

Invitation

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DOCTOR OF ECONOMICS

by Jinkai Li

The wellbeing of left-behind children and migrant children under rural-urban migration in China

Supervisors:

Prof. dr. Bart Cockx

Thursday, 17 October 2024 at 17h00

In room 'Faculteitsraadzaal', Campus Tweekerken, Tweekerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent

Please confirm your attendance no later than 7 October by email to jinkai.li@ugent.be

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the well-being of left-behind children (LBC) and migrant children in the context of rural-urban migration in China. As China experiences unprecedented levels of rural-urban migration, the growing population of LBC and migrant children might face disadvantages due to the lack of parental companionship and family support. The dissertation focuses on the physical and mental health, and educational achievement of these children and is organized into five chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the context of migration in China and the circumstances surrounding LBC and migrant children. It outlines the motivation for the research and provides a brief summary of the structure and objectives of the three studies included in the dissertation.

Chapter 2 presents a scoping review of the relationship between parental migration and the well-being of LBC in China. The Hukou registration system in rural China restricts internal migration, resulting in approximately 9 million LBC in 2020 left without parental care and supervision due to their parents' migration for work. This study reviews 33 studies to provide a comprehensive summary of the literature, finding that parental migration generally has the mixed but predominantly adverse effects on LBC's physical, mental, and educational outcomes. The migration of both parents, or specifically the mother, exacerbates these disadvantages. While the remittances from migrant parents positively impact on LBC's development, the absence of direct parental involvement is the main channel through which negative effects occur. Increased family and social support can help mitigate these disadvantages and the pattern and timing of migration also significantly influence LBC's well-being. The chapter concludes with implications for future research and strategies to improve the well-being of LBC.

Chapter 3 evaluates the long-term impact of parental migration on the health of young LBC. Using event study analysis with data from five waves of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) between 2010 and 2018, this chapter investigates the long-term effects of parental migration on LBC's health. The findings reveal a gradual increase in medical expenditures, but no significant impact on the incidence of sickness. Additionally, the analysis indicates a gradual decline in the incidence of overweight since the parents' first migration and suggests potential improvements in non-cognitive ability. These long-term positive effects on health and health-related expenditures are explained by the transitory nature of migration, the caregiving provided by grandparents, and a reorientation of family expenditures, partly influenced by government policies.

Chapter 4 examines the intergenerational transmission of prejudice against migrants among local parents and its impact on both local and migrant students. Utilizing data from the CEPS (China Education Panel Survey), this study focuses on middle schools in urban China where students are randomly assigned to classes. The proportion of local students whose parents harbor prejudiced views against migrant students (the prejudice index) is used as the treatment variable to assess its effects on students' academic achievement and mental health. The findings indicate that a one standard deviation (11 percentage points) increase in the prejudice index significantly reduces average academic scores by 0.069 standard deviations. This effect may be driven by increased misbehaviours and decreased learning input among local and migrant students. Although no significant direct impact of the prejudice index on mental health is found, there is evidence of reduced communication between migrant and local students, increased discriminatory behaviours among locals, and a deteriorated classroom environment. These factors suggest the formation of social exclusion, which may adversely affect students' mental health and educational outcomes.

In Chapter 5, the conclusion summarizes the main research findings and outlines their logical connections. It also offers reflections and suggestions for future research on LBC and migrant children. Finally, the chapter presents several policy implications aimed at enhancing the human capital of LBC and migrant children.

Curriculum vitae

Jinkai Li (°1994, born in Liaoning, China) holds a Bachelor degree in Management (2017, China Agricultural University, China) and a Master degree in Management (2020, Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, China). He joined the Department of Economics at Ghent University (Faculty of Economics and Business Administration) in 2020 as a PhD student. His research has been presented at several international conferences, e.g., International Conference MIGRATIONS (2024, Mons), Leuven Economics of Education Research Conference (2024, Leuven), Chinese Economist Society China Conference (2024, Hangzhou), and European Association of Labour Economists Conference (2024, Bergen). Chapters 2 and 3 have been revised and are currently under resubmission to the *International Journal of Social Welfare* and *World Development*. In addition to the work in his dissertation, Jinkai has co-authored several articles published in *Nature Mental Health*, *Energy Economics*, *Resources Policy*, and *Habitat International*.