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# Liushou-Children in a Chinese Village: Childhood Apart from Parents

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**Abstract:** As part of the fieldwork done in a Chinese village, Dongpai, which is located in Mashuang Township, Nankang City, Jiangxi Province, this paper describes the general situation of Liushou Children. The paper is based on data collected by in-depth interview and participant observation methods. “Liushou Children”(Liu Shou Er Tong) generally refers to children (less than 18 years of age) who need to be looked after by other relatives, friends or by themselves because both of their parents work as migrant workers or merchants, etc. outside their hometown. The main issues dealt in the paper are: How do they live through their childhood? What are their feelings and wishes under the conditions of parental absence? What are their family education and school achievements? Is there any failure of the system to guarantee children their basic rights and crisis in their moral development? The paper also presents the voices of the Liushou Children with regard to their yearns and wishes.

**Keywords:** Liushou Children; Childhood; Non-adult; China

## 1. Introduction

Along with the Reform and Opening-up of China from 1980s, hundreds of thousands of people who were part of the surplus rural labour force swarmed to urban areas, especially to eastern coastal cities, to hunt for jobs and to do business. On the other hand, many township and urban workers were retrenched during the process of deepening urban reform. These so-called lay-off workers were also forced to look for new job opportunities in relatively developed areas. Among these two kinds of floating population, the majority are young people with small children. But many of them could not afford to bring their children with them due to their low incomes and policy restrictions. They were forced to leave their children in their home communities and entrusted them to grandparents, relatives, neighbours, friends or just left them to live by themselves. These children were labelled as Liushou-Children (Liu Shou Er Tong).

Till now, there exist many divarications in defining the age range, involved region (including

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or excluding children in urban areas), status of parents and the reasons for parental absence of Liushou-Children, among the definitions put forward by diverse scholars. Based on the literature review of all these variations, the author defines “Liushou-Children” as children (less than 18 years of age) who need to be looked after by other relatives, friends, or neighbours, or who are living on their own because both of their parents (or the sole parent) work as migrant workers, merchants, etc. outside their home town.

According to the rough estimate made by Duan & Zhou (2005) through their investigation of the household survey of the Fifth Population Census of China, in 2000 there were about 22.9 million under-age-14 children in China who had been left behind because one or both of their parents was working as migrant workers, merchants, etc. outside their home town, and 86.5% of these children were living in the countryside. After excluding those who are living with one of their parents, and adding those from the omitted category of children aged 15-18, we can conclude that there were about 16.5 million Liushou-Children in the year 2000. With the same method and using related data obtained from the 1% population sampling survey of 2005, I estimate that by the end of 2005 there were about 18.5 million Liushou-Children, and that 16.0 million of them are living in rural China.

Liushou-Children, because of their huge numbers and special background, attracted much public attention from 2002 onwards, and even more so from 2004. At the beginning of the Spring semester of 2004, several influential national newspapers, such as *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and *China Youth Daily*, published a number of feature essays about the phenomenon of and problems faced by Liushou-Children. Once the problem of Liushou-Children began to be openly discussed, the government, academia and civil society did a lot to address this issue. Policies were formulated or revised, papers were published and some civil organizations were established. Many local governments responded with policy initiatives. For example, Ganzhou City of Jiangxi Province launched a *Liushou-Children Project* and put in practice special policies designed to address the problems faced by Liushou-Children as a result of parental absence. Investigations and questionnaire surveys were done in different parts of China such as Jiangxi (Li, 2002), Hunan (Zhu, 2002), Sichuan (Li, 2003), Fujian (Lin, 2003), Hebei (Lv, 2006a, 2006b) to explore the general situation of and difficulties faced by Liushou-Children, the implementation of *Liushou-Children Project* and the special policies, and the positive and negative effects of

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parental absence on Liushou-Children. Some scholars did national sampling surveys to get a better understanding of Liushou-Children and to put forward solutions and advice (Wu et al., 2004).

Though a number of papers were published in these years, the main approaches used have been data collection, questionnaire surveys and random interviews. We see few in-depth community case studies especially with participant observation. From the standpoint of daily life, however, we need to do in-depth anthropological studies of Liushou-Children in their communities if we want to put forward pertinent clues and advice to address the problem. This is why I decided to do a thorough case study in Dongpai Village which is located in Mashuang Township, Nankang County, Jiangxi Province.

## **2. Research Summary**

Since my intention was to do an anthropological study, I made use of a range of methods including in-depth interviews, case studies, data collection and participant observation, as well as sociological questionnaire surveys.

