

## Problems and Improvement of Protective System for Left-behind Children in Poor Rural Areas from the Perspective of Social Ecosystem

Li Debo <sup>a</sup>, Duan Yongchun <sup>b,\*</sup>, Qing Yin <sup>c</sup>

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yunnan Agricultural University, Panlong District, Kunming, Yunnan, China

<sup>a</sup>1543670678@qq.com, <sup>b</sup>23404940@qq.com, <sup>c</sup> 1325964730@qq.com

\*corresponding author

**Keywords:** left-behind children in rural area; children protection system; social ecosystems

**Abstract:** From the perspective of social ecosystem with field research, this paper found that there are some problems in the protective system for left-behind children in poor rural areas: defective protection system and low-level protection. These problems are embodied in the weak family protection function, insufficient attention from school and community, and unfavorable social environment to children. From 2017 to 2019, some child protection practice was implemented in the rural communities of Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, Southwest of China. Based on this practice, we put forward some suggestions to enhance protection level to these children, including: strengthening governmental mechanism design, building family supporting system, developing professional social service organizations and school social work, constructing child-friendly community, and purifying the social environment.

### 1. The Problems of Left-behind Children in Rural Area

“Protection” in this paper, in broad sense, refers to the actions and measures taken by the state, society, community, family to safeguard children’s legitimate rights and interests and ensure their healthy growth. “Left-behind children” are children under the age of 16 whose both parents go out for work, or one of the parents go out for work and the other has no capacity of guardianship.<sup>①</sup> With the development in economy and society and the advancement of industrialization and urbanization in China, the rural labor force in less developed areas leave for more developed areas to work or start businesses, leaving behind a large number of children in their hometown to be taken care of by others. According to the statistics by Ministry of Education in 2017, 15.5056 million children were left behind in 2017. Domestic scholars have found that left-behind children show many social problems in their growth. For example, *Gu Shengzu* and *Yi Shanci* pointed out that the left-behind children are now confronted with problems such as lagging learning, psychological imbalance, misbehavior and risks in safety.<sup>②</sup> *Zhang Banghui* and *Li Wei* thought that "left-behind children" have prominent problems in learning and growing, character and mentality.<sup>③</sup> To solve these problems, it is essential to build up effective protection and services.

In February 2016, the State Council issued *Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Area*. This policy provides strong support for improving the protection system for target children. The incidence of violence against children’s rights and interests should be effectively controlled. From 2017 to 2019, the author led a team of college students to provide social work service for the left-behind children in rural communities in Wenshan *Zhuang* and *Miao* Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province in each summer and winter

<sup>①</sup> Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Left-behind Children in Rural Areas (State Council 2016) No. 13.

<sup>②</sup> Zhai Shengzhan, Yi Shance, Li Hua. Problems and Countermeasures of Rural Left-behind Children in the Process of Urbanization[J]. Educational Research. 2011(09)

<sup>③</sup> Zhang Banghui, Li Wei. Study on the Problem of Rural Left-behind Children and Its Countermeasures[J]. Journal of Chongqing University(Social Science Edition).2016, Vol.22, No.2.

holidays. During the periods, the team also conducted in-depth investigation in two poor rural communities on site. The interviewees include parents, village cadres, heads of social organizations and social workers. The team did surveys with 450 families and 410 valid surveys were collected. The findings show that more and more residents in poor rural areas went out of hometown for work because of the large regional income difference, which then leads to the increasing number of left-behind children. However, the protection system for these children was far from perfect and in a low level. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the current situation and problems of protection system of left-behind children in poor rural areas from the perspective of social ecosystem based on the practice in Wenshan, and to reflect on how to better the social protection system in these areas.

## 2. Theory of Social Ecosystem and Analyzing Structure on Left-behind Children’s Protection

According to social ecosystem theory, the social environment in which human beings live, i.e. family, institution, group, community, etc., is a kind of social ecosystem in which human beings interact with the environment, thus exerting an important influence on personal growth. This social system can be divided into microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem. Microsystem refers to environments where people can directly contact and interact with each other, such as home and school. Mesoscopic system includes factors that can affect or determine the function of micro-environment, such as groups, organizations, communities, social welfare institutions that can influence individuals. Macrosystem are elements in the social environment, such as cultural, political, legal, regulatory, etc., that can influence or restrict the micro and meso systems. Theory of ecosystem holds that individual's growth and development is influenced by his or her relationship to the environment. His/her living state is not entirely determined by his/her personal characteristics, but also is related to whether he/she can adapt to the environment smoothly, and how much the environment supports him/her.

