# Media Discourse on Cell Phone Technology

# and "Left-Behind Children" in China

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*Abstract:*

Through critical analysis of selected news stories from sina.com from 2010 to 2015 about cell phones and "left-behind children" in China, this article examines media discourses on the relationship between migrant families and communication technology. The author finds that the roles of cell phones in their lives are portrayed in the following narratives: 1) cell phones are highly valuable for connecting family members living apart; 2) cell phones are used as a problem-solver in charity giving and rural development projects; 3) cell phones can bring unexpected risks to children lacking media literacy; and 4) cell phones could harbour or unleash evil—associated with increasing cases of juvenile delinquency or crime stories. The author discusses how the different institutional goals of social agencies, corporations, educators, and law enforcement contribute to the polarity of the discourses, reflecting the societal anxieties over unsupervised use of mobile devices by adolescents, as well as the cultural and political implications of empowering the "have-nots" of the digital divide by improving access to communication technology.

*Keywords:* Digital Divide; Information Technology; Media Discourse; Migrant Population; Mobile Communication; Parent-Children Communication; Rural Development; Telecommunication Infrastructure

*Résumé:*

Grâce à l'analyse critique de certains reportages de sina.com entre 2010-2015 sur les téléphones cellulaires et les "left-behind children" en Chine, cet article examine les discours des médias sur la relation entre les familles de migrants et la technologie des communications. L'auteur constate que le rôle des téléphones cellulaires dans leur vie sont décrits de la manière narrative suivantes: 1) les téléphones cellulaires sont très important pour relier les membres de la famille vivant à l'extérieur; 2) les téléphones cellulaires sont utilisés comme un résolveur de problèmes dans les dons de charité et les projets de développement rural; 3) les téléphones cellulaires peuvent présenter des risques inattendus pour les enfants privés d'éducation aux médias; et 4) les téléphones cellulaires pourraient abriter ou libérer le mal—associé à l'augmentation des cas de délinquance juvénile ou de criminalité. L'auteur explique comment les différents objectifs institutionnels des organismes sociaux, des entreprises, des éducateurs et les forces de l'ordre contribuent à la polarité des discours, reflétant ainsi les inquiétudes de la société sur l'utilisation sans surveillance des appareils mobiles par les adolescents, ainsi que les implications culturelles et politiques de l'autonomisation les "démunis" de la fracture numérique en améliorant l'accès à la technologie de communication.

*Mots-clés:* Communication mobile; Communication parent-enfants; Développement rural; Discours des médias; Fracture numérique; Informatique; Infrastructure des télécommunications; Population migrante

## Introduction

The term "left-behind children" refers to rural children under 18 years of age who are left at home when both or one of their parents migrate to urban areas for work. As a result of the rapid economic growth and the gap between labour demands in urban and rural areas, more than 61 million—nearly a quarter of children in China—live in rural villages without the presence of their parents, who have migrated in search of work opportunities. Recent findings show that left-behind children are disadvantaged by developmental, emotional, and social problems, while their parents strive to empower the family financially by earning wages and sending money home (Su et al., 2013). These children are more prone to skipping class, fighting, and even dropping out of school, as their caretakers are often unable or unwilling to monitor their study habits. Research demonstrates that due to a lack of family protection and educational resources, there have been growing signs of serious mental health problems and an increase in criminal records among this vulnerable group (CCRCSR, 2014).

Although the concept of left-behind children had already existed in China in the mid-1990s, it took almost a decade for the topic to receive wide attention in the media and academia, as government agencies started to react to the special needs of this "new underprivileged group" (Jiang, 2011). Previously, the discourses on migration in China's popular media had focused on

the possible impacts of migrants' presence on the city communities, indicating anxieties by urban residents about the mobile population and its potential effect on social order. The media used terms such as "tide of peasant workers", "floating population", and "outsider workers" to describe this trend, emphasizing the differences and inequalities between rural and urban communities. Media representations of these children were often stereotyped, usually presenting them as targets of charity or protective policy, or as "problematic". News reports on the topic, while increasing in numbers over the years, tend to revolve around government initiatives or corporate sponsors and rarely depict the children as the centre of action, as the stories are reported mostly from large cities than from their rural locations (Sun, 2014).