After collecting related literature and doing careful review of these documents, I constructed the outline of investigation, an interview schedule and draft questionnaire, and selected Dongpai Village as the target community according to the criterion of typology, convenience and easy access. Before doing on the spot investigation, I interviewed related officials of Ganzhou City, Nankang County and Mashuang Township to collect relevant documents and statistical data, and to get contact with headmasters of Mashuang Middle School and Mashuang Central Primary School. I held group discussions in each of these two schools with the headmaster, dean of educational administration, class supervisors and ordinary teachers. Some related documents were also collected, such as “Liushou-Children Registration Table of Mashuang Middle School”, “Implementation Plan of *Liushou-Children Project* of Mashuang Central Primary School”, “Grade Table of Mashuang Middle School” (three semesters), and “Grade Table of Mashuang Central Primary School” (three semesters). In addition, 128 questionnaires were filled in by three class supervisors of Mashuang Central Primary School, which invited them to appraise their students from ten different aspects. SPSS 11.0 was used to analyze the quantitative data mentioned above.

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When I first arrived at Dongpai Village, I did interviews with some village cadres to gather general information about the village, and asked the village head to draw a sketch map. After this I carried out household interviews. The interviews with Liushou-Children were usually done at weekends in their homes and after school hours in Mashuang Middle School and Mashuang Central Primary School. The first-stage fieldwork was done in March, 2006, the second stage in May and the third stage in October. In all, 38 Liushou-Children, 32 householders and 15 teachers were interviewed during this period.

This chapter is based on data collected in this fieldwork. The main questions I sought to find answers to were the following: How do Liushou-Children live through their childhood? What are their experiences of childhood, and what are their feelings and wishes under the conditions of parental absence? What are their family education and school achievements? Is there any failure of the system to guarantee children their basic rights, and prevent any crisis in their moral development? I particularly sought to discover what the children themselves had to say about their experience, their yearnings and wishes.

### **3. Liushou-Children in Dongpai Village**

Dongpai Village is located in the northwest of Ganzhou City. It is a village with many hills but little arable land. Though the Jiangxi-Guangdong Highway passes through the village (the highway passes through the west part of the village and divides the village into two parts of different sizes), transport links are poor. Villagers must change buses in the nearby Tangjiang Town if they want to get access to Nankang County and Ganzhou City.

The village consists of 1463 people who are divided into 384 households and 12 sub-units. There are 720 Mu of arable plowland, 50 Mu of orchards and 2000 Mu of forest. The main crop is rice and the main fruits grown are orange and grapefruit. Villagers usually use electric cookers and gas for cooking, but firewood is also used by many families. Once the local government planned to popularize the use of methane gas here but failed in the end because the material needed to produce it, such as dung from livestock, was insufficient. The majority of young villagers had moved to cities hunting for jobs and few people could engage in livestock-feeding. The average annual revenue per person is 3000 RMB or so. The main source of income is working and doing business outside the village, and this usually comprises as much as 70 percent

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of their total family income. A number of villagers became relatively rich by working or doing business outside their hometown. According to the information given me by Secretary Luo of the Village Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, there are about 20 families who had accumulated more than 200,000 RMB in recent years. However, the living standard of most families is relatively low. The gap between the poorest and the richest in Dongpai is much higher than it was before Chinese Reform and Opening-up of the economy. Illness and an insufficient labour force are the main causes of poverty.

There are 381 children under age 18 in Dongpai Village. Among them 211 children, or 55%, are Liushou-Children living without their parents. Among these Liushou-Children, there are 98 boys (46.5%) and 113 girls (53.5%) respectively. The enrollment rate of elementary education and junior secondary education is 100%. But the enrollment rate of senior secondary education is only about 50%. 30% of the age cohort chose to enter technical school, since after graduating they can usually expect to earn a higher wage than senior high school graduates. The remaining 20% had mostly left school and were working as migrant workers outside their home town. Most of them had chosen to work in places where they could be close to their parents who are migrant workers too.

### 3.1 What are the childhood experiences of these children?

According to interviews with villagers, an informal tradition has been formed in recent decades. Young girls will leave their home community to work as migrant workers for a few years before getting married and having children. They will probably return to the village for six months or so before giving birth to their first child, as well as in subsequent pregnancies, but will leave the village again once the child is 10 months old. But they will go back to the village more often, and stay longer, while they have children under 4 years of age. As the children get older they will go back less often. Once their children are old enough to go to school, some of them will come back to take care of their children in person. Furthermore, six months or a year before their children's graduation from junior high school or senior high school, many of them will come back to look after their children themselves. As far as the children's fathers are concerned, they are relatively long-term migrant workers who usually work outside the village both before and after marriage. They seldom go back even to see their new-born children. About 60 percent of them go

back once a year. 5 percent of them don't even go back home for three or four years at a time.

We can generalize the childhood situation of Liushou-Children as follows:

Table 1. common childhood situation of Liushou-Children in Dongpai Village

Birth -10 months	Living with mother or parents.
11 months-3 years	Living with grandparents. Parents, especially mother, come back home to see them often.
4 years-6 or 7 years	Living with grandparents. Parents come back home less often. They begin to communicate with parents by phone.
Usual period of primary and secondary education	Living with grandparents, relatives, neighbours or by themselves. Parents come back to see them once or twice a year. They usually communicate with parents and get family tutoring and moral education by telephone. They begin work as unpaid family labour after school both in the household and the fields.
1-2 semesters before graduation from junior or senior high school	In about 25% of cases, a Liushou-Child's mother or father (more usually the mother) will come back to look after them in order to help them do better in their graduation exams.