Based on the theory and considering the left-behind children in China’s rural areas, the author built a graph of social ecological system with children-centered (see figure 1 below)

The graph can be used to analyze the situation of protection system in traditional society and social transformation, and reflect how to optimize the system in the future. This framework includes four dimensions, namely the micro system i.e. rural children and family, the medium system i.e. the community, and the macro system i.e. the politics and economy. Each dimension includes its own subsystems.

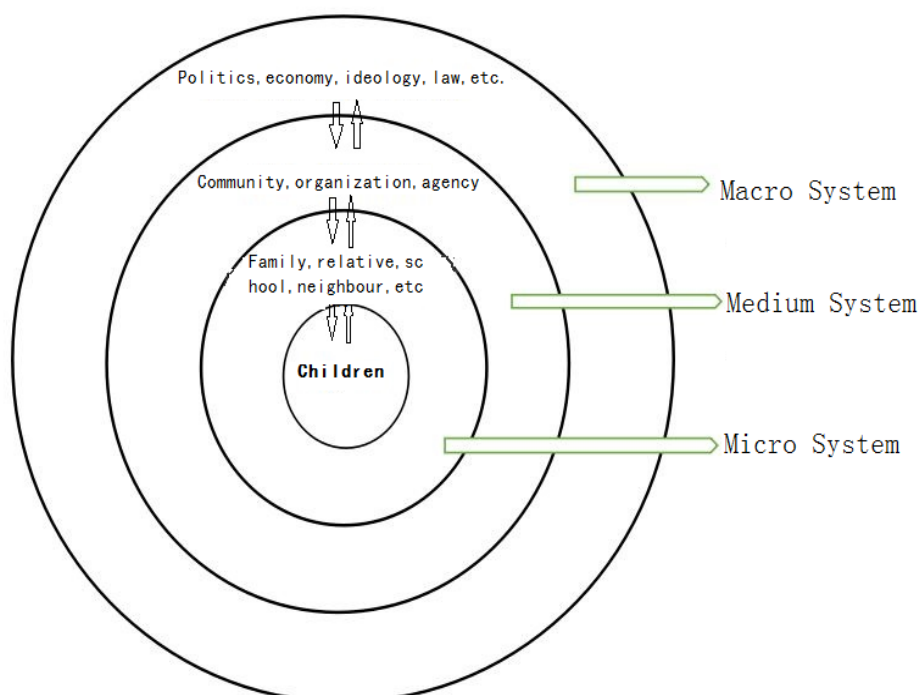


Fig.1 social ecosystem of children in rural areas

### **3. The Evolution and Problems of the Protection System for Rural Children in the Process of Social Transition**

The transformation from traditional to modern society in China is a fundamental change of social system. The social ecological system is also changing profoundly, causing the rapid changes in traditional protection system. A new protection system adapting to modern society is not yet constructed. Therefore, in a fairly long period of time, social reality in poverty area is that the left-behind children protection system is defective and with insufficient function.

#### **3.1 Traditional Protection System with Blood and Geographic Relationship as the Link**

Compared with modern society, traditional Chinese society has lower mobility and slower social changes. "The rural population seems to cling to the soil, and has little change from generation to generation." This conclusion must be conditioned, but on the whole it is one of the peculiarities of rural society." In traditional society, children lived in a world dominated by blood and geographic relationship, that is, "acquaintance society".<sup>①</sup> Children faced less social risks in this society than children in modern society. Therefore, rural people payed less attention to children protection than people in cities. In traditional society, children were generally considered as the group with no independent personality, unable to independently take social responsibilities, and actually in a dependency position of adults. Compared with modern society, the traditional social ecosystem has the following demonstration: family protection is the core in micro system, community protection at the medium level is an important supplement, and the protection at national and the social level is relatively deficient at macro system. Children's social ecosystem is made up of family, neighborhood and community, and the school system is virtually non-existent in many traditional rural areas. The basic bond of children protection system there is blood and geographic relationship. The basic characteristics are as follows:

##### **3.1.1 Families Provide a Comprehensive Protection, and Relatives Provide Important Supports**

In traditional societies, family has very complex functions. In terms of child protection, family takes the major responsibility, and parents are mainly responsible for their children. Other relatives, like grandparents, also have important responsibilities. In traditional societies, children spent far more time in their family than their counterpart in modern society. Some of them even lived in the original family all their lives. As an extended family, kin is often closely integrated with family in children protection, and all the relatives have a duty to protect the children, and even those members from marriage have the duty to protect children who have lost their parents. However, in traditional society, blood relationship is more valued than marriage relationship, and the protection from the family takes precedence over that of relatives.

