



**LONG-DISTANCE PARENTING AND CHILD CAREGIVING SERVICES OF
RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION IN CHINA:
THE CASE STUDIES IN HECHI CITY,
GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION**

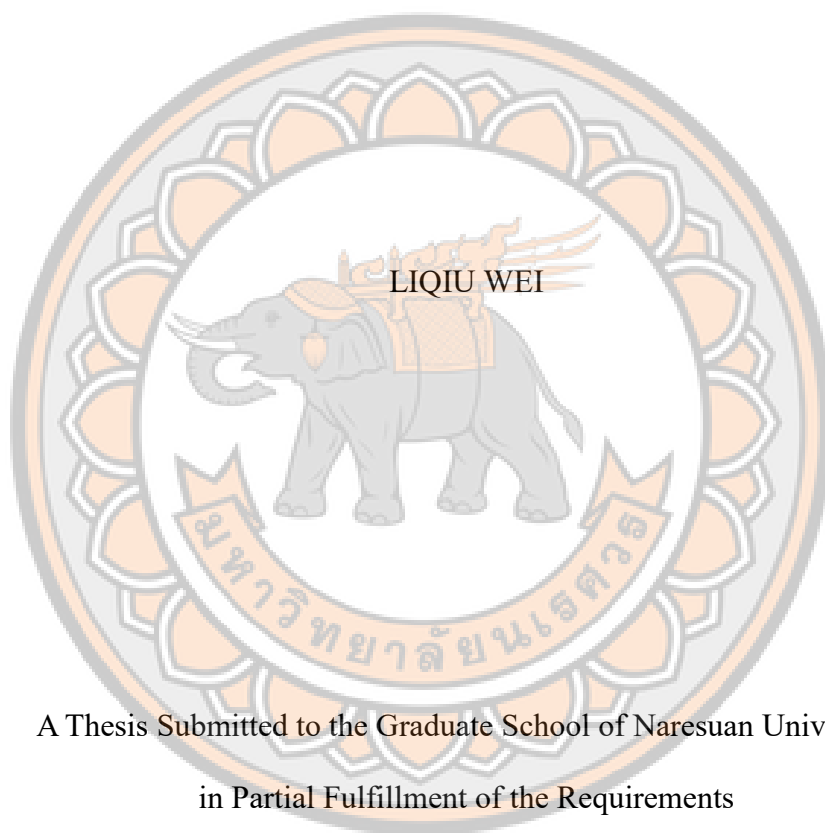
LIQIU WEI

**A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School of Naresuan University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master of Arts in Social Development-(Type A 1)**

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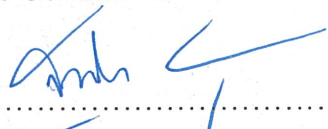
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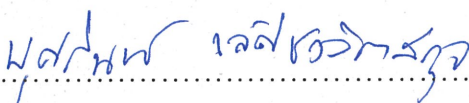
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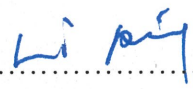
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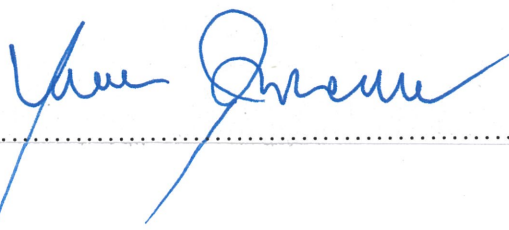

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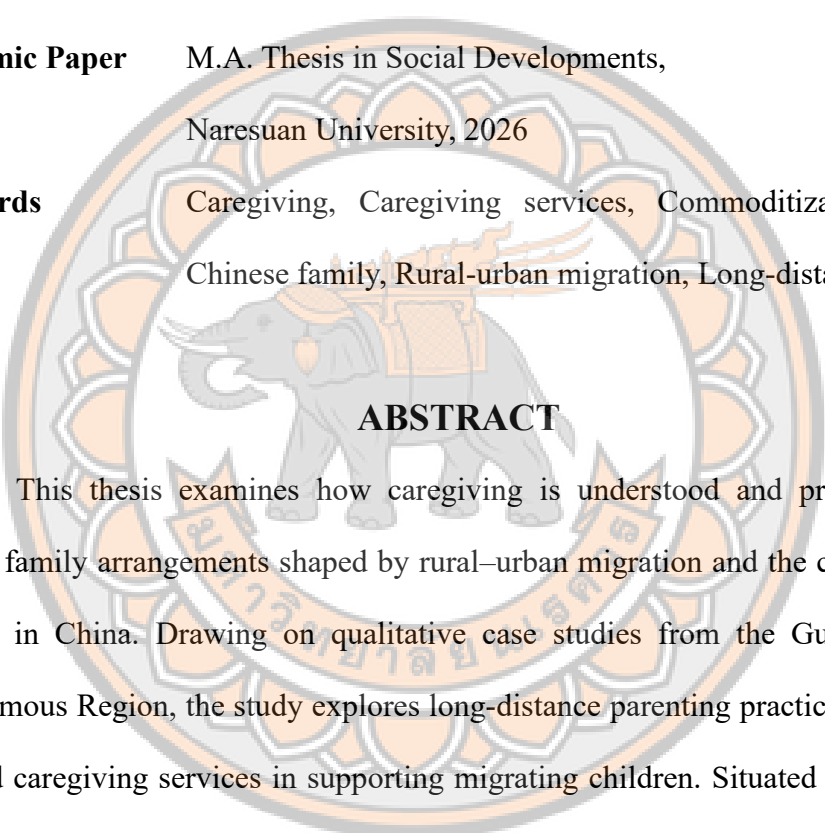
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how caregiving is understood and practiced within diverse family arrangements shaped by rural–urban migration and the closure of rural schools in China. Drawing on qualitative case studies from the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the study explores long-distance parenting practices and the role of child caregiving services in supporting migrating children. Situated within debates on welfare provision and the growing commodification of care, the research highlights how Chinese parents increasingly rely on private caregiving services while negotiating culturally embedded meanings of parental responsibility and care.