While there are a limited number of news reports describing left-behind children in rural China as individuals, their access—or indeed, lack of access—to cell phones has become an issue of concern. As China's telecommunication industry develops rapidly, a wide gap is found between computer/Internet access of students in urban and rural areas. The left-behind children are at a disadvantageous position as the digital "have-nots", compared to their urban peers and migrant students who follow their parents to the cities (Yang et al., 2013).

This paper aims to situate the question of children and technology in the context of China's rural-to-urban labour migration, to address how popular discourses address the role of mobile phone technology in the lives of underprivileged children and youth. The paper examines how different narratives are weaved about their cell phone use, and how the stories make sense of their unique long-distance family communication experiences. The paper also discusses how the popular discourse on personal communication technologies reflects shifting notions of progress, family values, and social network in China's trends of large-scale migration and urbanization.

### *Mobile Phones, Public Discourse, and Youth*

According to a report published by China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, there were 1.286 billion mobile phone users in China at the end of 2014 (Hwang, 2015). The report also indicates that 94.5% of China's population actually used a mobile phone at the end of 2014. In comparison, only 18.3% of them (249.43 million people) used a landline in that same period. The speed of growth in cell phone ownership is quite breathtaking, as many regions have skipped landline technology and moved straight to mobile.

How mobile phone technology might affect the family/social communication patterns of left-behind children relates to the broad question of the role of mediated communication in young people's lives. Scholars have addressed the interconnected relationship of mediated and unmediated communication, which are both situated and context-dependent, as mediated practices are intricately embedded in the daily activities of users (Ling & Haddon, 2008). Some have observed that all Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are accompanied by heightened popular reactions regarding their impact on the existing social order (Thurlow, 2006). Whether in terms of people's experiences of community life, their standards of morality, or the way they organize their personal relationships, public discourse about emerging technologies is typically polarized by judgments of their being either "all good" or "all bad". The mobile phone, as an increasingly popular communication tool, has affected family dynamics by changing parental surveillance patterns and young people's views of independence and negotiated freedoms. While family communication can benefit from increased coordination, mobile phones also brought new issues such as affordability, parent access, and over-reliance on the phone (e.g.,

Campbell, 2005; Devitt & Roker, 2009; Katz & Aakhus, 2002). For adolescents, cell phone ownership allows young people even more flexibility and spontaneity in their lives (Nawaz & Ahmad, 2012). It is becoming a highly sought after status symbol among young people in the developing world, seen as an indication that one is socially connected, accessible, and in demand (e.g., Ahmed & Qazi, 2011; Goggin, 2012). Concerns about the potentially liberating or detrimental effects of mobile technologies are widely reported in popular media as well as academic publications, as many parents and educators worry about teens' social alienation and consequence on academic performance (Huang & Leung, 2009). Young technology users tend to be reduced to a homogenous group in popular discourse, often portrayed as innocent youth or youth at risk, vulnerable to the addictive power of cell phones, particularly the appeals of social networking and instant messaging.

### *Parent-Child Communication in Migrant Families*

Previous studies that address parent-child communication among migrant families in different countries indicate that while labour migration generates stress on familial connectedness, ICTs can ease this strain by allowing distant family members to participate in day-to-day life through technology. Use of ICTs to counter the families' physical fragmentation creates a virtual psychological effect that helps the "left-behind" cope with the distance. Vertovec (2004) argues that low-cost calls serve as a kind of social glue for transnational El Salvadorian migrant families, facilitating parental role maintenance, joint decision-making, and the continuance of a sense of family. Horst states that in rural Jamaica, the mobile phone is viewed as a blessing, "transforming the role of transnational communication from an intermittent event to a part of daily life", which has also brought unforeseen burdens and obligations (2006: 143). For instance, Jamaican children regard frequent phone calls from their parents abroad as surveillance. Some other scholars are less positive about the role of mobile phones in migrant families in which the parent and children live apart. Madianou and Miller (2011) interviewed Filipina mothers working in the UK and their children back home, and find that mobile phone communication allows the women to deal with the ambivalence that is deeply ingrained in their decision to migrate. It may even contribute to their decisions on the prolongation of migration abroad. The researchers note that the children of these women are less confident about how the phone conversations function for child-parent communication, and the children do not associate frequency of calls with increased parental connectedness.