Classified according to which relatives are acting as guardians, Liushou-Children can be divided into five categories: those who are looked after by paternal grandparents, those looked after by maternal grandparents, those looked after by uncles and aunts, those looked after by older brothers or sisters, and those who live by themselves. Out of the 211 Liushou-Children in Dongpai, about 70% of them are looked after by paternal grandparents, 18% by maternal grandparents, 10% by uncles and aunts, while 2% lived with their sisters and brothers.

As a result of parental absence and the poor literacy level of their guardians, about 90% of them turn to teachers or friends for help when they encounter problems doing their homework. Only a small number of them will turn to their parents to seek for help over the telephone. Furthermore, teachers and friends are also their first choice in resolving living problems; only one third of them will turn to their family or to their guardians.

One problem related to having a guardian is that the guardian relative often changes. For instance, a child may start out being looked after by paternal grandparents, and then be shifted to the maternal grandparents, before ending up with other relatives. These changes will often result

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in their having to transfer from one school to another. Some Liushou-Children studied outside their home community with their parents for a short period but had to come back again because their parents couldn't afford the expense or they had difficulties in catching up with classmates. To take Mashuang Central Primary School as an example, every semester they had to deal with many students who asked to transfer in or out. In the second semester of school year 2005-2006, there were more than 40 students of this kind. In the first semester of the academic year, there would be even more transfers, commonly as many as 60 cases, which amounts to 10% of the total number of students in the school.

Another related problem is neglect. Sometimes, too, there is an inversion of the caretaker relationship, when an elderly guardian falls ill and the child ends up looking after them, instead of the other way around. In most cases, guardians do have the ability to provide for the needs of Liushou-Children, but the majority of them are grandparents. They are elders and weak to some degree and are liable to have health problems of one sort or another. If they are unable to take care of themselves after falling ill, they need to be looked after by the Liushou-Children instead of the other way around. In that case, these Liushou-Children not only are not receiving the necessary attention or care from their grandparents, but they themselves are also forced to take much time away from school to do housework and farm work, to buy medicine and to look after their guardians. This will have obvious consequences for the Liushou-Children in terms of their physical development and growth, their progress in school, and their chances of enjoying any entertainment or social interaction.

Case 1. Girl, 15 years old. Grade 3 of junior high school.

Parents began to work as migrant workers when she was one year old. She currently lives with her grandmother and little brother.

Because her grandmother has suffered from rheumatism for several years and could hardly take care of her and her brother, she on the contrary took the responsibility of taking care of her grandmother and brother. She goes home every Wednesday and Friday to do housework and look after her grandmother. She is also very busy on the weekends for she has to buy food and to wash clothes, etc. and usually has no time for study. Her academic performance is not so good now and she has little enthusiasm for study.

"I don't want to go to school anymore. I want to go home and take care of my grandmother," she said to me. She has lived with her grandmother from a very young age and it has been a very loving relationship. "Grandmother loves me so much and I also have deep affection for her. I want to take good care of her instead of continuing my school education."

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Case 2. Girl, 12 years old. Grade 5.

Parents began to work outside hometown when she was 7 years old. She currently lives with her younger brother (3 years old) and younger sister (4 years old).

Because her grandmother has rheumatism in her feet and her grandfather is always busy with his butchery business, she usually has to do the laundry and to take care of her grandmother when she is back home. But she doesn't regard it as a heavy burden.

Thanks to the development of telecommunications technology, Liushou-Children can at least keep in touch with their parents by telephone. Generally speaking, the parents will call them and their guardians once or twice a week to hear their news and give them instructions. For many Liushou-Children, phone-calls have been an important, or even the only, channel of communication between themselves and their parents. The telephone has played a very special role in maintaining and reinforcing the parent-child relationship, in relieving Liushou-Children's mental stress and the agony of yearning for their parents, and in enabling the parents to tell the children what to do from a distance.

### 3.2 What do Liushou-Children have to say about their feelings and wishes under these conditions of parental absence?

According to what I learned from talking with them, most Liushou-Children could understand the absence of their parents and supported their decisions to work outside. As they see it, their parents are forced to leave them behind. Most of them told me that their parents had left the village to earn money in order to pay for their school fees, to improve their incomes, and to do good for them and their families. So although in their hearts they are eager to live with their parents, they support their parents' decision to work outside after rational consideration. What they would like is for the parents to come home a little more often, or if one of their parents, especially their mother, could live with them.

Case 2. Girl, 12 years old. Grade 5.