Guided by three research questions, this study investigates: (1) how parents practice long-distance parenting under conditions of rural–urban migration; (2) how parents define and perceive caregiving provided by child caregiving services; and (3) how caregiving services in urban areas understand their caregiving roles and deliver

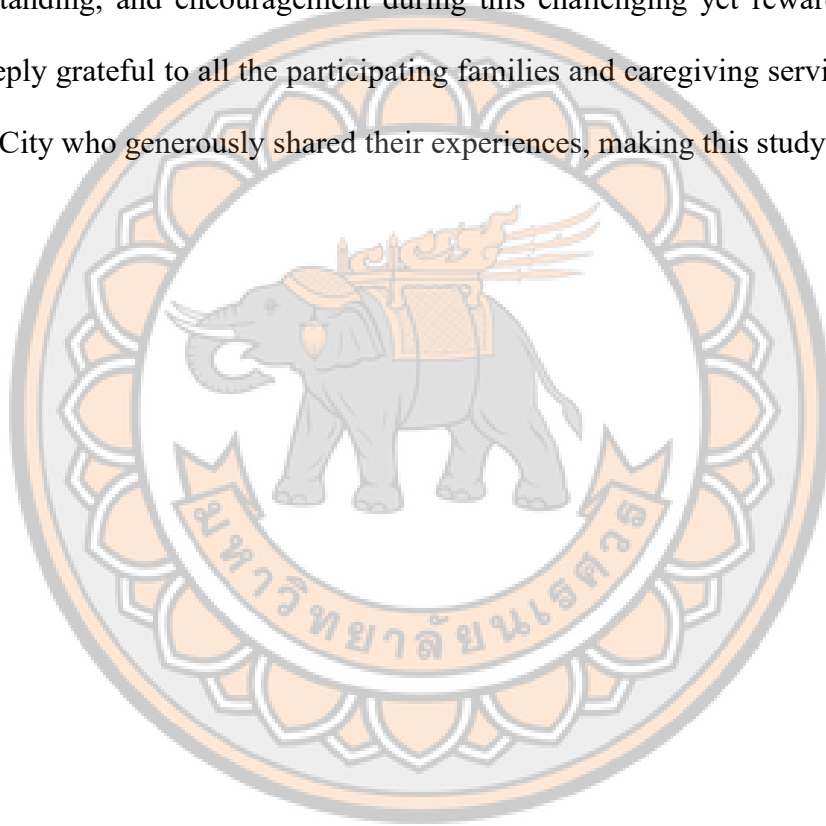
care to migrating children. Using in-depth interviews, the study includes parents from nine families, categorized into two groups: parents who remain in rural areas while their children attend urban schools and live in caregiving services, and migrant parents who work in urban areas while leaving their children in caregiving services. In addition, six caregivers from caregiving services participated in the research, including teachers, managers, and full-time caregivers.

The findings show that parents practice long-distance parenting through a combination of economic provision, digital communication, emotional support, and coordination with caregivers, reflecting a form of distributed parenting rather than parental withdrawal. Parents define caregiving services as essential support that enables them to fulfill parental responsibilities, particularly in education and daily supervision, in the absence of extended family members. Caregiving services, meanwhile, perform a dual role as both private service providers and emotional caregivers, forming affective relationships with children while operating within market-based arrangements.

These caregiving dynamics reveal blurred boundaries between formal and informal care, shaped by trust, economic constraints, and Confucian moral values. The study contributes to understanding how caregiving is reorganized at the intersection of migration, parenting, and marketization, demonstrating that the commodification of caregiving in China does not replace parental responsibility but restructures how care is delivered within distributed family systems.

