


Portrayal and Transformation: Analyzing the Representation of China's Rural Left-behind Children in State Media Discourse

Caiwei Li ¹, Mohd. Nor Shahizan Ali ^{2*}, Ammar Redza Ahmad Rizali ³, Jingwen Xu ⁴

¹ Ph.D Candidate, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

² Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

³ Dr., Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴ Ph.D Candidate, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

* **Corresponding Author:** shahizan@ukm.edu.my

Citation: Li, C., Ali, M. N. S., Ahmad Rizali, A. R., & Xu, J. (2025). Portrayal and transformation: Analyzing the representation of China's rural left-behind children in state media discourse. *Review of Communication Research*, 13, 17-30.

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.52152/RCR.V13.2>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 17 Oct 2024

Accepted: 15 Jan 2025

ABSTRACT

Through the portrayal of rural left-behind children in Chinese state media, this study investigates the evolution of narratives and the societal consequences. The research seeks to uncover its media depiction of left-behind children and how these constitute cultural and policy priorities. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was carried out using a qualitative research approach in order to analyze 20 peer-reviewed studies. Thematic analysis highlighted major shifts in media narratives moving from early portrayals that favored the idea of material deprivation to the more recent narratives that revolved around behavioral and psychological challenges. Visual and linguistic techniques of media encourage empathy and the alignment of narratives with family responsibility and resilience often detract from the realities of systemic problems such as rural to urban inequalities. Differences between the state media and the independent media are highlighted in cross cultural comparisons, Chinese state media emphasizes social harmony and policy alignment, while independent media features systemic critiques. The study's findings highlight the role of media in helping to form societal values and bolstering policy objectives. More balanced narratives, which integrate systemic critiques, are needed for deeper public awareness and policy reform, as well as scholarly understanding and practical strategies for media practitioners and policymakers.

Keywords: Portrayal, Transformation, Rural Left-behind Children, State-media Discourse, Narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Background

A unique demographic group in China resulting from rural-urban migration consists of left-behind children, whose parents migrate to urban centres for work and leave the children with their grandparents in the countryside. This arrangement represents the socioeconomic differences between rural and urban areas, as well as China's speedy industrialization. Poor access to education, psychological support, and parental care constitute the challenges for rural left-behind (Wei, Yang, Zhang, & Si, 2022). The absence of parent involvement institutes causes of developmental delays, social isolation and compromised emotional well-being, hence underscoring the need for policies and programs to address such impacts become important (Hu, Lu, & Huang, 2014).

The demographic scale of left-behind children is significant, with estimates from the Chinese National Bureau

of Statistics indicating that as of 2021, there were approximately 55.6 million rural left-behind children, representing 22.5% of the total child population in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, UNICEF China, & UNFPA China, 2023). This number of problem cases is a huge indicator of how common this problem is in rural communities. Research points out that unstable family arrangements in turn contribute to poorer education and social integration and intensify already existing inequalities (Seeberg, 2024). The signs of these children's experiences also serve to highlight more systemic rural migration challenges; cultural shift, economic pressures, social fragmentation, community dynamics, and family roles that change the structure of the dynamics of the community and the roles of the family (Atkinson-Sheppard & Hayward, 2018).

Problem Statement

Although media representations of left-behind children have received significant attention, scholarly work on the portrayal of left-behind children is fragmented, with most studies looking at discrete accounts or isolated themes. There is a need for a comprehensive review of such findings to reveal patterns, trends and gaps in existing literature in relation to the role of Chinese state media in shaping government discourse and public opinion.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows;

1. To analyze the representation of rural left-behind children in Chinese state media.
2. To explore how these portrayals transformed over time, especially in relation to societal and cultural developments.

Research Significance

This research has implications for understanding the role of media in constructing the social reality of left-behind children in rural areas of China. By identifying the narrative strategies and their development, the paper also uncovers the media's potential to create public awareness and integrate discourses with cultural paradigms. The findings underscore the significance of positive and non-stereotyped representations that may open people's minds, increase their tolerance, and enhance ethical communication. Finally, this study offers a theoretical contribution to the existing literature on media effects on public opinion and policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representation of Marginalized Groups in Media

In China, the representation of marginalized groups in the media tends to mirror existing societal and cultural narratives. Chinese media and cultural institution's representation of ethnic minority groups is discussed by Wang (2021) through the lens of cultural and ethical heritage and its identity in framing the minority groups in a manner that is based on the idea of national unity and social cohesion. While these portrayals contribute to raising awareness, they may also inadvertently simplify complex realities and reinforce generalized perceptions.