"I will study hard and wish to grow up quickly, enter a good university, find a good job and earn money for the family so that my parents needn't work outside our hometown anymore. In that case, the whole family won't have to live apart and on the contrary we can enjoy a very happy life together." "But now, the whole family can only be supported by my parents' hard work in the factories. They are very painstaking. I feel very distressed about this situation. I could never pay back sufficiently the love I have received from my parents. My only wish is to be of help as early as



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possible.”

Case 3. Boy, 13 years old. Grade 2 of junior high school.

Parents began to work as migrant workers in Guangdong Province when he was one year old. He currently lives with his grandmother and elder sister.

“I have no query about my parents’ decision to work outside. They would find it difficult to pay for my school education if they couldn’t earn money by working in factories. They are forced to do so in the consideration of my long-term happiness”.

Case 4. Girl, 14 years old. Grade 5.

Parents began to work as migrant workers in Guangdong when she was one year old. Currently lives with grandparents.

“I miss my parents so much. But I support my parents’ decision to work outside anyway. Our family will be very poor if they don’t earn salaries from factories outside our hometown.” She knows the truth of this by observation. For those families without migrant workers will often be poorer than those with somebody who works outside. “My parents are working outside to make a brighter future for the family”.

In addition, the influence of parental absence on Liushou-Children is not so strong because the majority of them have been living with their grandparents from a very young age and enjoyed a very intimate, affectionate relationship with them. “It has no significant influence that my father and mother are absent. I get good care from my grandparents. They treat me very well,” a boy of 12 said to me.

But they are children after all, and rational calculation was not enough to repress their emotional longings and aspirations. So some of them, especially those who are very young and without siblings, did have some problems in adapting to parental absence. About ten per cent of those Liushou-Children suffered from feelings of abandonment, and about five per cent even revealed feelings of pain and suffering. Some Liushou-Children told me that they didn’t want their parents to leave them to work elsewhere. Some of them even expressed hatred for the parents. One girl cried when her mother was due to leave home and said, “Don’t leave me, Mom, what’s the use of earning so much money if you don’t care about me at all?”

Case 1. Girl, 15 years old. Grade 3 of junior high school.

“I feel that I have received little mother love for I have lived apart from my parents from a very young age. In the depths of my heart, I thirst desperately to stay with my parents”.

Case 5. Girl, 15 years old. Grade 2 of junior high school.

Parents worked outside in Foshan, Guangdong Province when she was 7 years old. She currently

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lives with her grandparents and younger brother (also a student in the same junior high school).

“Every time I saw somebody else staying with his or her parents, I envied them very much. I always ‘envy to death’ especially when somebody’s parents dropped by school with food or other stuff.” “I long for my parents to come and see me and bring something to school. That will make me very happy.” She was so overcome with emotion when saying these words that she almost burst into tears.

Though most Liushou-Children are eager to meet with their parents more often or to live with them, there is little chance for them to realize their desires. According to interviews, about one fifth of them were lucky to see their parents once a year, and a few couldn’t even see their parents for a number of years at a time. For this reason, some Liushou-Children’s memory of their parents had become blurred, and they had become alienated from them. Some Liushou-Children even refused to talk to their parents over the phone.

There are differences between Liushou-Children and other children in terms of their anxieties about social interaction and their feelings of loneliness resulting from long-term parental absence. But this kind of difference also showed a discrepancy between boys and girls who are Liushou-Children. Generally speaking, the girls have stronger anxieties about social interaction while the boys express more feelings of loneliness. In addition, there are some other factors which have an important impact on the psychological perceptions of Liushou-Children, such as the length of parental absence, the type of guardian, and whether they have siblings living together with them. According to my research, Liushou-Children have difficulty in adapting to parental absence and present stronger feelings of abandonment, loneliness and anxiety in the early stages of parent-child severance. Nevertheless, being looked after by grandparents and living with siblings are both factors that have positive influences on Liushou-Children’s ability to adapt to their situation.

### 3.3 Education and upbringing

What sort of education are the children getting within the family, and how well are they achieving at school? As far as education within the family is concerned, Liushou-Children have less face-to-face oral instruction and spend less time being shown how to do things, or learning by joining in with adult activities, compared with other children. The opportunities for learning directly from their parents are limited to the times they are together during reunions. Most of the

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time they are being told things by their parents over the telephone. In compensation, their guardians will usually try their best to act as substitute parents. However, since their caretakers are mostly elders, the age gap between them and their charges is wide (usually the gap is 40-75 years). Furthermore, they mostly have very little education and are either illiterate or semi-literate, which means that they could hardly give their charges much help with their schoolwork. This factor has a negative influence on the school education of Liushou-Children. Although children who are being looked after by uncles, aunts or other people of their parents' age have the possibility of getting more help from these younger and better-educated guardians, the effect is discounted by the fact that there is generally a less intimate bond between them. However, according to my interviews, few Liushou-Children ascribe their examination failures (if any) to parental absence, as described in the following cases:

Case 1. Girl, 15 years old. Grade 3 of junior high school.