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Liqui Wei

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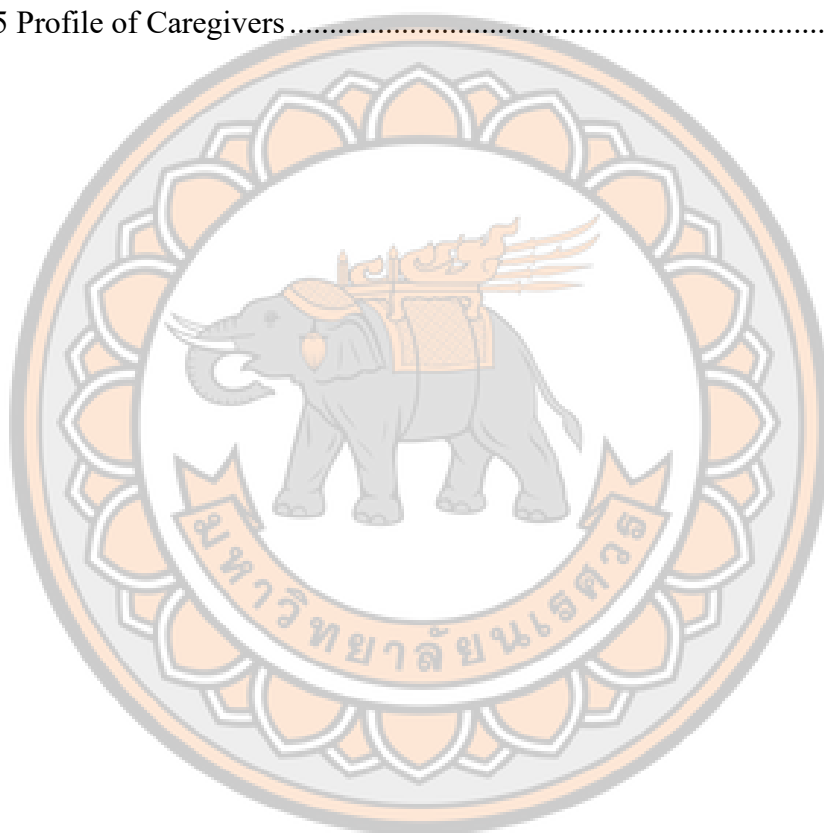
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Since the start of economic reforms in 1978, China's economy has proliferated, leading to the world's largest-ever wave of rural-urban migration, accelerating urbanization in the country (Zhang & Shunfeng, 2003). More than 500 million people have moved to China's cities since the reform year, with migration from rural to urban areas accounting for 78% of this increase (Su et al., 2018). The situation is even more complex: rural-urban migration intersects with urbanization, with demographic impacts on rural communities. The decline in the rural population has led to a steep decrease in the number of school-age children, resulting in the closure or merger of rural schools. The 2020 National Education Development Report stated that the number of primary schools in rural areas decreased from 160,160 in 2019 to 158,000 in 2020, while 746 primary schools were established in urban areas (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2021).

Resulting from rural-urban migration, Roberts and Hannum (2018) reported that the education of migrant worker children has been complicated by two major social issues: 'floating children' and 'left-behind children.' The former group does not travel with their parents; instead, they live with grandparents or a single parent or attend boarding schools in their registered township. When both parents are migrants, grandparents' care is the dominant arrangement (Zhou et al., 2014). Parents are forced to leave their children in the care of grandparents or relatives in their rural hometowns

due to restrictions imposed by the household registration (hukou) system, which categorizes Chinese citizens as either urban or rural based on their registered permanent residence. This system also causes employment, social, and residential segmentation, making it difficult for them and their family members to access essential public services such as education, health care, and social security in urban areas. (Cadsby et al., 2020).

Given the stark differences in educational resources between rural and urban regions, many parents have moved to cities to provide their children with high-quality education. As a result, the Chinese educational system may have changed in recent years. There is still significant evidence of educational disparities between rural and urban communities. The hybrid education experience, in addition to an unstable life, reduces the educational performance of migrant children, as rural migrant children account for a large proportion of rural children, exacerbating the educational inequality between rural and urban populations of the country (Zhang et al., 2015).

China's elementary schools nationwide have experienced a sharp decline due to rural-urban migration and the constraints imposed by the hukou system. Many rural youths have relocated to urban areas in search of education as urbanization accelerates. This has indirectly led to a decrease in primary school enrollment in rural areas, forcing some regions to consolidate or close the primary schools. As a result, the number of schools has also rapidly declined (Dongrinuanyang, 2023). According to Zhou et al. (2014), there was only one primary school in each township due to school mergers. Furthermore, because curricula differ across administrative districts, pupils who migrate across provincial lines are negatively affected by the need to take exams for senior high school and university entry in their registered province of residence.

As a result, moving to the county has become a viable option for many rural residents. For most migrant parents, comprehensive childcare services located in the county or urban areas are now their first choice. However, comprehensive studies on the impacts of the intersection of rural-urban migration, urbanization, and the schooling policies are scarce. Therefore, this thesis will firstly examine long-distance parenting strategies for parents whose children move to cities for school, as well as those who migrate to work in other cities and leave their children in the care of private providers.