Similarly, Tao (2015) analyses the ways in which Chinese media present internal migrant children over the period from 1990 to 2012. Early images of neglected children focused on material deprivation, contrasting with later presentations where the coping occurs in deeds and morality that matched the growing priorities of society. This evolving discourse shows the media's framing of marginalized groups, such as left-behind children as either dependent or resilient, tying their stories to wider state-driven narratives of social stability and progress.

Evolution of Media Narratives

The media narratives on left-behind children in China are a result of changing societal and policy priorities. Gu and Yeung (2019) point out that early media images portrayed rural migrant children as facing material deprivation and lacking adequate access to education, capturing the huge infrastructure obstacles to their integration into the urban milieu. However, as China's economic and social landscape altered, stories about media changed from psychological and behavioral, mirroring the recognition of emotional and relational dynamics.

Liu and Leung (2016) consider how technology, and mobile phones in particular, has been presented as a bridge to connect migrant parents to their left-behind children. This underscores a new emotional connection and psychological well-being in news stories. These shifts highlight how socio-economic changes and policy shifts shape media content, mirroring media representations in accord with changing societal values and priorities.

Media's Role in Public Awareness

The Chinese media has played a significant role in influencing the public's impression of the difficulties facing

those so-called 'left behind' children 'left behind' by their parents. According to Coleman and Chen (2020) a new lens named "digressive framing" is introduced and explains how media narratives frequently leave out critical frames, thus underplaying structural issues while overstating individual resilience. In this approach, framing shifts public attention from the systemic causes to personal responsibility.

The support systems concerning family, school and community all play an important role in building resilience of left-behind children as pointed out by Qi and Yang (2024). Often these aspects are highlighted in media narratives that feature stories of perseverance, highlighting familial bonds that evoke public empathy. Chinese media serve as a public reflection of Chinese culture and promotes cultural values to achieve social cohesion which includes family responsibility and educational importance. It highlights the constructive role that media have in raising awareness and encouraging societal support.

Cross-cultural Comparison

Across cultural and societal contexts left-behind children are portrayed in media in different ways, with varying priorities. In China, media tend to emphasize narratives of social harmony and collective responsibility, in line with wider cultural values of familial duty and resilience. Usually, these portrayals of family relationships place emphasis on the assistance of governmental and community support in bolstering those family roles and societal cohesion (Mu, 2018).

In contrast, media systems in other contexts frequently focus on systemic factors, such like income and welfare inequalities (Lam, Ee, Anh, & Yeoh, 2013). Usually, they provide insight into those structural challenges and also address the matter of agency on the part of individuals. The differing cultural ethos may have to do with Chinese media's emphasis on welfare of the collective and the Chinese values; contrasted with democratic media's more critical stance toward social institutions in democratic contexts.

Together, these perspectives underscore the importance of cultural and societal factors in shaping media narratives. Other contexts explore structural issues to a greater degree while Chinese media focuses on collective effort and family responsibility. This balance represents the functional focus of media in solving social issues in different regions.

Theoretical Framework

According to social constructionism, social reality is developed through shared meaning, language and discourse. Basically, it states that knowledge is not objective but is constructed by cultural and social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This process is aided by the media who continue to perpetuate narratives which go on to shape societal norms and values. In particular, it is very useful to analyze how repeated media portrayal affects public perception and reinforces shared cultural narratives.

The application of social constructionism to the representation of children left-behind in the media shows how narratives reproduce societal perceptions, and endorse cultural ideology. Repeatedly, then, the media contributes to public understanding of left-behind children, largely as either a set of vulnerable victims or as a symbol of societal perseverance and resilience. These are not neutral depictions; they are part of overarching cultural narratives that support societal norms of family responsibility, education, and collective resilience (Tang & Guan, 2021).

The state and community constructs provide an emphasis on positive interventions which creates the perception that system level issues, such as rural urban migration and socio-economic inequality, are being addressed. Positive interventions are highlighted in state and community constructs to suggest that left-behind challenges are being attended to. Yet the individual struggles and their solutions are still the focus, at the expense of more widespread, societal and structural issues. Social constructionism highlights the fact that these narratives not only construct a 'discourse of left-behind children', but also influence the identities of the left-behind children within the society. Its presence underscores the role of the media in amplifying cultural values, like family responsibility and resilience, while simultaneously reflecting public perceptions of the world and the shaping of a culture.

