in the study because your school is in one of the areas where a large proportion of the local residents choose to migrate to other places and have to leave their children in the rural community to complete schooling for the nine-year compulsory education stage (It is reported that among all the local schools, students 'left behind' account for over 60% of the total). Many initiatives have been undertaken by educators across the country as an endeavour to better support these students, and much ongoing attention and support regarding this topic have been gaining including your school, which has expressed an interest in being involved in the study and believes this study will be beneficial for the students. As the one who has the richest first-hand experiences of teaching and knowing these students, your perceptions and opinions are of great help and value for the study.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you would like yourself and your class to be part of the research or not. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you or your class, by contacting the researcher Yang Hong, Tel: 008613982382083; Email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

What will happen if I take part?

So that I, the researcher, can learn what the normal class environment is like, what students do in the class, how they behave and interact in the class, I would like to observe some lessons taught by you in your class. This will simply be to note the nature of activities used in normal lessons and not to make any judgements about those activities or any aspect of teaching, and the main focus will be on students. During the observation, written notes will be made. With your consent, some classroom observations may be video-recorded or photographed for later review.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information given by all participants in the study will remain confidential and will only be seen by the researcher (Yang Hong) and her supervisors (Dr Carol Fuller and Dr Catherine Foley) in the University of Reading. None of you, the parents, the students or the school will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the school.

Teachers in similar studies have found it interesting to take part. We anticipate that the findings of the study will assist for teachers and educators in endeavouring to better support children and young people 'left behind' in rural China.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you, your students or the school to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. I will transcribe the recordings from interviews and anonymise them before analysing the results. You and your students will be given pseudonyms and will be referred to by that pseudonym in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study may be presented at national or international conferences, and in written reports and articles. I can send you electronic copies of these publications if you wish.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, you can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, I will discard your data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Dr Carol Fuller, University of Reading; Tel: +44 (0) 118 378 2662; Email: c.l.fuller@reading.ac.uk

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information, please contact Yang Hong

Tel: 07549266320 (UK), 008613982382083(China), Email: yang.hong@pgr.reading.ac.uk

I do hope that you will agree to your participation in the study and to your involvement in it. If you do, please complete the attached consent form and return it (via email or sealed letter) to Yang Hong.

Thank you for your time.

<u>Teacher Consent Form</u>

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of teacher: _____

Teaching subject: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please tick as appropriate:

I consent to the observation in my class ☐

I consent to the class observation being video-recorded or photographed ☐

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 8: Transcription Example

HY: Please tell me something about your family.

Luli: In my family, there are grandpa, grandma, my younger sister and I. My parents went out to work, now my younger sister and I are living with my grandparents.

HY: What do your grandparents do?

Luli: They do farm work at home.

HY: How old is your younger sister?

Luli: She is 9 years younger than me, and now in kindergarten in the same school as me.

HY: How do you think about the financial condition of your family?

Luli: It's ok.

HY: And do you think it is a result of your parents working away?

Luli: Yes, it is.

HY: How do you usually spend your weekend at home?

Luli: I do homework in the morning and do homework in the afternoon.

HY: Are there any other activities?

Luli: Watching TV, cooking and washing dishes.

HY: Do you arrange your own time or someone in the family does that?

Luli: My grandparents arrange time for me.

HY: They also arrange your study time?

Luli: Yes.

HY: If they didn't make timetable for you, would you arrange time to study yourself?

Luli: Yes, I would.

HY: What about holidays, like the winter holiday and the summer holiday, what do you usually do?

Luli: I do homework for a few days, then I relax for a few days, then I do homework for a few days again, then relax for a few days again.

HY: Why would you do homework first, unlike many other students, who would play first?

Luli: Because only I did my homework first, I would feel at ease playing.

HY: Do you have lots of homework on holidays?

Luli: Not too much.

HY: For students like you (perform well academically), how long does it take you to finish all your homework?

Luli: About 10 days.

HY: Now let's talk about your parents: where are they now and what do they do?

Luli: They're both in Xinjiang, working in a construction site.

HY: When did you parents start working outside?

Luli: They went out in 2006 when I was in grade 1, and they came back to build our house in 2008 which was damaged by the earthquake, and until recently (2015.3), they went out again.

HY: Have your parents told you about their life working away?

Luli: Yes, they told me there were many people living together in their workplace, and the living condition was not good.

HY: How do you feel when you heard this?

Luli: The reason why my parents told me this is to encourage me to study well, then I won't have this kind of life in the future.

HY: Do you agree?

Luli: Yes.

HY: How often do you see your parents when they were working away?

Luli: Once a year, they came back during Chinese New Year.

HY: How do you contact them?

Luli: By phone.

HY: Do you call them or they call you?

Luli: I call them.

HY: What do you usually talk about on the phone?

Luli: I ask them 'how's your health?' 'how's life there?'; they ask me 'how's your study?'

HY: Do you tell them the truth about your study?

Luli: Yes.

HY: About your study, what specifically do they usually ask?

Luli: They ask about my exam results and how my school life is.

HY: What do you tell them, general information or in detail?