##### **3.1.2 Neighborhoods and Communities are Important Complements**

"Distant relatives are not as good as close neighbors". In traditional society, the population density of rural communities is not as high as that of modern villages, so mutual support between neighbors are very important. "In the traditional structure of a community, each house is centered on its own status, with a circle around it called the neighborhood. Where there is a wedding, there is a feast. As long as there is a new born baby, a red egg must be send. If there is a funeral, neighbors have to come out to help dress the dead, and carry the coffin. These are mutual aid in daily life. Neighbors often help each other take care of the children, and a good neighborhood relationship is often considered important to the development of children. The neighbor is usually the mediator when the incident of beating and scolding the child occurs. If child is assaulted by others, the neighbor who is on the scene can also testify as a witness during the lawsuit.

##### **3.1.3 Social Organizations Such as Temples Play an Important Role in Protecting Orphans**

Compared with modern society, traditional society has fewer social organizations, the

---

<sup>①</sup> Fei Xiaotong. Native China [M]. Beijing: Life • Reading • Xinzhong Sanlian Bookstore, 2013: 3.

organizations in countryside are founded basically by consanguinity and geography. Due to the lack of a specific child protection organizations, some orphans are adopted and educated by the temple besides being adopted by relatives.

### **3.1.4 The State Pays Insufficient Attention to Child Protection**

Children protection is regarded as the responsibility of a family. The state bears less direct protection responsibility and pays less attention to the children protection. The state mainly regulates family relations through moral norms and indirectly advocates some social norms of educating and caring for children, rarely regarding children as a special objects of protection.

## **3.2 The Evolution and Problems of Rural Children Protection System in the Period of Social Transformation**

China's rural society is undergoing unprecedented changes in history. Considering the process of China's modernization, modern production and life style are imported rather than endogenous things in the rural society. As the gathering place of the second and third industries, the city represents the advanced mode of production and way of life. On the contrary, the countryside, though as the foundation of the traditional society, till now has been in a backward state in the process of modernization for a long time. Due to the long-standing gap between urban and rural areas, a large number of rural residents, being attracted by higher income in city, left their hometown to work in the second and third industries in city, which results in a large number of children left in the countryside as left-behind children. The gaps between urban and rural areas and from region to region in poor areas are very significant. The number of migrant workers has been particularly increasing in last decade. At the same time, the number of left-behind children has also increased rapidly. Compared with traditional society, the needs of growth of rural children are becoming more diversified, and the socialization process for children is becoming longer. The complexity of modern social environment and the fragility of family relations have brought unprecedented challenges to the growth of children. The protection system for rural children also begins to undergo major changes. The overall trends are as follows: the micro system's child protective function starts to weaken; the medium system's child protective functions rises and falls mutually; and the macro system's child protective function strengthens day by day.

### **3.2.1 The Function of Children Protection in Rural Families Begins to Weaken**

Based on blood relationship and geography, children protection in traditional society mainly relies on family. However, modern society is highly mobile, and its industrialization and urbanization has seriously impacted the small-scale peasant economy which is the foundation of a traditional rural society. Traditional rural organizations such as families are also inevitably strongly impacted. The miniaturization and the weakening of families led to the weakening of the child protection function in rural family. Migrant workers in different places not only break the traditional rural family relations, but also alienate the close ties between families and neighbors. Among the 410 rural families's surveys by the author, 90% are nuclear families, with an average size of 4.05 persons per family. Few families choose to live with their grandparents. In the two rural communities investigated, the feature of family has gradually faded. The traditional activities that rural residents need to carry out in the form of family are mainly ancestor worship. Therefore, the function of family mutual assistance in traditional society has been very weak. The weakening of family protection function is mainly seen in: The first problem is parents lacking of parenting ability. among 410 families surveyed, the children's parents had an average education level of about junior middle school, while grandparents were almost illiterate. Without psychological knowledge, these parents can't find an appropriate way to care about children's emotional or psychological problems. Parents often have no idea of how to handle when their children are injured or harmed. The second problem is insufficient home supervision. According to the survey, 102 of the 410 left-behind families (24.88 percent) had both parents working outside and 308 families (8.53 percent) had one parent working outside. Due to the long separation from their children, parents of left-behind children cannot fulfill their duties of guardianship.