She achieved a good score in primary school but her grades fell after she entered junior high school. Though lack of time to study makes a difference, she didn't ascribe this failure to parental absence but to her study method. In addition, she said that the school administration was in a state of disorder and teachers were not strict with students; "they often indulge our students."

Case 3. Boy, 13 years old. Grade 2 of junior high school.

"I think that parental absence has no significant influence on my studies. Excellent achievements should be attributed to self-discipline and diligence. It wouldn't help you to stay with your parents if you didn't also study hard by yourself."

Still, there is the possibility that parental absence might on the contrary enhance Liushou-Children's school achievements, since they could learn to be independent and self-reliant, to reason by themselves, and deal with problems by themselves from an early age. They would probably study more diligently in order to repay their parents for the hardships they have experienced working away from home, and perhaps get higher grades as a result. This assumption is in fact supported by statistics of the scores of students in Grade Five of Mashuang Central Primary School. I explored their scores over the past three semesters and the results I obtained are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Scores of Grade Five Students in Mashuang Central Primary School (past three

semesters)

	Average Total Score			Average Score for Language			Average Score for Math		
	Total	Non-Liushou Children	Liushou-Children	Total	Non-Liushou Children	Liushou-Children	Total	Non-Liushou Children	Liushou-Children
Semester 1, Grade 4	120.9	118.6	126.1	59.4	58.8	60.8	61.4	59.7	65.3
Semester 2, Grade 4	138.6	136.9	143.6	67.6	67.3	68.5	71.0	69.6	75.1
Semester 1, Grade 5	153.2	148.3	159.3	73.3	72.2	74.7	80.0	76.1	84.6

According to statistics, the average scores of Liushou-Children (including Total Score, Language Score and Math Score) are all higher than other children in the most recent three successive semesters. Other than the explanation put forward above, there are three other factors that may be contributing to this outcome. Firstly, Liushou-Children's families are usually better off than those of other children, since their parents can earn more money by working away from home. This means that these children are getting better economic support in their studies. Secondly, the parents of Liushou-Children usually gain a broader perspective as a result of living and working outside, and they encourage their children to study hard in order to catch up with urban children. Thirdly, if the child is doing well in school it is more likely that both parents will venture to become migrant workers. On the contrary, if a student is showing poor performance in school, one of the parents will be more liable to stay home in order to help him or her.

However, a few other studies have drawn different conclusions. For example, Yao Y. (2005) and Huang & Liu (2005) pointed out that the average achievements of Liushou-Children are lower than Non-Liushou Children. Lin (2003), Wang & Wu (2003), Yao L. J. (2005), and Wang, et al. (2005) also concluded that Liushou-Children usually have relatively poor scores in examinations. In addition, Zhu et al. (2002) maintained that there was no relationship between Liushou experience and school achievements.

My findings also contradicted the opinions held by the principal, vice-principal and ordinary teachers of Mashuang Central Primary School. They all told me in my interviews that the average

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achievements of Liushou-Children were lower than those of other students. When I told them about the result of my statistical review, they were astonished and at first could not give me any explanation. Then a vice-principal said that the problem of Liushou-Children was not a matter of examination scores but of their characteristics. But even this argument is also their subjective impression only. In my observation, they had formed a First Impression that Liushou-Children were usually trouble-makers who won't study hard, behave badly and are difficult to supervise, though they never did any quantitative, statistical or comparative studies to prove the point. Needless to say, this misguided impression is partly affected and intensified by the one-sided propaganda coming from the public media such as TV, journals and newspapers. That is not all. The sensationalised, oversimplified impressions formed by officials and managers at the grassroots will in turn feed back into the public media when journalists undertake investigations at the grassroots. That may be the key factor contributing to the misjudgment of Liushou-Children.

In addition, according to my interviews and statistics, Liushou-Children's school achievements are correlated with the time span of parental absence. In general, those Liushou-Children who had experienced more than one year's parental absence had better school achievements than non-Liushou Children, but those who have experienced less than one year's parental absence had poorer average school achievements than non-Liushou Children. The reason lies in the adaptation of Liushou-Children to parental absence. Liushou-Children usually met with many difficulties in adaptation during the initial stages of parental absence but became effectively accustomed to it after about a year.

### 3.4 Basic rights and moral development

Still another question I was seeking to answer through my research was whether there was any failure of the system to guarantee children their basic rights, or to protect them from any crisis in their moral development.

According to my investigations and interviews, the basic rights of Liushou-Children could be effectively guaranteed, even in the absence of direct attention and teaching from the parents, or face to face emotional communication between parent and child. For one thing, their guardians can give them responsible care. Secondly, teachers could give Liushou-Children in their classes

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special attention. Thirdly, the Ganzhou government's Liushou-Children Project has also had some positive influence on the protection of Liushou-Children's basic rights.