In a study about migrant families in Jamaica, where the rate of migration and family separation is very high, Brown and Grinter (2014) demonstrate that as communication technologies become more affordable and ubiquitous, mobile phones are allowing migrant parents to maintain a caregiving network to remotely mediate household matters among the children, educators, and guardians. As there is also inevitable tension and inconsistency in the communication process involving shared responsibilities and authority, the mobile phones become tools to negotiate control. Also, between Filipina and Indonesian foreign domestic workers in Singapore, who often harbour a sense of anxiety about their children's well-being in their home countries, mobile phones are utilized as a tool to negotiate and redefine identities and relationships (Chib et al., 2014).

Most of the existing studies about cell phones and migrant families were conducted using interviews or survey methods, collecting data from parents, educators, and guardians, and sometimes the children themselves. Very little research is done about how the media portrays the

role of cell phones in the lives of the left-behind children. As cell phones are seen as helpful in facilitating communication between family members living apart, the typical concerns by adults about children/teens and cell phones, usually in terms of addiction or detrimental effects on school performance or social activities, could be more complicated regarding the left-behind children.

## Method

To analyze popular representations of the relationship of left-behind children with mobile phone technology in China, this paper examines reports in major newspapers through critical discourse analysis of selected samples from news stories online. In critical discourse analysis (e.g., van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Chilton, 2005) news stories can be analyzed as texts, revealing the social, cultural, and therefore national representations of an issue or group circulating in a society at a given time. Critical discourse analysis offers "not only a description and interpretation of discourses in social context but also offers an explanation of why and how discourses work" (Rogers, 2004: 2), often addressing power relations in a society and the issue of dominance and inequality. It is a qualitative research method to demonstrate how text producers use language, wittingly or not, in a way that could be ideologically significant, which could influence a reader's view of the world through, for example, problem definitions and stock images.

The stories for analysis are retrieved from sina.com, one of the largest Internet portals in China, owned by China's leading media and Internet services company Sina Corp, through a key word search of "left-behind children" and "cell phones". Sina.com's news site can be seen as the representative of China's enterprise-owned news databases, which include a broader range of stories than the official news portals, such as Xinhuanet.com or People.com.cn. Most provincial, metropolitan, and local newspapers in China can be accessed on the site, which includes specialty media such as sports newspapers and women's newspapers. The search yielded 1867 news stories from various news organizations in mainland China, with a timeframe of January 1, 2010 to May 15, 2015. A small portion of these stories was not used for analysis when cell phones bear no direct relationship to the event reported.

The stories are categorized by the different types of narratives on cell phones and left-behind children or people related to them. First, the author examines the narratives around cell phone ownership and access, and the power relations revealed in whether or how the children could have become users of cell phones. Second, the author analyzes the narratives on cell phone usage by the children, on how cell phones could influence the lives of the left-behind children in positive or negative ways. These might reflect and potentially reinforce popular notions about technology and the rural youth population.

As these news stories are products of Chinese news agencies, which often serve both official and commercial purposes in China's transforming media landscape (Zhao, 2008), the paper tries to analyze the stories within the context in which they were produced. The stories are also analyzed in terms of the ways the children are portrayed, either as a social group or as individuals with personalities, the news sources that provided the information to the news agencies, and the main action taker in the reports. The excerpts are translated from Chinese into English by the author.

**Research Findings**

The author finds that the relationships of these children with mobile phones are portrayed in the following types of narratives: 1) cell phones are highly valuable for connecting family members living apart, playing a crucial role for children and their migrant parents in faraway locations to keep in touch with each other to a limited extent, as used by the children, their families and relatives, or teachers and guardians; 2) cell phones are used as a problem-solver for remote rural communities, highly popular in charity giving and rural development projects to benefit migrant families, with the promise of making them new phone users; 3) cell phones sometimes bring unexpected risks—left-behind children's unfamiliarity, over-dependence, or misuse of cell phones can lead to accidents or other awkward scenarios; and 4) cell phones could harbour or unleash evil—as more and more cases of juvenile delinquency or crime stories are associated with cell phones, involving both male and female offenders or victims.

In the following sections I discuss each of these narratives, illustrating with examples and excerpts from selected news stories, and examine how each narrative highlights one specific role that cell phones might potentially play in the lives of the rural children. I will then conclude by analyzing how each of these narratives relates to the notion of communication technology as a source of problem or a source of solution for the left-behind population.