Literature Gap

Research on left-behind children in China has increased significantly, but studies rarely investigate the interaction of isolated themes or how the evolving media narratives altered societal perceptions. Though there's limited attention to how Chinese state media presents and reinforces cultural values in these portrayals, this requires a comprehensive and critical discourse analysis.

METHODOLOGY

Research Method and Research Design

This study utilizes the qualitative research method to study left-behind children's media portrayals in China, this paper adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). This approach to the SLR allows a structured and comprehensive synthesis of academic literature, media narratives and policy documents. The study is qualitative as it explores the evolution of media narratives, how they are in alignment with cultural values and how they have a societal impact. This design offers a systematic and critical overview of existing studies, in order to better understand the nuances with which media constructs perceptions and meets research objectives.

Data Collection

This study adopted a systematic and comprehensive data collection process to find related literature and media narratives of left-behind children in China. A search strategy included a combination of keyword identification, database search, and Boolean operator integration such that the search was inclusive and precise. The aim was to develop this strategy with respect to the research objectives and make an in-depth investigation of the media narratives, their meanings and their social implications.

Searching Strategy

Keywords Research: The literature was extracted based on the research objectives and topic, using keywords such as “Chinese media representation” “left-behind children” “Narrative evolution”. Synonyms of keywords were also used to obtain the maximum amount of literature.

Database Research: For this purpose, several academic and media databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and ProQuest were used for the process of collecting the literature. They provide access to peer-reviewed articles, policy documents and reports about research themes.

BOOLEAN Operators: To refine the process and avoid irrelevant studies, Boolean operators were used. Key Boolean strategies included:

- **AND:** To combine different aspects (e.g., “left-behind children” AND “media portrayal”).
- **OR:** To include synonyms or related terms (e.g., “resilience” OR “psychological challenges”).
- **NOT:** To exclude irrelevant material (e.g., “NOT international education”).
- **Quotation Marks:** To locate exact phrases (e.g., “Chinese media narratives”).
- **Wildcard (*):** To capture variations (e.g., “child*” for “child” and “children”).

This systematic search strategy ensured that the data collection process was robust and focused.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Relevance	Studies focus on media narratives, portrayals and societal implications of left-behind children.	Studies focus on international education policies or non-migrant children.
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed articles, books, policy documents	Non-peer-reviewed articles, opinion articles
Geographic Focus	Research specifically centred on China or Chinese left-behind children	Research solely focused on other countries
Timeframe	2000–2024 (capture historical and recent trends)	Before 2000 (lack contemporary relevance)
Language	Studies published in English are included	Studies not published in English

PRISMA Framework

The PRISMA Framework process for this study is represented in **Figure 1**.