Luli: I give them detailed information.

HY: Apart from yourself, who else supervises your study at home?

Luli: My grandpa; he often sits next to me to monitor me when I do homework.

HY: Does he also help you with your homework?

Luli: No, he can't, he only finished primary school.

HY: How would you describe the role that your parents played in your study?

Luli: When I didn't feel motivated in studying, then I thought of my parents, then I said to myself that I must study hard.

HY: What are your parents' educational levels?

Luli: My dad's is primary school, my mom's is high school.

HY: How do your parents expect for your education?

Luli: For my dad, it's fine for him as long as I study hard; for my mom, she wants me to go to a good high school and then at least, go to the University of S.

HY: Do you think your parents involved in your study or nor when they were away?

Luli: Yeah, I think they have.

HY: Did they encourage you or support you in study?

Luli: Yes, if I got bad results in exams, my dad wouldn't say anything, my mom would encourage me.

HY: So you would honestly tell your parents you didn't do well in exams?

Luli: Yes.

HY: What do you think of this kind of encouragement from your parents?

Luli: I think it helped me a lot; I think it's good that my mom didn't blame me, coz this makes me wanna study better; if she blamed me, I wouldn't wanna study.

Appendix 9: Example of Data Analysis

Example 1. Analysis of transcripts of individual students – with initial codes and thoughts

Student 1: *'I won't go to university, I won't even go to a general high school, I will go to a vocational high school and learn a skill, and then I'll start working… not only <u>because my academic performance is not good but also university costs too much money.</u> I also don't want to go to university, the ultimate reason is I want to <u>escape from schools</u> because there is <u>no freedom</u> in schools; I don't like being restrained when I want to do something. I guess I'd <u>feel free</u> in the outside world. I think <u>I'd still be restrained in university</u>, just like in the junior and* senior *high school.'*

Analysis:

- Self-perceived low academic ability and a worry for money
- The ultimate reason**: no freedom in schools**! – university would be the same as the secondary school
  - *Lack of knowledge about what university is like; doesn't know the difference between university and the secondary school (cultural capital)*

- Feel 'restrained' – by whom? – family / school

S2: '*<u>I can't make it</u> to university, <u>my academic performance is not good enough</u>, and this is the ultimate reason… I'll go to a vocational high school<u>; my grades are too low</u> to get into a general high school. Even though I went to a general high school, I'd be among the low-achieving ones, and I probably had learnt nothing and it's impossible to get into university, so I only got a diploma; eventually I still need to find a job, in that case<u>, I'd better study in a vocational high school 'coz at least I had learnt a skill so it's easier to find a job</u>… After high school, I will start working and won't continue in education.'*

Analysis:

- Perceived low academic ability
- Has her own benefit-cost calculation between a general high school and a vocational high school – a rational choice

'I hope I will study well in high school and I can find a good job after graduation… but I'm not confident in myself '<u>coz I have already become a low-achieving student so I will always be</u>, things like going to university is only an unreachable dream.'

'In the deep inside of my heart, I have no wish to stay in education. Because I know it'll be very difficult to improve my academic performance to the same level as before. I deeply regret neglecting my study for <u>some other reasons</u> at that time, as a consequence, <u>I have to accept this reality… Now, I only want to learn a skill then I can start working. Studying is too difficult for me now, I won't succeed, so why bother to pursue? You know, like an 'escaping and giving up' sort of mind.'</u>

Analysis:

- Has a good hope for the future – study and job
- **Low self-confidence! Low self-esteem! –** a result of perceived poor academic performance – what are 'some other reasons'? What made her neglect her study at that time?

S3: *'I don't think my academic performance allows me to be admitted by a good academic high school, so I can't make it to a top university. <u>I believe going to an average university is not useful, must be a top one, so I'd rather not go to university at all.</u>'*

'I decided to go to a vocational high school. <u>I won't have a good future if I went to an average academic high school</u> 'coz I won't get good teaching and discipline there, then I will be just muddling along; plus, I am not interested in those advanced academic knowledge anyway, so going to a vocational high school and learn a skill for employment seems to be a better choice for me.'

Analysis:

- Perceived poor academic performance
- A belief of 'if not going to a top university, then no university at all'
- Being 'rational' about choosing to go to a vocational high school – learn a skill for employment seems more useful

S4: *'I don't want to continue in education after I finish junior high school, <u>education is not the only way out for the future</u>… people say if you go to university then you can find a good job, if not then you can only do manual labour, but <u>I don't believe this… the ultimate reason is I have no wish to attend university</u>, and also I can't go 'coz my academic performance is poor.'*

'I feel <u>studying is so annoying, especially now we have so much homework and lots of pressure</u>, which makes me more fed up with studying… I began to have a weary mood about studying from grade 8.'