### *Cell Phones Treasured by Children of Migrant Parents*

News stories frequently present a social reality that cell phone access is sparse and regarded as precious among rural migrant families in the inland provinces, focusing on the poor infrastructure and lack of communication facilities, and the desire for technology. Landline or cell phones are rare resources, as the ownership and allocation of shared access often reflect the social stratification and power relations of these isolated communities.

Many children only could talk to their parents through school office phones, or use cell phones owned by their teachers, relatives, or village chiefs to reach their parents. In these regions the children rarely have their own cell phones, and if they do, the news reporter notices the fact and mentions how the phones are used in the story. Many stories about schools with predominately left-behind children describe their eagerness to communicate with their parents through phone calls, as letter writing seems less preferable.

A news story published on November 21, 2013 in *West China Metropolis Daily* titled "Yibin city spreads family connection telephone network to console left-behind children" reports that in a boarding school in Sichuan province, over 90% of students are left-behind children, many of them yearning to get a chance to talk with their parents over the phone. One 11 year-old boy who had not heard from his father in several months told the reporter "I wish dad could call me once a week, or just once a month". Another student also waits every day to hear from her father:

> Among the nearly 400 left-behind students in Yudinghua Elementary School, not many can remember their parents' phone numbers, but Lin Liguo remembers her father's number firmly. She wrote it on her textbook and recites it every day when she reads, but there have been few calls from this number. Each time she hears the school loudspeaker notifying a student to go to the office to answer the phone, she really hopes that one day her name would be called.

The story quotes a teacher who had worked for 30 years at a village school in Jiangan County, saying that before the "family-connection phone" was installed, everyday some children would line up after school to use his cell phone to talk to their parents, occasionally with more than ten children in line. The parents usually would inform the teacher the time of the calls beforehand and he would tell the students to wait. In other news stories profiling well-respected rural teachers who devote years of their lives to children in remote village schools, the teachers' cell phones are also routinely used by children to talk to their faraway parents. The teachers might also contact the parents directly about issues with their children, or manage small allowances for the children, playing a caretaker role.

In a story about a village school, titled "10-year struggle of a school for left-behind children: 353 students have only 9 teachers" on the Qilu Evening News (July 22, 2014), the school doorkeeper's cell phone is the designated communication device for the children to reach their parents occasionally. The doorkeeper, whose salary is 600 yuan a month, gets a monthly phone cost compensation of a few dozen yuan from the school.

> There is no sound of cell phone rings, as no children own cell phones. They have no pocket money, or occasionally less than 10 yuan of it, usually handed to teachers to manage. Sometimes when they miss their parents, they would go to Liu Xianxi (the school doorkeeper) to borrow his cell phone to make a call, but this type of occasion is rare. Only when the children get sick, they would try to reach mom and dad far away.

As rural boarding schools for left-behind children become more common, some children staying in schools have less time with their relatives/guardians in their hometown. One story indicates an old man whose monthly income is 160 yuan owns a cell phone, which he uses to contact his grandchild in a local boarding school, as landlines are not available in his house.

Phone conversations are often the only channel of connection between the parents and these students, and tend to be depicted in the stories as highly desired by the children. However, some recent stories reveal that even when children can access their parents with phone calls, they could have difficulties in emotional bonding. *China Youth Daily* reported on March 2, 2015 that a survey by the China Adolescence Research Centre shows 60% of left-behind children talk with their parents over the phone at least once a week, but 81.9% of the children believes their parents only care about their exam scores, and only 5.8% thinks their parents care about their mood. A high school student named Xiaoguo tells the reporter that his mother has been disappointed with his academic performance: "[w]henever my mother gives me a call, the first sentence would be, 'Where are you?'. The second sentence must be 'What score did you get in the exam?'".

Although most stories on the children tend to describe family reunion as a cherished moment of happiness for everyone, the survey found that it is also a time of heightened conflict between family members. One boy indicated that the first day of his father's return would be like heaven for him, with new clothes and many exotic treats to eat, and the second day would be like hell, as the father would beat him up after seeing his transcripts. In contrast, a story by CCTV's Finance Channel (October 2, 2015) about Spring Festival travel rush[1] (chun yun) describes a ten year-old girl living with her grandparents in a mountain village in western Hubei province who studies extra hard and gets good grades, in order to ease the worries of her mother working in a movie theatre in the coastal Zhejiang province. The girl begged her mother over the phone to come home this holiday season as she had not been back in four years, working hard to repay

their family debt. Eventually the mother got an approval for seven days off from her employer, and spent four days travelling on a bus and only three days with the family.