Due to parents' migration and children moving to cities for better education, long-distance parenting is a prevalent practice in such circumstances. Parents cannot avoid confronting the challenges of fostering a meaningful, engaged relationship, despite geographic separation, to sustain familial relationships and support systems. In this study, every parent and child, particularly those who migrated to urban areas for education and relied on child-caregiving services, had either a mobile phone or a phone watch. These mobile communication devices served as valuable tools for long-distance parenting, enabling parents to maintain regular contact and offer support to their children despite physical separation (Liu & Leung, 2017). It becomes evident that long-distance parenting is not merely an individual concern but a societal issue that necessitates collective action. This research will specifically examine how parents who migrate for work and place their children in childcare services navigate long-distance parenting.

In addition to examining long-distance parenting, this study employed a qualitative research method to investigate the perceptions of parents and care providers regarding childcare in Huanjiang Maonan Autonomous County (hereinafter referred to as Huanjiang), Hechi City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (hereinafter referred to as Guangxi). Guangxi has a complex ethnic composition and a dense network of minority settlements. Harsh living conditions, specifically,

mountainous terrain, poor land, and long-term poverty, are predominant in most of the region (Xin, 2002). Huanjiang County is characterized by karst mountains and dispersed rural settlements, which makes it challenging for infrastructure and economic development. Zhao and Lu (2020) reported that Guangxi remains one of China's poorer border provinces, with approximately 4.52 million of its population, or 4.52%, living below the national poverty line in 2015. The out-migration rate of Guangxi increased from less than 1.3% from 1990 to 1995 to more than 3.6% from 1995 to 2000 (Shen, 2013). Xu (2009) also points to considerable intra-provincial variations in socioeconomic conditions, indicating that measures of equity and development tend to decrease. The Guangxi government has attempted to address this through widespread anti-poverty campaigns and infrastructure investment to stimulate underdeveloped areas.

Among Guangxi's prefectural cities, Hechi has the lowest equity index. In August 2023, the opening of the Guiyan-Nanning high-speed railway immensely improved transportation accessibility to and from Hechi. This development promoted labor mobility and regional economic integration (Xinhua, 2023). This made Hechi a strongly representative site for exploring caregiving dynamics under migration and inequality, which includes family separation, long-distance parenting, reliance on caregiving institutions, and changes in caregiving practices.

Background of the study: Rural-urban migration

Rapid economic growth and industrialization in China have driven more and more peasants into urban areas. The children of migrants either moved with their parents to cities or stayed behind in villages, cared for by their grandparents or relatives (Tang, 2012). In recent years, as county towns have grown and people increasingly seek a better educational environment for their children, many have relocated to these areas. As a result, rural schools now face declining student populations. During the 1950s, in an attempt to control population movement, the government classified every resident as rural or urban through the household

registration system (hukou). There may be special problems for migrant children in terms of education since the Chinese state places severe restrictions on the access of children of migrant workers to education in urban China. However, there are also critical non-economic reasons for migration, including the desire to experience city lifestyles, which are frequently presented in the Chinese media and state discourses as being more “advanced” than rural life, and which may be particularly important for parents wishing their children to become modern urban citizens (Goodburn, 2016).

Regarding the educational impact of parental migration on children, Zhou et al. (2014) state that children’s academic performance is adversely affected by parental migration only when both parents migrate or when a non-parent guardian is the principal carer. Additionally, longer durations of parental absence are associated with poorer educational performance. Youlu (2017) mentioned that it can be seen that both migrant and left-behind children experience problems with educational difficulties, poor discipline, and poor mental adaptability, and are in a disadvantaged position, and recommends that the government, schools, society, and families jointly cooperate to strengthen emotional guidance for migrant children and left-behind children and ensure that no child is abandoned, allowing migrant children to grow and learn healthily in their respective environments.

Currently, there is a significant body of work exploring long-distance parenting in China, particularly among parents who migrate abroad for work. However, this study focuses on a less-researched aspect: parents who migrate to other cities, as well as those who remain on farms but confront a lack of educational facilities in rural areas. Consequently, these parents are compelled to send their children to live and attend school in urban areas and rely on private caregiving services.

Rational study: Child caregiving services and the commoditization of care

Specific to the care of children at the primary education level in China, which is the focus of this research, Chinese parents, as a collective practice, pick up their children twice a day. In China, the regular school day is nationally regulated: it begins at 8 AM and continues until noon, after which there is a midday break. Classes resume at 2:30 p.m. and conclude at 5 p.m. Compared to many countries, where students attend classes for an entire day, the primary school program in China involves four daily trips, which requires parents working full-time to track their children personally each day. Children are sent to private care services to find solutions that provide shelter and oversight for their studies.