As for moral development, parental absence does have a negative impact. A few Liushou-Children are liable to be lazy, tell lies, break school discipline and even steal and get into fights. When this happens it can be accounted for by the style of upbringing they are experiencing from their guardians. Some of them failed to set any limits for the children in their care at the very beginning. Some of them are inclined to overindulge their charges and let them do whatever they want. Thus Liushou-Children are greatly influenced by the people around them. If the influence is negative, then it will have a negative impact on their moral development. In my interviews with villagers and teachers, a story I heard often was about a middle school student who persuaded his classmates to help him disassemble the iron balustrades along the Jiangxi-Guangdong Highway (which happens to pass close by Mashuang Middle School) and sell them. After he was found out as the organizer and was criticized by his teacher, he threatened to commit suicide by throwing himself into the river. In addition, some Liushou-Children spent money heedlessly and wastefully or even cheated their parents or guardians out of money to buy snacks or to play electronic games.

In addition to the environmental influence of the sort of upbringing they are getting from family and community, there are some other factors which have an important impact on the protection of Liushou-Children's basic rights and their moral development. These include such things as the deficiency of infrastructure, lack of investment, and shortage of teachers in schools. Let's take Mashuang Central Primary School as an example. Though it is the best primary school of Mashuang Township, it also faces many problems. There are not enough dormitories for the students, not enough teachers, too many students in one class, no dining hall, and no boiler to provide heating in the winter. Boarders at the school must boil water and cook for themselves. Many boarders are obliged either to take food from home or buy dishes from outside the school. They usually lived an undernourished life without suitable basic services. Obviously some of these problems affect all the children at the school, and not only Liushou-Children, but since the latter are more likely to be boarders, they suffer the most.

Another problem that arises in guaranteeing the basic rights of Liushou-Children is that adults are still very neglectful of children's right to information about matters concerning them,

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and their right of participation. According to Article 12 of *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. As far as Liushou-Children in Dongpai Village are concerned, they should be provided the opportunity to have their views heard in the process of formulating, implementing, supervising and assessing the *Liushou-Children Project*. But in fact, not only did they not get any chance to participate in formulating and implementing this project, they also were not given enough - or indeed, any - information about the project. Almost all the Liushou-Children I interviewed during my fieldwork told me that they had no idea what the *Liushou-Children Project* was; still less had any of them participated in it. The reason lies in the adult prejudice that the child is not capable of forming his or her own views. The officials, teachers and many other adults I spoke with tend to view the child as an inchoate adult rather than as a full-fledged person, who has rights that he or she can assert independently.

### 3.5 Voices of the Liushou-Children with regard to their yearnings and wishes

When asked the question what help they wish to get from government, school or society, most Liushou-Children said at first that they could provide no help at all. They regard parental absence as an irresolvable problem, for parents are irreplaceable. In addition, the majority of Liushou-Children didn't wish to be singled out for special treatment or made to seem different from other children.

After deeper conversations with them, some Liushou-Children began to talk about their innermost hopes. Some are related to basic living conditions such as: "I wish they could renovate and fix up our dorm and build a boiler", "I wish we could have a better dining-room as well as a better dormitory. Then we could enjoy a more homelike time at school and we wouldn't pine for our parents so much." Some of their statements are related to communication between students and teachers, such as: "I wish our teachers could commune with us more often", "we hope our teachers could take the initiative to chat with us", and "I wish our teachers could leave more time

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for us students and could discuss relevant issues with us”. Others are related to school administration, participation and tutorship, such as: “I’d like to have rigorous teachers and disciplined classmates”, “we are also curious about what’s going on such as the *Liushou-Children Project*”, and “I expect our teachers could give me more help in my study”. Here are some selected abbreviated cases:

Case 1. Girl, 15 years old. Grade 3 of junior high school.

“The school administration is in a state of disorder and teachers are not strict with us students, they often indulge our students.” “I’d like to have rigorous teachers and disciplined classmates.”

Case 2. Girl, 12 years old. Grade 5.

When she talked about their teachers, she said helplessly, “we are all scared to talk with our teachers though each of us want to chat with them. We dare not call on teachers, and they seldom initiate confidential discussions with us, either.” “We hope they could chat with us more often in the future.”

Case 3. Boy, 13 years old. Grade 2 of junior high school.

He goes home every Wednesday and Friday to bring some fried dish back to school when the weather is not so hot. But when the weather becomes hotter, he has to buy all his dishes from the school dining-room. At those times he can seldom eat any meat because the dining-room sells only vegetables with a uniform price of 0.5 RMB/course. In addition, their dormitory is not so good, either. The roof leaks once in a while and lets the rain in. “I wish we could have a better dinning-room as well as a better dormitory. Then we could enjoy a more homelike time at school and we wouldn’t pine for our parents so much,” he said at the end of my interview.