### **3.2.2 The Child Protection Function of Rural Community Still Needs to Be Developed**

Departments with child protection functions, like civil affairs, justice, youth league committee, and women's federation, exist in community, but they have not fully played their roles for various reasons. For example, the Children's Activity Center has been set up by the women's federation in the community but is basically idled due to the lack of professional child protection organizations and staff to maintain the operation and provide services to children. The two rural communities investigated by the author are typical "shell villages", that is to say these two do not develop collective economy and collective accumulation which results in no investment in child protection. Since 2018, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has set up child welfare supervisors throughout the country's civil affairs system, further improving the protection system for children in rural communities. But in the two rural communities investigated by the author, child welfare supervisor is actually under the management of the officers of civil affairs in each village, who don't have working allowance or working funds, so this system basically is not really running. When orphans without guardianship being identified in the community, they are usually removed to a welfare home in the town or county.

### **3.2.3 The Child Protection Functions of Schools Need to Be Improved**

There are primary schools in the two rural communities investigated by the author have . The campus is also where the college student team led by the author carried out most activities for children in community during winter and summer holidays. Through the investigation of the schools, the author got to know that the primary schools in these two communities lack professional talents in psychological counseling and social work, and the teachers mainly focus on teaching and students' daily-life management but lacking professional protection knowledge for students when they are bullied or hurt by others. Students need to go to other places for middle schooling, but even middle schools often do not have counseling teachers or social workers specialize in serving children.

### **3.2.4 The Policy and Legal System of Child Protection Needs to Be Improved**

At present, China has formed a child protection legal system, *the Law on the Protection of Minors in the center* supported by *Marriage Law*, *Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Law*, and *Law on Anti-Domestic Violence* and so on. It has constructed the basic framework of family protection, school protection, social protection and judicial protection, showing the characteristics of national standpoint and tool standard, but there are problems of unclear legal obligations. When the legitimate rights and interests of left-behind children are violated, many departments can take charge, but if they do not fulfil responsibilities, no one will be held accountability, unless the violation of children is serious and upgrades to a criminal case. *Opinions on Strengthening the Care and Protection of Rural Left-behind Children* is a special regulation on the protection of rural left-behind children in China. However, in poor areas, the backward in economy and culture and underdevelopment in social organizations lead to the failure of many care and protection work.

In general, the social protection system indeed has made progress while the protection function of family, clan, relatives and neighbors is weakened. However, it is not enough to make up for this weakening. As a result, children are facing more and more risks, and all kinds of social incidents in violating children's legitimate rights and interests keep occurring. As a special vulnerable group, left-behind children face more complex and realistic risks.

### **3.2.5 Social Environment is Unfavorable to Left-behind Children**

Generally speaking, China has established a basic legal system for child protection, and relevant government departments have issued various policies and taked measures to constantly improve the environment for left-behind children's growth. However, during the investigation, the author found two outstanding problems: one is that the harm of online games to left-behind children has not received due attention. Left-behind children indulge in online games and neglect their studies to a certain extent, but rural areas lack relevant services to help children overcome the harm of online

games. When the author investigates rural areas, it is often found that left-behind children in rural areas like gathering in the village committees and other places with WiFi to play online games. Parents in poor rural areas also lack the concept and ability to educate their children on the correct use of mobile phones. Second, the Internet is full of harmful information, especially the porn and violence, advertisements, frauds that do not conform to the socialist values. Left-behind children are easy to be captured by online information which harms their growth due to the lack of appropriate guardianship.

#### **4. The Optimization of the Protection System for Left-behind Children in Poor Areas from the Perspective of Ecosystem Theory**

Child protection is a systematic project that cannot be well met by any single one factor like family, school, community or government. Child protection needs overall planning, systematic measures and multi-department cooperation, and to build a healthy and friendly environment for children. The basic idea of optimizing the protection system for rural left-behind children in poor areas is to perfect the protection system for children, improve the level of family protection and school protection, increase the supply for professional child protection services, build friendly communities and purify the social environment, so as to provide a superior environment for the healthy growth of children.

##### **4.1 Top-Level Design Should Be Strengthen and the Protection System for Left-behind Children Should be Optimized Systematically**

At present, China's rural left-behind children protection system has built its frame, basically building a legal system of child protection, with *the Law on the Protection of Minors* centered. And China has carried out effective child protection work in economically developed areas, and gained a lot of useful child protection experiences. However, due to the underdeveloped economy and society, the practice of child protection in poor rural areas is still less, the mechanism of child protection has not completely built, and there are few professional social service organizations, urgent need of children protection services are always not be satisfied. As an absolutely vulnerable group in society, the plight of children in poor areas has gained extensive social attention. The top-level design of the protection system for left-behind children in poor areas is to closely integrate the relevant laws and policies of the country on left-behind children with the actual situation in poor areas, so as to avoid the appearance of formalized protection. Sometimes, good policies fails to be enforced due to lack of local conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to study the actual situation in poor areas, refine relevant policies and regulations, adopt special preferential policies, encourage the development of social organizations, strengthen financial support, so that to ensure that laws and policies can be truly enforced and protect left-behind children.