News stories reporting the installation of "family-connection" phone lines in rural locations as a positive progress tend to emphasize the yearning of the children for family communication opportunities. Stories around Spring Festival about migrant families tend to focus on the trips of reunion, which the families occasionally record in photos with cell phones as treasured moments. Stories with news sources from research institutes and social agencies usually have quotes discussing the psychological needs of the children and the consequence of insufficient caretaking on their wellbeing. Access to cell phones has become one of the recommended steps in solving the parent-child communication problem.

### Cell Phones as Problem Solver

As the issue of "left-behind children" becomes widely recognized as a social problem associated with poverty and neglect, there are more and more news stories describing government measures and charity activities for children by corporations, neighbourhood committees, volunteer groups, and nonprofit organizations. Many of these "care and love" themed news stories emerge around the annual June 1st Children's Day, Spring Festival, and occasionally Mid-Autumn Festival. They often highlight the efforts to improve migrant families' access to communication technology, among other ways to help. The reports use terms such as "delivering warmth" (song wennuan), "care and love actions" (guan ai xingdong), or "dream-construction projects" (zhu meng gongcheng) to emphasize the positive goals of these initiatives in the less affluent provinces. Consequently, a number of rural communities launched activity centres equipped with phone or computer facilities for parent-child interaction, some with video call facilities. These reports often come with news photos showing groups of children receiving gifts at donation ceremonies or utilizing the facilities provided to them with excitement. Cell phones for individual use are also reported as main donation items for left-behind children in news stories, and occasionally urban schools encourage students to write letters and send donations to the rural children.

A story from the Red Network that aired on March 3, 2013 titled "Trip to fulfill dreams: Online volunteers deliver positive energy with loving hearts" describes a group of nine volunteers travelling to the rural Anren County to visit left-behind children, bringing them "carefully-prepared gifts":

> Among the loving-heart online volunteer dream-fulfillment team, there are businessmen, civil servants, corporation employees and other caring people from different professions. They come together for the purpose of spreading love. Left-behind child Tan Zhangqi lives alone. His father works outside to make a living and rarely returns home throughout the year; his mother remarried. When he received the gift of a cell phone from the volunteers, he could not suppress his feeling and came to tears.

While depicting the difficult conditions of the rural schools or villages, these stories often show positive steps taken by the local agencies or volunteers to help the children. Terms such as "family-connection phone" (qinqing dianhua) or "warm booths" (wennuan xiaowu) are used to

indicate organized effort with policy support from the government to alleviate local left-behind population problems.

News stories in education sections sometimes feature college students or graduate students sent to the rural schools as part of their training requirements. Often familiar with personal communication technologies, they would help the children contact their parents on their personal cell phones, for instance, by using the QQ chat app[2], or in some cases manage to raise funds for online chat facilities for the village. Also, in stories reporting efforts by schools or social agencies such as women's federations to connect with the parents, text messaging is noted as a new method to inform parents about children's academic performance or school activities.

The use of cell phones as a problem solver for left-behind children is also supposed to contribute to their safety in some areas through high-tech positioning features of the phones, to alleviate the concerns of lack of parent-child communication and supervision, in addition to the music and entertainment functions.

A story titled "20,000 left-behind children in Jiangsu province will receive free positioning wristwatch phone", by the Yangzi Evening News (May 28, 2012), focuses on the new GPS feature of the wristwatch phones that could offer parents assurance of their children's whereabouts, as there have been more and more cases of missing or runaway children:

> To provide a more secure growth environment for these children whose parents are not around all year round, Jiangsu Children Safety Guard Program will equip satellite positioning wristwatch phones for children for free. In addition to free calls, SMS messages, alarm signals, and other functions, whenever a child presses the SOS button for help, the phone will send an SOS message of the location to the parent's cell phone.

The stories highlight the children's eagerness to communicate with their parents by using the talk function, positioning them as recipients of charity and targets of poverty-relief policies. Mobile phones, especially those with video chatting or musical features, are seen as a magical gift that alleviates the problem of separation and poor communication, though occasionally recent news reports note the lack of depth of conversation and the inability to replace parental presence. In this narrative, mobile technology is not only delivered as a device for family communication, but is often brought to the rural residents as a facilitator for them to connect with the "modern" outside world.