Case 6. Boy, 12 years old. Grade 1 of junior high school.

Parents began to work as migrant workers in Guangdong when he was ten months old. He currently lives with his grandmother and elder sister.

He will tell his true thoughts to his parents on the telephone. But in school, he seldom has the chance to exchange ideas face to face with teachers. “They talk with me about things to do with my studies once in a while, but it’s far from enough”, he said with a kind of disappointment and dissatisfaction. In addition, he said that he had no idea about the *Liushou-Children Project*. “They never told us or discussed it with us. All I can remember is that they once asked us to fill out some forms related to our parents and deputy guardians.”

“I wish our teachers could leave more time for us students and could discuss relevant issues with us. We are also curious about what’s going on such as the *Liushou-Children Project* you just told me of.”

In addition, though almost every informant expressed understanding of their parents’ decision to work outside their hometown, the majority, especially little girls, yearned to live with their parents. A four-year-old girl looked into my eyes and asked solemnly, “Sir, could you please



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call my mum and ask her to come back home soon?” A middle school student told me that she was longing for one of her parents, especially her father, to be at home to keep her company. Another student, who is about to enter Grade 3 of junior high school, said that if her mother could come back home and keep her company for one year, she would be more confident to realize her dream of entering the best high school of Nankang County.

Case 5. Girl, 15 years old. Grade 2 of junior high school.

Because she will sit the entrance examination to senior high school next year and hopes to perform well in order to be accepted by Nankang High School, the best one in Nankang County, she hoped that her mother could come back home and kkeep her company for one year. “It would make me more confident to realize my dream to enter the best high school.” “Though my academic performance is normal, I’m confident that I will get an excellent score that will enable me to enter Nankang High School if one of my parents could come back home to live with me during Grade 3 of junior high school”.

Case 7. Girl, 11 years old. Grade 4.

Parents working outside in Guangzhou, currently lives with her grandparents.

“I’m longing for one of my parents, especially my father, to be at home to keep me company. My father loves me so much. I envy those children who live with parents.”

To sum up, though they express themselves in a simple, straightforward way and are mainly concerned with matters closely related to their own living and studying conditions, we can get a very clear picture of what needs to be done to help them with their problems by paying attention to these simple but genuine wishes expressed from their innermost hearts. That is to say that we should address the problem of Liushou-Children by facilitating more parent-child and teacher-student communication, improving basic living conditions and increasing the social attention they receive.

## **4. Address Liushou-Children in Schools**

According to investigation and in-depth interviews, different agencies are concerned with the phenomenon of Liushou-Children to different degrees. That is: concern is high in public media, low in school administrators; high in upper levels of government, low at local government level; high among policymakers, low among policy-executors; high for the state, low for society. The reason for the lack of ardour among school administrators is the restraints they face in terms of fiscal and human resources. The reason for policy-executors’ apathy is the financial restraints produced by game-playing among different stakeholders, in addition to the distrustful attitude of

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Liushou-Children's parents and deputy guardians.

As mentioned above, though local government carried out the *Liushou-Children Project* in Dongpai Village, they met with many difficulties in implementation. In addition to subjective factors, the limitations of objective conditions are a critical obstacle. As school administrators and teachers pointed out, the biggest problem lies in the lack of fiscal and human resources. It is also related to the inadequate importance attached to the children's problems by parents, deputy guardians and civil society.

a. The personnel restraint enacted by government results in a lack of human resources<sup>①</sup>. This consequently forces every teacher to assume heavy duties and forces schools to assign too many students to a class. Let's take Mashuang Central Primary School as an example. There are about 50-60 students in a class and every teacher has to teach 18 hours a week on average, which means teachers could get very little leisure time to give students extracurricular instruction or personal help. They usually have only the noon time lunch break to talk with students and their guardians. Because of the large size of the classes, they find it exceedingly difficult to give every student individual coaching and supervision. A teacher said to me helplessly: "The *Liushou-Children Project* said that we should talk to Liushou-Children often. But how can we do it if there are so many students and so few teachers? We have so much work to do and have our families to care for. We definitely don't have so much time to visit students' families. Those people who said we should communicate with Liushou-Children's parents and deputy guardians several times per month are fantasists sitting on their sofas having imaginary ideas. Furthermore, if we were to dial long-distance calls to every Liushou-Children's parents, nobody could afford it because the cost will be very high. The only possibility is to make local calls. I think it ought to be the responsibility of Liushou-Children's parents to take the initiative in keeping in touch with the teachers. Whatever the location, no one could solve this kind of problem if there are so many Liushou-Children with their parents scattered in diverse corners of China".

b. Fiscal restraint is another critical factor. As far as Liushou-Children in school are concerned, social tutors could be hired to help them. Though voluntary tutors could be found in

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<sup>①</sup> According to the education policy of Jiangxi Province, the ratio of teachers to students is supposed to be 1:27.