There is growing interest in understanding caregiving practices across childcare types (centers and preschools, family childcare homes, and kith and kin care), in particular, childcare providers are increasingly considered sources of family support beyond the physical care of children (Bromer & Henly, 2004). Caregiving encompasses the nurturing, tasks, resources, and services that meet the day-to-day needs of children and youths (Hoover et al., 2022). The term “caregiving” is widely used and has been studied from a variety of perspectives, including nursing, sociology, and psychology. By analyzing the term caregiving, Hermanns and Mastel-Smith (2012) argue that caregiving is the act or process of helping those who are suffering. Sociologists narrowly define caregivers as unpaid workers, including family members, friends, neighbors, and individuals affiliated with religious institutions. From this, we can understand that caregiving encompasses at least several aspects related to both care and the caregiver.

In short, caregiving services refer to support for caregivers. It is widely recognized that the quality of caregiving and educational processes within childcare centers is strongly influenced by the “structural” characteristics of the caregiving environment. Four structural characteristics are particularly influential, namely: 1) the child–caregiver ratio, 2) group size, 3) caregiver education and training, and 4) caregiver salary. The child-caregiver ratio is generally considered the most important structural characteristic of center-based care, particularly for younger children (De Schipper et al., 2006).

Distinct from broader caregiving, child-caregiving services in China are roughly defined as after-school programs that receive parents’ permission to manage and educate students. The content of caregiving services includes studies of life, behavior, moral character, and other aspects (Dan, 2020; Fen, 2020; Ji, 2025). In China, the specific types of caregiving services mainly include: first, small caregiving services classes opened or rented by private persons in residential areas or commercial houses on the first floor; second, large-scale caregiving services operated by various educational institutions or enterprises; third, the caregiving services provided by social institutions such as youth activity centers and communities (Zhao, 2022). Apart from the original concept of caregiving services, the services in this study are defined as the commodification of care.

According to the study’s data collection, four types of child-caregiving services were identified in the study area and across all of China. First, weekly care provides weekday (Monday to Friday) breakfast, lunch, and dinner, pick-up and drop-off, study counseling, and life care services, etc. Parents will take them home on Friday evening. The parents will pick up the children on Friday evening and take them home. Second,

midday care provides only lunch, lunch-break care, and midday pick-up and drop-off services from Monday to Friday. Lunch care only provides lunch, lunch break, and midday pick-up and drop-off services Monday to Friday. Third, evening care prepares dinner, academic counseling, and evening pick-up and drop-off services from Monday to Friday only. Fourth is full-time care, which includes providing food, clothing, and accommodation for an entire semester. The fourth type will be the focus of this paper.

The absence of parental care at home due to parental migration, school closures, and mergers prompts parents to seek alternatives (Yin, 2025). Private childcare giving services, which are dubbed as “*tuo guan ji gou*” (托管机构) in Chinese language, translated as “trusteeship institutions”, have become a necessary replacement, undertaking tasks beyond physical care to include supervision and school support (Zhou 2019 ; Dan, 2020; Fen, 2020; Wei, 2022). This option is primarily available in cities of all sizes in China, and the services are often located adjacent to primary schools. They are a helpful resource for migrant parents who must send their children to primary education, and for migrant children who lack access to schools in rural areas. This reflects increasing demands and commodification of caregiving under structural changes in many parts of the world, including China. Echoing Folbre’s argument (1994), childcare, which is part of social production, has become paid work handled mainly by women both at home and in the market. Care has become a product that can be sold and bought in the care marketization.

Commodification of care is defined as the transformation of care and care work into commodities that are bought, sold, and traded in the market, thereby rendering relationships with the state and society (Aulenbacher et al., 2018). Commodification of care is rooted in capitalism, where it is treated as a product or service traded for

profit, rather than being based on personal relationships or philanthropy (Ungerson, 2005; Coe, 2024). Nevertheless, it is the transformation of social production in response to economic shifts, influenced by various factors and structures within a contested terrain of social countermovement (Aulenbacher et al., 2018). The commodification of care is therefore seen as paid work or formal, while it is also in contestation with existing non-paid or informal work, which is often immersed in personal obligation and morality. However, on several occasions, these two types become blurred in their boundaries (Ungerson, 2005; Claassen, 2011; Coe, 2024).

While childcare has gained importance and been incorporated into policies by welfare states (Mahon, 2002; Aulenbacher et al., 2018), the Chinese government has designed a concrete scheme for childcare support, primarily targeting pre-school or kindergarten (Jinglun & Xin, 2020). However, parents must rely on private care when their kids enter primary education. In 2011, the quantity of child caregiving services in China increased from 43,100 to 57,300 by 2018—a 32.95% rise within seven years (Dan, 2020). This upward trend continued, with 75,700 caregiving services and 3.6 million childcare places tallied by the end of 2022, followed by 4.77 million slots by 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024; Xinhua, 2024). The statistics emphasize that childcare has been transformed from unpaid labor within families and kinship into paid services with the commodification of care.