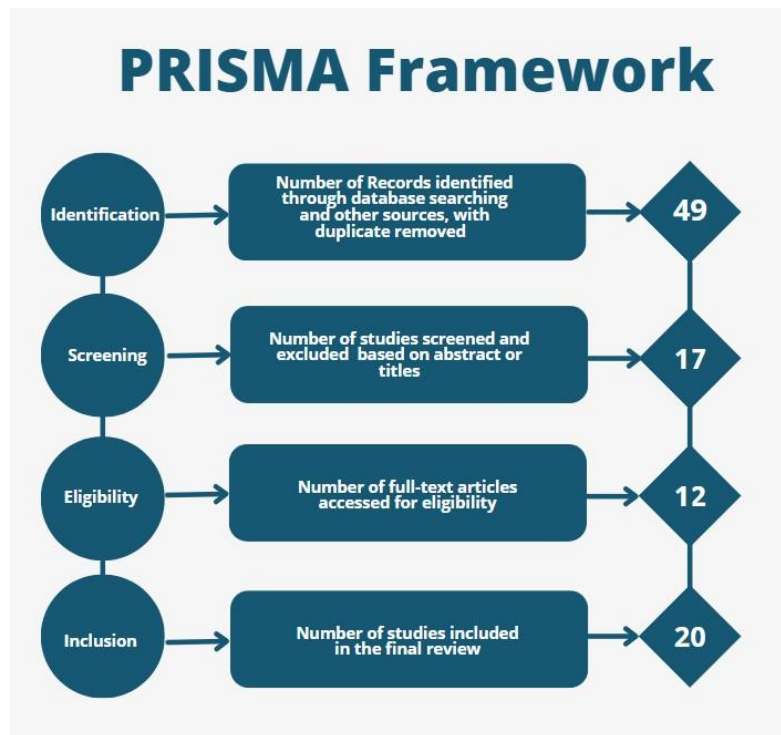


Figure 1. PRISMA Framework

For this study, the process of systematic data collection is defined by **Figure 1**. A total of 50 records were found, of which 40 were from databases and 10 through other methods. Once the duplicates had been removed, there were 33 papers remaining for screening. During screening, 17 papers were excluded because they did not meet relevance or quality criteria. The eligibility phase evaluated 21 full-text articles, excluding 12 for being irrelevant or lacking data. The qualitative synthesis included 21 studies and the data meets the research objectives. With this structured approach, the rigor involved in choosing the right and good studies is noticeable.

Data Analysis

In order to identify patterns, trends, and insight with regard to media portrayals of left-behind children in China, an analysis of the data as collected through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was completed using a thematic analysis approach. The analysis involved the following steps in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis Steps and their Description

Steps	Description
Familiarization	All selected studies were thoroughly read and reviewed to understand the content and identify recurring themes related to the research objectives.
Initial Coding	Key phrases, concepts, and ideas from the studies were highlighted and systematically coded. Such as “narrative evolution” “visual and linguistic techniques”.
Generating Themes	The codes were grouped into overarching themes that align with the study's objectives. For example: Theme 1: Shifting Narratives in Media. Theme 3: Media and Public Perceptions.
Reviewing Themes	The identified themes were reviewed for coherence and relevance. Overlapping or redundant themes were merged, while ambiguous themes were clarified and refined.
Defining and Naming Themes	Each theme was defined clearly to capture its essence, ensuring it addressed the research questions. Themes were named to reflect their content concisely.
Synthesizing Findings	Finally, the themes were synthesized to create a sense of the diverse ways media tells stories about left-behind children. Using this synthesis, conclusions about societal implications and policy alignments were drawn.

Thus, this study employs thematic analysis of media narratives and explores its impact on society through a nuanced exploration of themes present in the collection data, keeping analytic work grounded in the collection data.

RESULTS

Themes Based on Research Objectives

Themes and sub-themes obtained after thematic analysis based on the research objectives is shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Themes and their Description

Objectives	Themes	Sub-themes	Description
To analyze the representation of rural left-behind children in Chinese public media.	Analyzing Media Representation	Evolution of Narratives	Explores the transition from material deprivation to psychological and behavioral focus in media portrayals.
		Visual and Linguistic Techniques	Explores how media employs imagery and language to create impactful narratives and foster empathy.
To explore the transformation in these portrayals over time, particularly in alignment with societal and cultural developments.	Societal Implications of Representations	Media and Public Perceptions	It examines how media influences social attitudes which are in line with cultural values such as family and resilience.
		Policy Alignment in Narratives	Explores the ways media narratives serve as a means to reflect developmental goals and focus on what children need and can contribute.

Theme 1: Analyzing Media Representation

Evolution of Media Narratives

The evolution of media narratives on left-behind children forms the subject of this theme. However, it explores this transition from early representations focused on material deprivation to emergent narratives of behavioral and psychological challenges legitimated by policy priorities and socio-cultural developments. The SLR of studies related to the evolution of narratives is represented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. SLR of Evolution of Media Narratives

In-text Citation	Research Objective	Methodology	Data Analysis Results	Conclusion
Liang and Wang (2024)	Analyze discourses of grown-up left-behind children on Zhihu to understand their experiences.	Corpus-assisted analysis of online discourses on Zhihu.	Identified contradictions in narratives, revealing emotional and social struggles paired with resilience.	Media narratives present a duality of victimization and resilience.
Sun et al. (2015)	Investigate the psychological and educational challenges of left-behind children in rural China.	Mixed-method study including surveys and interviews.	Found emotional neglect and educational disadvantages, with children often depicted as lacking agency in narratives.	Early narratives focus on material deprivation, overlooking emotional and educational struggles.
Gu (2021)	Explore governance strategies for left-behind children during China's Great Migration.	Qualitative analysis of policy documents and governance models.	Media highlights family as the primary intervention unit, aligning with policy shifts and downplaying systemic issues.	Media narratives emphasize family responsibility over systemic inequalities.
You (2018)	Examine portrayals of homelessness and left-behind children in	Content analysis of literary works.	Showed a transition from helplessness to resilience, reflecting societal	Media reflects societal shifts, portraying resilience while omitting