On the other hand, in charity initiatives collecting public donations to left-behind children, cell phone text messaging as the donation platform has been mentioned in many stories. A China News Network story (August 27, 2014) reports that the Red Cross Society of China has launched a charity campaign called "Philanthropic Messenger", under which 10 million yuan will be used to help underprivileged children left behind by their parents or suffering major diseases in Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Gansu. Sometimes, news agencies also collect donations from readers through the use of text messaging or SMS, as it is assumed that most of the readership is urban residents.

### Cell Phones Ownership Comes with Surprises and Risks

For many rural children, cell phones enter their environment as a surprise and novelty, as they grew up with little access to the toys or electronic devices that are familiar to urban children.

Although this is not specifically emphasized, stories of accidents demonstrate that they encounter the new intruder as technology novices with limited past exposure to communication tools, thus they might face unexpected risks, or get a false sense of security carrying a phone around. These stories usually become newsworthy to the media when local social service agencies or educators respond to cases endangering the safety of left-behind children "playing with" mobile phones or inadequately using them.

One news story in Red Network (December 16, 2013) is titled "Mistaking cell phone rings for alarm clock, left-behind child goes to school at midnight, frightening family members". It is about a middle-school student who usually sets the alarm clock for 5:30am and walks to school in darkness alone, as he lives far from school. One night as he was in bed, he heard his grandfather's phone ringing. Assuming it was the alarm clock, he got up and headed to school. Seeing the school gate locked, and shivering in the cold, he went to a bus station nearby and fell asleep inside a bus. Meanwhile the worried grandfather called his teacher at 1:00am, reporting the boy missing, leading to hours of searching by two teachers before locating him.

Some news stories indicate that over-dependence on cell phones and a lack of basic communication/social skills could cause unanticipated problems for the children. There are rural children who routinely talk with their parents on the phone but could not recall the phone number or their parents' city address or workplace, which could frequently change. A story titled "More than 60 left-behind children were 'picked-up' in less than two months" by Wuhan Evening News (August 18, 2013) reports that in the summer school break many rural children arrived at the industrial city in central China to visit their parents, and were sent to the Children Rescue and Protection Centre after being lost. Many of these children, new to the city, could not find their parents after losing their phones or wallets. One of them is a 16 year-old girl from southwest Yunnan province who had never seen the outside world, going to visit her father who did not return to the hometown that year at Spring Festival. Nervous about the trip, she asked her 17 year-old cousin to go with her, but the two fell asleep on the overnight train and she found her cell phone, which she had been holding in her hand, gone. The girl could not offer any clue to the protection centre staff to locate her father in Wuhan, as she only knew he worked in construction, and apparently the cell phone was the only way she communicated with him. The staff's attempt to call her village did not yield any information either. Unable to help the girl meet her father, the staff eventually bought train tickets for the two teens to return to rural Yunnan.

As smartphones have social networking functions to bring the owner to new social circles, online friendship, fantasy, or love affairs could become new outlets for the emotional needs of the teens. One story in the Chongqing Morning News (August 22, 2013) reports that Xiaojun, a 13 year-old boy, became addicted to QQ chat after receiving a smartphone from his parents, and fell in love with a girl online nicknamed "ice fish", who also shared the same fate of being a left-behind child. After finding in surprise that they were both in the same junior high school, they started dating, but the girl's "sharp-eyed" grandmother intervened. As the girl stopped dating Xiaojun, the distressed boy could not control his emotions. In a restaurant he yelled about suicide and smashed a glass bottle on the wall, wounding his hands, and was sent to hospital after the police arrived and contacted his parents.

Meanwhile, cell phone addiction as a problem has been bothering educators not only in urban schools, but also in some rural boarding schools for migrant-children, where boredom and loneliness were widespread. A story titled "Childhood 'kidnapped' by cell phones" in Yanzhao Metropolitan News paper (May 29, 2014) reports that cell phones have become the most desirable gift for Children's Day of June 1st, replacing traditional gifts of toys, clothes, or travel.

The story reports that both urban and rural educators are worried, seeing students playing games in classes or sharing content of sex and violence with others, and the educators point out many adults themselves are addicted to cell phones. In a boarding school:

> Teacher Zhang told the reporter that over ninety percent of the school's junior high third-year students are using Internet- enabled smart phones. In order not to affect their learning, a school regulation states, "when students return to school on Sunday they should hand over the phones to the teachers, then get the phones back when returning home on Friday". But in reality, few students hand in their phones.