Previous literature regarding childcare resulting from migration in China has focused on migrant parents and left-behind children (Wen & Lin, 2012; Lu et al., 2019; Chen, 2023), while several have concentrated on education management or children's physical or psychological well-being (Bromer & Henly, 2004; Corlett & Twycross, 2006). This article then illustrates how parents and caregiving services construct and

negotiate their understanding of care's meanings and practices in contemporary China. Moreover, there have been a few Chinese-language research studies on caregiving services; however, the management of these services has been hardly addressed due to their semi-legal status (Dongguan Municipal Government, 2025; Ji, 2025; Zhong & Long, 2025). Meanwhile, parents' understanding and meanings of care received less attention. This study fills these gaps by providing a case-based, in-depth study of childcare giving in Huanjiang, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. It asks how caregiving is perceived, defined, and enacted across different family forms. Meanings and perceptions of childcare are negotiated through everyday communication and interactions between parents and care providers. The childcare deficit at the primary education level in China, therefore, gives nuances of both care systems that have become a collective action (Folbre, 1994), as parents in China are encountering challenges amidst the evolving rural-urban migration and rural school shutdowns in rural areas (Chen et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2022).

This study aims to contribute to the current phenomenon of childcare in China, especially by examining parents in agricultural areas who were affected by educational solutions arising from rural-urban migration. While the previous research looked at the migrant parents, this study will look at both groups, one remains home, but children become migrants, and those who migrate and have no one to take care of their children. Another important issue is the limited research on parents' and private childcare providers' definitions and perceptions of caregiving. Research in China has been conducted on the phenomenon and policy suggestions for education management, and children's physical and psychological conditions, including their behaviors and study performance (Zhao, 2019; Zhou 2020; Zhong,2025).

Policy Context of Childcare and Caregiving Services in China

While childcare has gained increasing attention and has been incorporated into welfare policies across different contexts (Mahon, 2002; Aulenbacher et al., 2018), the Chinese government has developed a relatively concrete policy framework for childcare support that primarily targets children under the age of three, often within pre-school or kindergarten settings (Jinglun & Xin, 2020; General Office of the State Council, 2019). This policy orientation is closely linked to concerns over declining fertility, work–family conflict, and the need to support early childhood development (Yang, 2019; Zhang & Song, 2024). Once children enter primary education, however, formal policy support becomes limited, and parents are largely required to rely on private or semi-formal caregiving arrangements, particularly in urban areas.

Alongside this in need, the number of child caregiving services in China has expanded rapidly. Between 2011 and 2018, the number of caregiving services increased from 43,100 to 57,300, representing a rise of 32.95% within seven years (Dan, 2020). This growth continued, reaching 75,700 caregiving services and 3.6 million childcare places by the end of 2022, and further expanding to 4.77 million places in 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024; Xinhua, 2024). Although these figures suggest a growing supply of caregiving services, existing studies indicate that the expansion has been driven not only by policy encouragement but also by the insufficiency of public provision and uneven policy implementation (Wei, 2018; Pan, 2020; Liu et al., 2025).

Research further shows that childcare policies in China have largely emphasized institutional establishment, regulatory standards, and service expansion, while issues related to accessibility, affordability, and service sustainability remain insufficiently

addressed (Zhang & Wei, 2019; Chen et al., 2022). As a result, families—particularly those affected by rural–urban migration—often face limited access to stable and affordable public caregiving options and are pushed toward market-based solutions. In this context, caregiving has increasingly shifted from unpaid labor embedded in family and kinship relations to paid services provided by childcare services, reflecting a broader process of care commodification (Mahon, 2002; Aulenbacher et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2025).

Within this policy environment, caregiving for migrating children frequently takes place outside the family and beyond direct parental supervision, relying instead on various forms of paid caregiving services. While existing policies prioritize service expansion and institutional management, they pay limited attention to how caregiving is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday family life (Guo & Zuo, 2021; Liu et al., 2025). In particular, little is known about how parents enact long-distance parenting under conditions of rural–urban migration, how they define and evaluate “good care” when caregiving is delegated to services, and how caregiving institutions themselves understand and perform their caregiving roles. Addressing these gaps, this study examines long-distance parenting practices and caregiving services from the perspectives of parents and service providers, situating their experiences within the broader policy context of childcare provision in contemporary China.

Research questions

1 . How do parents practice long-distance parenting in the context of rural–urban migration in China?

2 . How do parents define and perceive caregiving provided by child caregiving services?

3 . How do child caregiving services in urban areas define their caregiving roles and provide care for migrating children?

Research objectives

1 . To examine how parents practice long-distance parenting under conditions of rural–urban migration in China.

2 . To explore parents' definitions and perceptions of caregiving provided by child caregiving services.

3 . To analyze how child caregiving services in urban areas define their caregiving roles and deliver care to migrating children.

Research Significance

1. Rural-urban migration is a prevalent trend in China, leading to the separation of parents from their children. Understanding the implications of this phenomenon for parenting and child caregiving is crucial for addressing the social challenges arising from such separations.