In-text Citation	Research Objective	Methodology	Data Analysis Results	Conclusion
	Chinese children's literature.		priorities during urbanization.	structural challenges.
Liang, Wang, and Zhang (2024)	Decode paradoxical identities of left-behind children in Chinese news reports.	Discourse analysis of 200+ news articles.	Highlighted paradoxical portrayals: children depicted as vulnerable yet responsible, aligning with cultural values.	Media constructs dual identities to resonate with societal expectations and policy objectives.

The SLR shows that the representation of left-behind children in Chinese media has made a great change. Studies like Sun et al. (2015) and You (2018) evidence how early narratives mainly rely on the idea of material deprivation. These portrayals highlighted children's vulnerabilities but often overlooked deeper emotional and psychological struggles. As Gu (2021) and Liang et al. (2024) observe, media narratives gradually tuned in their focus towards exemplifying resilience and family responsibility. It is closely aligned with policy priorities; by reducing left-behind children to the products of family governance, not systemic inequalities, it restricts intervention to local authorities.

Nevertheless, Liang and Wang (2024) concur with such contradictions in the discourse and they make left-behind children appear both vulnerable and resilient at the same time in accordance with the social expectation and cultural values. The findings emphasize how media narratives reflect state-driven priorities, aligning with cultural values of family unity and resilience. These portrayals primarily focus on collective efforts and societal harmony, aligning public perceptions with developmental goals and social priorities.

Visual and Linguistic Techniques

This theme discusses how media approaches the left-behind children through their storytelling strategies. This integrates the visual and linguistic foundations to develop empathetic and culturally resonant, societal value based, public engaging narratives. The SLR of studies related to visual and linguistic techniques is shown in [Table 5](#).

Table 5. SLR of Visual and Linguistic Techniques Used by Media

In-text Citation	Research Objective	Methodology	Data Analysis Results	Conclusion
Yan (2018)	Analyze the portrayal of ethnic minority children in Chinese cinema.	Content analysis of Chinese cinema from the 1990s/2000s.	Found visualizations of rurality and ethnicity align with societal goals.	Media uses visual and cultural cues to connect narratives with societal goals.
Hirschman (2003)	Examine the role of visual and symbolic elements in shaping perceptions.	Theoretical reflection on consumer representations.	Highlighted how visual storytelling shapes societal perceptions and creates empathy.	Symbolism and visual elements are central to societal perceptions in media narratives.
Si, Du, Guo, Shi, and Song (2023)	Explore the impact of multimodal picture books on the emotional well-being of left-behind children.	Case study of 'Dear Ducklings,' a multimodal picture book.	Found that multimodal elements enhance emotional resonance, supporting children's well-being.	Multimodal approaches effectively foster empathy and emotional support for left-behind children.
Gan (2023)	Investigate how digital communication fosters emotional connections between migrant parents/children.	Qualitative analysis of video-mediated communication.	Showed how communication bridges emotional gaps, emphasizing family bonds and resilience.	Digital tools foster emotional connection and provide a basis for impactful storytelling in media.
Huang and Zou (2023)	Analyze media narratives about left-behind children in rural China.	Critical discourse analysis of media portrayals.	Media tends to focus on family responsibility while downplaying systemic issues.	Media often assigns individual responsibility, overlooking systemic structural challenges.

Together, the studies show the range of media narrative techniques on left-behind children. Yan (2018) emphasizes the usage of rural and ethnic visualizations appropriate to cultural and societal values, but Hirschman (2003) points out symbolism's role in the establishment of societal empathy. Si et al. (2023) find that multimodal

storytelling can foster emotional resonance for children, while Gan (2023) finds that digital communication facilitates the emotional bridge across familial gaps. Finally, Huang and Zou (2023) point out that media narratives focus on individual responsibility, in order to minimize systemic issues. These studies have come together to deliver a complete picture of how visual, linguistic, and technological methodologies are used to create narratives that connect to cultural values, facilitate empathy, and complement national and societal agendas. The focus of this research is on how media shapes public opinion about left-behind children. It highlights the part narratives play in the formation of societal attitudes towards issues such as family responsibility and raising awareness of difficulties experienced by children of the left-behind, all in cultural and policy contexts.