These stories mainly use educators and social service agencies as news sources, revealing the new challenges cell phones pose to their professional routines. While the stories tend to highlight their dutiful performance in their caretaking roles, they inadvertently expose the contrast of the high-tech features of cell phones with the paucity of cultural life in the surroundings of these children. As many children have weak information literacy skills, and lack experience with tools such as calculators, landline phone, or maps, the sudden introduction of cell phones to their lives could bring unexpected consequences, leading to occasional mistakes, miscommunication, or over-dependence. From time to time, it could lead to even bigger risks that change their course of life.

### *Cell Phones in Juvenile Delinquency and Crimes Victimizing Left-Behind Children*

In recent years there have been a rising number of left-behind children involved in crimes, either as victims or as perpetrators, and the cases of juvenile delinquency among them have been worrisome to researchers. Mobile phones are often mentioned in these news reports involving left-behind children and law enforcement. These stories are usually based on police or court reports, featuring individual characters in an identified location, often using aliases for minors. While an examination of the stories demonstrates that both boys and girls could be engaged in juvenile delinquency, a clear gendered pattern emerges. Among the boys, phone and online game addiction or desire for phones can sometimes lead to stealing, suicide, or even killing of family members who tried to block their access to mobile phones. Group fights or bullying could also occur among left-behind children or victimizing them. In some instances, an adolescent perpetrator could use cell phone games to lure an unsuspecting younger peer to an isolated location for robbery or even manslaughter or murder, according to news story descriptions.

Cell phones as an object of theft or robbery appear to be more frequently associated with male adolescents than females. Qianjiang Evening News (December 10, 2013) reports that in a peaceful village in Quzhou, where the residents usually do not lock their doors, a 12 year-old boy living with only his grandparents was found to have 18 records of theft in the township police department in less than one year, ranging from coins in a neighbour's drawer to villagers' cell phones. His explanation was he felt envious of classmates having "good things to eat and play with". The court indicated that as the total value of the stolen goods are assessed as more than 10,000 yuan, it fit the criteria of crime of theft, but the boy was not charged with a criminal offense, as he was a minor.

Crime stories referring to the term "left behind children" come not only from rural regions, but also in large cities, as some of the children whose parents were migrant workers in

the 1980s or 1990s have grown up and also left the countryside. Some news stories of arrests of criminals attribute their behaviours to past experience as left-behind children, stating that the way they grew up with little adult supervision contributed to their potential tendency to violate laws without knowing the consequences of a prison sentence. Meanwhile the sporadic exposures to city life also make them discontented with a farming life in their barren rural hometowns. One feature story titled "The lost second generation migrant workers" by *Law and Life* (May 17, 2010) starts with the following descriptions of this group:

> They were "left-behind children" before; they were the "rootless children" who followed their "first generation migrant" parents to search for dreams in the cities. As their "first generation migrant" parents gradually withdraw from the stage of the city, they flow into large and small cities one after another—seeking their dreams among the tall buildings that do not belong to them.

The story narrates the cases of three young men who grew up as left-behind children and moved as teens to the cities to search for opportunities, where they later became criminals. The interviews reveal that the eye-opening wealth gap they witnessed between the city residents and the rural villagers led to their material desire, hatred against the rich, and wishful thinking to make a gain without being caught. The story describes an interview with 19 year-old Lang Feng, who came to the prosperous city of Ningbo from Henan province two years ago. Working in the restaurant he was amazed at the wealth of some customers who "did not blink their eyes" at the huge bills of their banquets. The temptation of cell phones to him was irresistible:

> He suddenly found that almost everyone had a cell phone, even the junk collector who came to the restaurant regularly. At that time the market price of the cheapest cell phone was over a thousand yuan, but he only had less than 200 yuan in his pocket.

He tried to snatch a woman pedestrian's cell phone and handbag one night after work, but was caught by security patrols while running, then sentenced to more than one year in a youth detention centre, as he was under the age of 18. It is evident that smartphones, as a trendy consumer item and a status symbol, have become highly tempting for youth with material ambitions.