2. By exploring the experiences of long-distance parenting and the utilization of caregiving services, this study sheds light on the evolving dynamics of family structures in the context of migration. This understanding is essential for policymakers and service providers to develop targeted interventions that support families in the context of parents' rural-urban migration and children's migration to urban areas.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on the analysis of long-distance parenting and child-caregiving services in the context of rural – urban migration in China. The discussion is organized around four major themes that align with the dynamics later examined in the findings and discussion chapters.

The first theme concerns rural–urban migration and its impact on education in China. This includes the emergence of migrant and left-behind children, the decline of rural schools, and the structural pressures that drive parents to relocate or send their children away for schooling. These studies provide essential background for understanding why families in regions such as Guangxi must redistribute caregiving across distance.

The second theme examines educational solutions that have emerged in response to migration and educational restructuring. This section reviews three pathways: children migrating to cities, the rise of child-caregiving services, and the role of boarding schools. Recent Chinese and English-language studies on caregiving services illustrate not only their rapid expansion but also recurring issues of semi-legal status, uneven regulation, and increasing marketization. These insights help contextualize how caregiving services in Huanjiang frame their responsibilities and justify their practices, as later discussed in Chapter V.

The third theme focuses on parenting strategies under migration. It considers long-distance parenting, the role of grandparents and kinship networks, and the ways families adapt parental responsibilities across geographic separation. Research on mobile-phone parenting, intergenerational caregiving, and gendered divisions of care provides a foundation for analyzing how parents in this study maintain emotional ties, supervision, and moral guidance from afar.

Finally, the fourth theme presents the conceptual framework for this research. It reviews key concepts of caregiving, the commoditization of care, parenting, and family systems. These perspectives help explain how caregiving becomes distributed among parents, kin, and caregiving service providers in rural–urban migration settings. The framework also informs later chapters by clarifying how both parents and caregivers construct the meaning of “care,” how responsibilities are negotiated, and how care becomes more commodified.

Together, these four themes provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how parents and caregiving services define care in Huanjiang. These concepts are applied to interpret the daily practices, emotional work, and organizational strategies that structure childcare in the context of migration.

2.1 Rural-urban migration and the impact on education in China

2.1.1 Rural-urban migration in China

Since the late 1970s, China has experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization, leading to one of the largest internal migration flows in modern history. Economic reforms created new employment opportunities in urban areas, and an increasing number of rural residents moved to cities seeking higher wages and improved living conditions (Ma et al., 2018). Since 1979, more than 500 million

people have been added to China's urban population, and approximately 78% of this increase is attributable to rural-to-urban migration. As China's economic structure shifts toward greater reliance on domestic consumption and investment, migrants have become an essential component of the urban economy, supporting industrial development and driving city growth (Su et al., 2018).

Rural migrants have also become a major part of the urban labor force. Their mobility provides flexible and relatively low-cost labor that supports urban construction and service sectors (Mohabir et al., 2017). According to the Seventh National Population Census in 2020, the country's mobile population reached 376 million, representing 26.6 percent of the total population and illustrating the increasing scale and persistence of internal migration (Cao et al., 2023). Migration has not only reshaped the distribution of labor but has also reconfigured family structures and caregiving arrangements, as parents and children are often separated across rural-urban divides (Li et al., 2024).

Rural-urban migration is not unique to China but reflects broader patterns observed across developing countries. In Bolivia, for example, education accounted for more than one-quarter of rural-to-urban migration, with a majority of migrants enrolling in primary, secondary, or tertiary education (McCatty, 2004). Indonesia has also recorded one of the highest rates of urbanization in Asia over the past four decades, driven primarily by sustained rural-urban migration (Marta et al., 2020). These cases demonstrate that migration is frequently used as a strategy to improve access to educational resources and enhance future opportunities.

What distinguishes the Chinese case is the interaction between large-scale migration and institutional constraints such as the hukou system, uneven regional

development, and the restructuring of rural education. These factors have contributed to the closure and merger of many rural schools, resulting in increasingly limited access to basic education for children who remain in rural areas (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2021). In less developed regions such as Guangxi, geographic isolation, limited educational investment, and shortages of qualified teachers have intensified these disparities (Xin, 2002; Zhao & Lu, 2020; Shen, 2013).

As later chapters show, these structural conditions compel families to adopt new strategies for ensuring their children's schooling. Some parents relocate their children to county schools while remaining in their rural hometowns to sustain agricultural livelihoods. Others rely on grandparents, relatives, or child caregiving services to bridge the gap created by migration-induced separation (Jingzhong & Lu, 2011).

2.1.2 Rural education impacted by rural-urban migration

Rural-urban migration has substantially reshaped the landscape of rural education in China. For many rural families, children's schooling represents the most viable pathway for upward social mobility. Parents, therefore, place strong emphasis on securing better educational opportunities, even when these require separation or relocation (Yiu & Yun, 2017). The education of rural children has been directly affected by large-scale population movement. According to UNICEF (2014), approximately 106 million children were impacted by migration, with 35.81 million migrating with parents and nearly 70 million becoming left-behind children. This demographic shift has intensified educational inequalities between urban and rural regions.