Theme 2: Societal Implications of Representations

Media and Public Perception

The theme explores how media influences the public's perception of left-behind children. It highlights the part narratives play in the formation of societal attitudes towards issues such as family responsibility and raising awareness of difficulties experienced by children of the left-behind, all in cultural and policy contexts. The SLR of media and public perception is represented in **Table 6**.

Table 6. SLR of Media and Public Perception

In-text Citation	Research Objectives	Methodology	Data Analysis Results	Conclusion
Lan (2022)	Examine how empathy impacts academic engagement of left-behind youth in rural China.	Quantitative analysis using surveys on empathy and academic outcomes.	Affective empathy improves academic engagement, while cognitive empathy moderates emotional impacts of parental absence.	Empathy can be leveraged to improve academic outcomes among left-behind youth.
Laurent (2023)	Analyze how education markets and middle-class parents influence educational access in China.	Qualitative analysis of education markets and policy documents.	Education markets privilege urban middle-class families, creating inequities in access for rural children.	Educational disparities highlight systemic marginalization of rural children.
Sheng (2022)	Provide an overview of internal migration's impacts on rural Chinese left-behind children.	Systematic literature review of internal migration effects.	Internal migration disrupts family structures, leading to academic and emotional challenges for left-behind children.	Internal migration has profound academic and emotional impacts on left-behind children.
Fang and Bi (2018)	Investigate how ethnicity is treated in Chinese children's literature, including left-behind children.	Content analysis of Chinese children's literature.	Ethnic narratives frame rural children as resilient but ignore systemic barriers in education and welfare.	Literature reflects resilience but fails to address deeper systemic issues affecting rural children.
Guo and Spyrou (2024)	Rethink 'left-behind children' through constructs like 'liushou children' in China.	Case study and critical discourse analysis.	Alternative constructs reveal systemic issues and provide nuanced perspectives on left-behind children.	Alternative constructs enrich understanding of left-behind children's challenges and narratives.

The systematic literature review shows the media's subtle role in creating public awareness of left-behind children. As a tool of narrative framing, empathy is actively recommended by Lan (2022) as a significant factor influencing academic engagement. Laurent (2023) and Sheng (2022) reveal how education markets and internal migration shape the lives of left-behind children and highlight the need for structural reform.

Fang and Bi (2018) critique how literature frames resilience but neglects systemic barriers. Finally, Guo and Spyrou (2024) suggest other constructs to help understand left-behind children better especially, in the absence of traditional narratives. Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of intersectional critiques paired with empathetic storytelling that conveys agency as a means to create deeper societal understanding and support.

Policy Alignment in Narratives

This theme discusses how media approaches the left-behind children through their storytelling strategies. This integrates the visual and linguistic foundations to develop empathetic and culturally resonant, societal value based, public engaging narratives. The SLR of policy alignment in narratives is shown in **Table 7**.

Table 7. SLR of Policy Alignment in Narratives

In-text Citation	Research Objectives	Methodology	Data Analysis Result	Conclusion
Hsu (2010)	Analyze state-NGO relationships and their influence on societal narratives in China.	Organizational analysis of state-NGO interactions and societal discourse.	State-NGO narratives align with state policies, framing societal issues within permissible discourse boundaries.	State-aligned narratives dominate, influencing public perception and limiting systemic critiques.
Q. Chen, Sun, Xie, Li, and Chan (2019)	Analyze how internal migration affects child victimization in China.	Meta-analysis of 35 studies using quantitative data related to internal migration.	Migration increases emotional and physical abuse risks; parental absence and inequalities are key factors.	Highlights the need for policies to protect children in migrant families.
Li (2015)	Explore how narratives shape identity formation among rural migrant women in Chongqing.	Qualitative interviews with rural migrant women on identity and narrative formation.	Narratives empower migrant women but remain influenced by systemic cultural and policy constraints.	Narratives provide agency but are shaped by cultural and systemic constraints.
H. Chen (2019)	Investigate mediated communication in transnational Chinese families and its effects on traditional parenting.	An ethnographic study of communication practices in transnational Chinese families.	Mediated communication redefines parenting roles while reinforcing traditional cultural values in transnational families.	Communication fosters cultural continuity while adapting to modern challenges.
Ramasubramanian and Banjo (2020)	Bridge cultural communication and media effects through power, intersectionality, and agency frameworks.	A theoretical framework combining critical cultural communication and media effects analysis.	Media constructs intersecting identities and agency while highlighting systemic power dynamics in cultural narratives.	Media narratives integrate cultural and systemic analyses, offering a nuanced understanding of power and agency.