Meanwhile, as news reports with statistical results indicate a broad trend of vulnerability of left-behind girls to sexual assaults, there have been more and more stories in local newspapers reporting police arrests of sex offenders targeting these girls. Among the offenders there are teachers, neighbours, and other acquaintances. For adolescent girls, a cell phone as a gift or a promised gift is often used by criminals as bait, sometimes accompanied by cash, eventually turning them to victims of sexual abuse. For instance, a story on the China News Network (July 22, 2014) is titled "Man uses cash and cell phone to seduce and rape 13-year-old middle school student, making her pregnant".

In contrast to news stories about communication technologies that often portray left-behind children as innocent school students yearning for love and care, particularly chances to talk their parents, crime stories project a more greyish picture of their environment. There are predators and dangerous temptations around, victimizing them or bringing out unanticipated motivations or reactions from some of the children. These stories tend to emphasize the

vulnerability of the adolescents without adult supervision, as well as the hazards of desires unleashed by mobile devices or other material goods, and point to the need of psychological counseling and guidance for left-behind children. In these narratives youth are considered as both at risk and a source of risk, while the police are portrayed as effective and dutiful in maintaining law and order. As cautionary tales for both parents, educators, and youth, these stories emphasize that there were consequences to the choices young people made when faced with temptations, putting emphasis on the special vulnerability of left-behind children and youth who might make poor decisions or moral choices, which led to involvement with the legal system.

**Conclusion**

An analysis of news story narratives reveals that there are polarized portrayals of mobile communication technology as either good or evil. In stories highlighting positive potentials of communication technology, the problem definition focuses on the physical distance, highlighting the loneliness and anxiety of the children caused by separation from their parents. Cell phones are seen in many cases as a powerful tool to solve the problem of serious lack of parental care, but in other occasions they are a source of temptation leading adolescents to take risks at a time of growing materialism and wealth gap in society.

Technology is value-laden and reflects the social/cultural settings of a given society. The optimistic portrayal of mobile communication technology as a gift to the migrant population echoes the mainstream media's discourse of modernization, economic development, and progress, and supports the government initiatives of extensive infrastructure building. On the other hand, the negative portrayals of cell phones in the lives of left-behind children showcase consequences of the vast social changes and disturbing cases of moral failure, which have led to overloads in social agencies and the legal system in some regions. As social norms, communities, and traditional family lives are threatened by uneven economic development and large-scale migration, the cautionary illustration of harmful consequences of adolescence at risk is aligned with the authorities' efforts of social control and moral education, which involved wide mobilization of local youth leagues, neighbourhood committees, and women's associations to address the social problem.

As the news sources are often social agencies, corporations, educators, or law enforcement personnel in their professional roles, the stories about left-behind children could take on distinct institutional perspectives. They are portrayed as children in poverty needing charity assistance, information "have-nots" in the digital divide, distracted students needing guidance, or a vulnerable population that potentially needs legal protection or monitoring. Each of these images corresponds to a line of popular discourse weaving the social representations of left-behind children in society, revealing contradictory notions about how cell phones could enter their lives and change its course. To a certain extent, the news media also serve as agents of various policy projects, creating visibility and publicity for their operations and organizational priorities, which have to turn to visible steps to prevent the widespread social problem from becoming a monumental crisis in the socio-economic transformations reshaping China.

Furthermore, these stories demonstrate that there could be unanticipated cultural-economic and political implications in efforts to equip the "have-nots" of global and regional digital divide with mobile technology. As more and more social groups recognize the yearning of the left-behind children for communication opportunities with their parents, the seemingly empowering capacities of cell phones could bring unanticipated hazards or risks, given the

children's relative weakness in information literacy and their paucity of material and cultural life. The popular discourse also shows that there is a lack of coherence in finding potential ways to address the societal anxieties over unsupervised access to mobile communication technology by underprivileged adolescents, with a discordance of intents to manage the risks and benefits of technology in the lives of millions of migrant families.

## Notes

1    Spring Festival rush is a special period of the year for the Chinese transport system, lasting more than a month, when it faces greatest pressure from high traffic loads, due to tens of millions of people travelling to spend the traditional lunar New Year with their families.

2    QQ is a popular instant messaging software service developed by Chinese company Tencent Holdings Limited. It has services including online social games, music, shopping, microblogging, movies, game platforms, and group and voice chat, available for both desktop and mobile platforms.

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*Citing this paper:*