##### **4.2 Build Family Child Protection Support System and Improve Family Child Protection Function**

Family protection is the most basic protection for children. In modern society, with the diversified needs of children, families can only meet some of the most basic needs, such as life care, emotional, moral education and so on. The specialized needs, such as mental health, personality disorder, disease rehabilitation, academic development and special personal needs, need to be supported by the state and society. Improving family parenting and caregiving ability is the fundamental way to improve the level of family protection. Improper education to children such as corporal punishment will infringe on the legitimate rights and interests of children and hinder their healthy growth. By implementing relevant national policies on child protection, the youth league committee, women's federation and other relevant departments have organized training for parents to popularize family education and child development knowledge. Besides, when there is a domestic violence, the judicial departments will intervenes promptly to provide effective shelter for children facing violence.

### **4.3 The Government Need to Develop Professional Social Organizations and Raise the Level of Professional Protection for Children**

In modern society, the environment for children to grow up is highly complicated. To solve children's professional problems, it is necessary to develop professional social organizations, increase the supply of specialized services for children's protection, solve complex problems faced by left-behind children, and remove obstacles for children's growth. Social organizations that give priority to development mainly include social organizations that provide psychological counseling services, child growth services, correction services for juvenile offenders, judicial protection services, and special education services for children.

### **4.4 Develop Social Work in Schools and Raise the Level of School Protection**

At present, China's schools focus on education, mainly providing general growth services for students, such as academic education, ideological and moral education, legal education, etc., while there are few services for left-behind children. It is suggested that "one school, one social worker" system should be implemented in rural schools in poor areas, and social workers should be listed in human resource compile in rural areas. Their main responsibilities is to deliver child protection services, connecting schools and families, and integrating social resources to solve the problems faced by left-behind children at school-age. For preschool children, it is necessary to accelerate the development of preschool education in poor rural areas, meeting the preschool children's needs to enter the kindergarten, and extending the school services as more as possible, so as to make up the insufficient family protection ability of left-behind children.

### **4.5 Build Child-Friendly Communities and Give Full Play to Their Role in Protecting Children**

Child-friendly community includes policy friendly, space friendly and service friendly. For policy friendliness in community, in addition to implementing the national policy on left-behind children, the community itself should also pay close attention to the needs of children, formulate appropriate community care and protection policies for left-behind children, actively integrate resources to serve children protection, and accept social organizations to carry out children services in the community. In the process of community environment construction, the community public space, public facilities and free entertainment environment for children should be planned and designed from the needs and perspectives of children. The educational facilities and play space for children of all ages should be reasonably planned and arranged to ensure the safety and accessibility of all children, promote community participation and interaction between children and adults, improve the utilization rate of community public space and vitality, and realize children's rights and interests. Services provided by the community should fully consider the needs and characteristics of children, moreover, child-related services should rich enough to attract children to participate as much as possible, and community services should effectively solve children's problems.

### **4.6 Purify Social Environment, Build the Social Network of Child Protection**

We should urge relevant departments of governments at all levels to earnestly fulfill their responsibilities to protect children, encourage local governments to raise their awareness of the responsibility for protecting children, and formulate public policies conducive to the development of left-behind children. Publicity department, cultural management department, market supervision department and network management department should divide responsibilities but work together to purify the social environment. First, purify the cyberspace; shield the information that are harmful to children's physical and mental health, call anyone who release harmful information to account. Second, carry out positive energy publicity in the whole society. Provide films and TV programs suitable for children's growth and conducive to children's correct outlook on life. Third, promptly crack down on the illegal forces and individuals who harm left-behind children. Protect legitimate rights and interests of left-behind children.

## References

- [1] He lianhui, Chen Tao. New Trend of the Development of Community Child Protection and Service Mechanism in China [J]. Chinese Youth Social Science. 2018(03).
- [2] Gao lilu. Enlightenment from the Development of American Child Protection System to China [J]. Social Work and Management. 2016(06).
- [3] Yu jing, Huang Xiaoyan. Community Protection of Migrant Children from the Perspective of Ecosystem. Chinese Youth Social Sciences, 2016(4).
- [4] Du Yaqiong, Du Jiaobao. Historical Evolution of China's Child Protection System. Contemporary Youth Research, 2019(05).
- [5] He Fang. American Child Protection System and Its Enlightenment [J]. Contemporary Youth Research, 2015 (01).
- [6] Ye jingzhong, Pan lu. A Different Childhood -- Left-behind Children in Rural China [M]. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2008.