This systematic literature review of Policy Alignment in Narratives provides insight into what constitutes a successful adaptation of cultural, systemic and policy driven context of media narratives. Q. Chen et al. (2019) claim that internal migration in China turns children into vulnerable victims of both emotional and physical abuse due to socioeconomic inequalities and parental absence. Li (2015) studies how marginalized groups form narratives and finds that identity empowerment is often countered by systemic constraints. Building on the work of H. Chen (2019), this paper explores issues of transnational family dynamics, charting how media enables cultural continuity when faced with global challenges. Finally, Ramasubramanian and Banjo (2020) theorize power and intersectionality in media narratives.

Together, these studies show how such a balance among media's shaping of public awareness, reinforcement of policy goals, addressing systemic inequalities. The findings highlight the need for more nuanced, intersectional analysis of media narratives towards a more nuanced understanding of power and agency.

DISCUSSION

The study finds considerable evolution in media narratives about left-behind children in China. Portrayals were initially focused on material deprivation, then increasingly psychological and behavioral challenges influenced by policy and cultural changes. Visual and linguistic techniques of media create empathetic and cohesive narratives around family values and societal balance. Narratives that align with policy goals are both pedagogical and leverage systemic critiques in ways that foster awareness, but at the cost of undermining public perception and minimize systemic critiques. Wherein, cross-cultural comparisons reveal how state controlled and independent media are different, and systemic critiques are more prevalent in contexts of independent media.

Discussion on Analysing Media Representation

The results of this research demonstrate an important transformation in how left-behind children are depicted in Chinese media. Early on the focus was on material deprivation and the absence of parental care but

later shifted to behavioral and psychological problems. This corresponds well with the broader societal and policy shifts in how family responsibility and resilience take the place of systematic shortcomings. Additionally, visual and linguistic strategies are put to use by media in constructing those narratives that work with cultural values, capitalize on empathy and press people into public engagement together with the reinforcement of collective duty and social harmony.

X. Chen's (2024) findings are in agreement with this theme's finding and support their role of changing societal priorities to alter narratives. In doing so, they challenge the growing recognition of migrant parents' active agency in educational contexts as a reflection of a more generalized trend of deciding who is to be held responsible for a child's failure: the system, or the family. Zhao, Wang, Zhou, Jiang, and Hesketh (2018) also found that media and public discourse typically highlight emotional resilience of left-behind children, consistent with cultural values of family and psychological strength.

On the other hand, Mu and Hu (2016) take a critical stance, showing how stories about the left children and floating children in China often veil structural inequalities and the policy barriers. While resilience is tracked and celebrated, the structural factors which lead to continued vulnerability are often ignored, contrasting to state media's framing of things. The difference serves to highlight the importance of a greater context for how media can affect the way people perceive society.

Discussion on Societal Implications of Representation

The results in this theme reveal the why media is an indispensable component for public understanding of the left-behind children in China. Resilience, family responsibility, and even the cultural values associated with educational dedication are commonly told within narratives which foster societal empathy. Yet, these portrayals often align with policy priorities depicting close family ties that rarely acknowledge systemic matters like rural-urban inequities. Furthermore, state controlled media in China contrasts with other independent media to focus on building a powerful societal harmony, whereas independent media elsewhere systematically criticizes the system.

These findings resonate closely with the results of Dong (2023) that highlights how left-behind children are prone to adopt tales of resilience and accountability created by societal ideals, leading to their emotional and academic aspirational formation. In a similar way, Evans and Hornberger (2005) demonstrate that media under the banner of the "No Child left behind" framework also aligns with policy goals such as measurable outcomes driven by educational accountability and ignores broader systemic inequities.

Mu (2018) on the other hand, criticizes the celebratory tone of resilience narratives making the point that resilience narratives emphasize individual strength whilst obscuring that structural inequalities continue to create vulnerability. A failure to talk about these systemic issues in a way that does not reaffirm the status quo makes these portrayals less likely to facilitate a true transformation. The stark contrast makes it more necessary for media to balance the presentation of system critique with those narratives driven by empathy.