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current situations, this is not the ideal solution. If we want to enhance their effectiveness, we have to pay these tutors money. However, there is usually not enough money to maintain even the running expenses of the school, let alone paying for social tutors. Again, to take Mashuang Central Primary School as the example, there are about 50 boarders every semester. Every boarder pays RMB 40 per semester for water, electricity, fuel and kitchen costs. That is RMB 4000 every year. But the school must pay RMB 500/month for electricity and RMB 1300/month for fuel. That is RMB 16200 every year (counting only 9 months per year). The deficit is RMB 12200. However, the annual fiscal allowance allocated by the government is only RMB 40 per student. That is  $40 \times 611 = 24440$  (there were 611 students in all in March 2006). After paying for the deficit, only RMB 12240 is left over for other expenses.

c. Some parents give inadequate attention to the problem of Liushou-Children. Some teachers said that many parents could absolutely afford for one of them to stay home with their children. But they didn't do it. However, they also acknowledged that requesting the parents to arrange for one of them to stay home to look after their children was not practical and not in accordance with national policies.

In consideration of these three obstacles, the faculty of local schools said that the only effective way to address the problems of Liushou-Children during the years of their education was to let all of them live in school, where centralized services and supervision could be carried out. To do this, the government needs to invest in the construction of school infrastructure such as student dorms, faculty dorms, mess halls, etc. and loosen the restraints on personnel. In short, that is, "Let the government increase investment, and the school practise centralized management." In addition, the government should provide special training for teachers to improve the abilities they need to be competent for professional wardship.

## **5. Conclusions**

Given the background of labour migration from countryside to urban areas triggered by China's Reform and Opening-up, the quantity of rural Liushou-Children has increased at a very rapid speed and has absorbed much attention from both academia and government. Though as a way of living, the phenomenon of Liushou-Children is something that has existed in China for a long period, today it has given rise to a social group that is peculiar to contemporary China if we

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take into consideration the sheer numbers of Liushou-Children today, and the causal factors involved.

First of all, let us consider the issue from the numerical point of view. According to the most conservative estimate, there are more than 14.5 million Liushou-Children in China and 12.5 million of them are living in the countryside. Compared with the historical instances of Liushou-Children, who were scattered here and there in small quantities, they are now so numerous that they should be given special attention as an important and vulnerable social group.

Secondly, let us consider it from the angle of causal factors. In history, Liushou-Children were mainly the children of parents who were away doing business, being officials outside their hometowns, or studying abroad. But the predominant cause of contemporary Liushou-Children is the unilateral migration of young peasants. Seen in terms of the broader social background, it is the inevitable outcome of China's social transformation from centralized economy to market economy and the subsequent collapse of a dual social structure and the segmentation of rural and urban labour markets. In consideration of the particular situation of Liushou-Children in contemporary China, we should do a thorough exploration into their general circumstances and the special experiences they encounter, especially those living in rural China.

In the case of Dongpai Village, Liushou-Children constitute a considerable proportion of the children under the age of 18. They were usually separated from their parents at a very young age and were brought up mainly by their grandparents. They have been starved of parental care and instruction, and have enjoyed little parent-child communication for most of their childhood. In general, most of them have avoided moral crises thanks to the supervision and instructions of their guardians and school teachers. Parental absence has usually had no significant influence on their school learning. They have even managed to achieve better results than non-Liushou Children. Many of them have become accustomed to parental absence.

But in their innermost hearts, they are still longing for intimate parent-child affection and interaction. They are yearning to live together with their parents, thirsting for instruction, support and consolation when they meet with problems and frustrations. However these requests, which for non-Liushou Children are ordinary and simple, are usually extravagant hopes for Liushou-Children. As time goes on, a few Liushou-Children become alienated from and even bear a grudge against their parents, and become indifferent to their guardians' attempts to communicate

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with them. Some Liushou-Children feel they have been abandoned and this results in immoral or illegal behaviour.

If the government, the education agency and civil society want to address the issue of Liushou-Children effectively, then they should start by addressing the key problem of “parent-child separation” and try to find useful substitutes to counteract the impact of parental absence on Liushou-Children’s psychology and upbringing. Some helpful methods that have proved to be practical include developing community cultural and recreational establishments, constructing compeer communication platforms, and enriching school collective activities.

As a case study of Liushou-Children in a village located in a province that boasts a large number of migrant rural labourers, the main purpose of this chapter have been to describe and analyze the living status of Liushou-Children as a vulnerable social group, and lend an attentive ear to their yearnings and hopes. The author fully recognizes that the conclusions derived from this case study may not necessarily hold true when applied to other areas of China. But it can at least give us clues that are helpful in understanding the situation of Liushou-Children in many other Chinese villages located in Jiangxi, Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, Guizhou, Henan, Anhui and other provinces with high rates of labour migration.

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