Analysis:

- leave school after junior high – 'education is not the only way out' – personal attitude to and value of education
- the ultimate reason - be weary of studying – too much homework and pressure

S5: *'I know <u>I can't get into college</u>… <u>I don't have a plan where to go after graduation</u>… my dad wants me to repeat grade 9, but I don't want… <u>if I had a choice</u>, I'd choose to go <u>to a vocational high school,</u> like many other classmates, I want to learn a skill to find a job after because my study performance is poor… <u>I can't get into a general high school</u> given my academic performance, and no matter how hard I try, I still won't make it.'*

Analysis:

- no confidence about higher education
- no plan for future education, but has a wish to go to a vocational high school and has her own reason
- no confidence at all about going to a general high school – perceived low academic ability
- Father-daughter disagreement

'… my dad <u>doesn't allow</u> me to go to a vocational high school, <u>he only wants</u> me to go to a general high school then get into university because he thinks in this way I can find an easier job… he asked me to choose the same general high school as Shilin (a high-achieving student in her class) did, but for sure I won't make it… he decided to let me repeat grade 9 so that I can try next year, but I don't want to do that because I don't want to stay alone while other classmates all have left; plus, there won't be any difference with my study performance even though I repeated one year, it'll still be very poor.'

- Father-daughter disagreement: seems her father set unrealistic goals for her – not realistic and also against her own will

'My dad made plans for me, and he made <u>only one plan</u>, which is going to university, there's no otherwise… my dad thinks I will have a better life if I go to university, but I'm more practical 'coz I won't make it.'

'He is very determined to push me to university because he said he was too poor to pursue higher education when he was at my age… <u>I'm too scared to tell my dad my real thoughts because I'm very scared of him</u>. I think very <u>likely I will do what my dad wants me to do,</u> which is to repeat grade 9, because no matter what, <u>my dad won't change his decision on this</u>. He knows the real level of my academic performance, but he still insists on pushing me to a general high school, <u>and I'd get punished if I couldn't make it</u>; he also often blamed me for not studying hard enough. Now I <u>have no other choice but to listen to my dad, though I don't agree and not willing to do it, I can't change anything</u>… there's <u>no one in the family who could help me,</u> even though my grandparents didn't agree with my dad, my dad is the decision-maker in the family… although I had repeated grade 9 as my dad wanted, I still won't make it to a general high school next year; what will happen and what will my dad ask me to do then, I have no idea.'

Parent-child relationship – Family factor

- A very authoritarian parent who pressures the child with his only wish
- The child has no freedom to choose
- The child is too afraid of the parent – no real thoughts known by the father
- No help or support from the family – completely alone and very much disadvantaged
- Feel no choice but to accept the father's decision
- Feel extremely uncertain about the future – the future seems beyond her own control

Example 2. Synthesis and further analysis of some initial codes created in individual students' transcripts to look for patterns for the whole group

The reason why going to university:

1. For **'getting a good job'** in general: degree/paper certificate/academic qualifications
2. **Freedom and self-development** (S2)
3. **Personal occupational goals**: paediatrician, doctor, a graphic designer or a policeman

(Thoughts):
University=educational qualification=good jobs in the future (why this is interesting – where are they getting this from, without anyone to advise them?)

The significance of having higher education:

1. **Better job acquisition**: from tiring manual jobs to physically undemanding/not tiring, non-manual, fun jobs; education = a good job; different levels of jobs
   More education means higher status, easier work

2. **Being competitive in labour markets+ security** --- more education gives security; ensuring stable money-making means, not temporary ones; have more chances and means to make a living (don't have to be farmers only)
3. **Change the social status** - fulfilling one's occupational dreams, then change for a good life; One's educational level is a demonstration of one's social status (cultural capital)

4. **Competence** - Education=knowledge=being able to handle the job

5. **A better human being** - Education is important for good personal conducts

6. **Self-improvement and development**: knowledge – being creative

7. Exclusively highly valued for enabling a good future life

The impact of education on future life:

1. If education = money, why without education still makes money? – (**uncertain and lack of information**)
2. Education = a good job – **security** = a good future life
3. Education = knowledge = capability of doing a job
4. BUT academic performance matters mainly for job hunting, academic performance can't decide one's future life (**self-efforts matter**!)
5. Education = the dreaming job = a good life
6. Education = more opportunities to make a living – **security and status changing** = a good future
7. Education = a good job – **security** / knowledge – self-improvement – creative – advanced skills – **more security**
8. Education = **the only means** to the dreaming occupation – **security** = the only means to good life

Future occupations - what 'a good job is:
1. 'not physically tiring and fun' in general
2. 'not manual-related so not tiring' in general
3. Non-manual, easier job
4. Some specific occupations: singer, lawyer, graphic designer, policewoman, doctor, kindergarten teacher, paediatrician

Future destinations: stay near home or go outside:
1. Undecided
2. Stay near home
3. Go outside
4. Go to big cities

Future self
1. **The educational-self**
2. **Self-development/self-expectation -** Studying' or 'education' relates to the definition of 'success' and the kind of person they want to be in the future
3. **Self-confidence –** be aware of their own merits and advantages as a rural kid
   Rural-urban difference

4. **A clear belief and faith in meritocracy –** one's own effort and hard work lead to a good future

The process of plan-making for future education:

1. 'Own ideas' – being left alone to make decision
2. Lack of information – no knowledge of university and high education overall
3. Parent/carer being authoritative