Theoretical Implications

This finding is in accord with the framework of social constructionism as the process through which societal realities are constructed by having shared narratives and cultural discourse. The ways in which the media frames left-behind children as either resilient or vulnerable reflect broader societal values about family responsibility and resilience. This supports Tang and Guan's (2021) assertion that media processes societal perceptual alignment with state promoted narrative of harmony and policy effectiveness. This is backed up even further by the literature review, which shows that media narratives place an emphasis on resilience, familial responsibility and simultaneously ignore systemic inequalities (Murphy, 2020).

Further, the study also demonstrates how the media employs visual and linguistic strategies to construct narrative coherence and increase empathy and focus the public on an issue. This is consistent with Liu and Leung's (2016) work in understanding how media utilizes technology to establish an emotional connection between migrant parents and children. In other words, these findings note the cultural resonance of media narratives, that generate a sense of collective responsibility and social harmony, as pointed out by Tao (2015). These trends are explained by the theoretical framework on the basis of the media's role in shaping societal norms and values through repeated framing and discourse.

Yet, the findings also highlight limitations in media portrayal. The narratives tend to channel their attention away from systemic issues, such as rural urban inequality by focusing on individual resilience and familial responsibility. However, social constructionism further explains this tendency by arguing that media frames are framed by state priorities in a way that determines the kind of reality constructed for developmental purposes but enforces limits on systemic critique. The findings ultimately confirm the dual media function as an actor who both

constructs and reinforces cultural values and implements those of the state.

Practical Implications

Finally, this study provides a number of practical implications for improving media portrayals of left-behind children and for tackling societal challenges. First, it underscores the importance of media narration shifting from resilience and familial responsibility to systemic criticism. Media can therefore increase public awareness, awareness of structural problems and facilitate policy reform.

Second, the findings indicate that media practitioners need to employ more inclusive and subtle stories. Diverse voices, including those of left-behind children, their families, and community advocates are useful for enriching, and challenging, narratives to include previously marginalized views. To create balanced representations, it is crucial to train journalists and media professionals not to fall into the trap of reductive portrayals.

Finally, the study suggests using visual and linguistic means to facilitate empathy and engagement. It is through such collaboration that policymakers as well as NGOs can join hands with the media and design awareness campaigns to create resonance with cultural values while advocating for change at a systemic level. However, by bringing these strategies together, the media can make major contributions to shaping public perceptions, influencing policies and ensuring a more equitable society for left-behind children.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the representation of rural left-behind children in China's public media and how media discourses have changed, along with their social impacts in line with policy objectives. It identifies themes reflecting shifts in the values of society and the media strategy using a qualitative research method and a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Media are thus 'shown' to have a critical role in the construction of societal perceptions, family responsibility and resilience, along with somewhat downplaying of systemic challenges. These results are consistent with a theoretical framework of social constructionism whereby common stories develop public awareness and policy congruence.

Results show the narrative transition from early material deprivation to behavioral and psychological challenges. Fostering empathy and aligning narratives and cultural values, the use of visual and linguistic storytelling techniques has been central in bringing this about. Family responsibility is pushed as being a media focus, and away from the systemic issues such as rural to urban migrants.

These portrayals are of significant to the society. Different media frames left-behind children as resilient and responsible, this framing generates societal empathy as well as public support. However, these accounts fail to recognize structural inequalities. By bringing these to the forefront, this study urges media narratives that combine such empathy driven storytelling with systemic critique so as to achieve more comprehensive public awareness and policy reform. These findings extend the understanding of media's dual role in the creation of culture while supporting state driven objectives, informing media practitioners, policymakers and scholars.

LIMITATIONS

However, this study addresses Chinese media primarily, although there may be other portrayals in non-mainstream or social media platforms. Thematic analysis is also reliant on subjective interpretation based on the researcher's perspective. Finally, the availability of comparable studies from other contexts limits cross-cultural comparisons.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

For future research, non-mainstream media platforms and social media should be used to capture diversity in the narrative of left-behind children. Quantitative and mixed methods approaches are particularly useful in trying to come up with findings that apply on a more generalizable level. Future research examining evolving narratives over time, as well as cross cultural analyses should consider media systems from more varied socio-political contexts.

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