In this way, migration is not merely a movement of labor but a process that redistributes educational responsibilities and reshapes the caregiving landscape,

setting the stage for the rise of child caregiving services discussed in subsequent sections. Migrant children and left-behind children are the products of rural-urban migration. Offspring of migrant workers, who live with their parents in places other than where they have registered permanent residence, are known as “migrant children (Ma et al., 2018). In China, migrant children refer to children under eighteen years old who moved with their parents from rural to urban areas for over half a year without household registration in the receiving localities. Due to internal migration in China since the 1980s, the number of migrant children has increased rapidly.

The huge gap between urban and rural education is embedded in the disparity in educational investment, children's educational attainment, school quality, and the returns to education. Migrant children move with their parents to urban cities to pursue a better education. However, the Chinese household registration system (hukou) limits migrant children's rights and access to basic education in cities (Zhang, 2017). Most parents of left-behind children migrate to urban areas to work, leaving their children with grandparents. Therefore, intergenerational parenting is a common phenomenon for left-behind children (Jin et al., 2021). As a result, ensuring children have access to a supportive educational environment while also receiving parental accompaniment has become a shared challenge for rural children and their parents.

A growing body of research shows that migrant and left-behind children face significant structural disadvantages. Migrant children often experience barriers to school enrollment, higher tuition fees, and discrimination linked to the hukou system, which restricts access to public services in cities (Zhang, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). Meanwhile, left-behind children experience emotional strain and inconsistent

caregiving, often from a very young age (Jin et al., 2021). These unequal conditions accumulate across households and communities, reinforcing long-term disparities in educational attainment and social mobility (Cao et al., 2023).

Migration also reshapes the availability and quality of rural schooling. Shrinking rural populations have contributed to the consolidation and closure of village schools, leaving many rural children without nearby access to basic education. The Ministry of Education reported that the number of rural primary schools decreased from 160,160 in 2019 to 158,000 in 2020, while the number of new urban schools increased during the same period (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2021). As Li et al. (2024) argue, migration reorganizes family life and childcare arrangements, thereby affecting children's educational participation. These structural pressures are evident in less developed regions such as Guangxi, where uneven educational investment, geographic isolation, and limited teacher resources contribute to persistent inequalities (Xin, 2002; Shen, 2013; Zhao & Lu, 2020).

The decline of rural schools has led parents to pursue alternative educational pathways for their children. Some relocate their children to county schools, even when they themselves cannot migrate due to agricultural responsibilities or financial constraints. Others rely on kinship arrangements or child caregiving services to secure access to stable schooling (Jingzhong & Lu, 2011). These decisions reflect broader transformations in rural family structures, where parenting responsibilities are redistributed among parents, grandparents, and paid caregivers in response to migration-induced absences.

Educational migration has become an especially significant strategy for rural households. Parents increasingly send children to urban or county schools not only for academic quality but also for access to safer environments, structured routines, and more stable support systems. These motivations align with findings in later chapters, where parents describe caregiving services as essential complements to schooling and as substitutes for parental presence during the workweek.

In summary, the impact of rural-urban migration on rural education is multidimensional: it decreases rural school enrollment, strains local educational capacity, and compels families to reorganize caregiving and schooling arrangements across distance. These dynamics form a crucial foundation for understanding why the use of caregiving services has expanded in regions and how parents negotiate educational and caregiving responsibilities under conditions of migration.

2.1.3 Education migration

In recent years, the steady decline of the rural population has intensified the challenges facing rural schools. As rural-to-urban migration increases, the number of school-age children in many villages has dropped sharply, leading to widespread school closures across China. According to the 2018 National Education Development Statistical Bulletin, 247,700 of the nation's 513,700 primary and secondary schools were located in rural areas. By 2020, the number of rural primary schools had decreased from 160,160 in 2019 to 158,000, while 746 new primary schools were established in urban areas during the same period (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2021). This shift reflects not only demographic change but also the structural reallocation of educational resources toward urban centers.

Rural parents respond to these changes by pursuing educational migration, sending their children to nearby towns or county seats where schooling is more accessible and better resourced. As Hannum (2003) notes, geographic disparities in educational investment create strong incentives for families to relocate children to areas with stronger schools. Teacher shortages, high turnover, and limited professional support in poor rural regions further undermine the quality of local education (Li et al., 2020). In Guangxi, where geographic isolation and uneven development persist (Xin, 2002; Zhao & Lu, 2020), many rural families face a practical dilemma. Their remaining in the village limits their children's educational prospects, but complete family migration to urban centers is financially unattainable.

Consequently, educational migration becomes a strategic compromise. Parents often send their children to county-level schools while maintaining their work or agricultural activities in the village. These arrangements reflect broader patterns of rural-urban mobility, where migration reorganizes family life and redistributes caregiving responsibilities across geographic distance (Li et al., 2024). Some children live with relatives during the school year, others commute long distances daily, and an increasing number rely on child-care services adjacent to urban or county primary schools.

As Jingzhong and Lu (2011) observe, migration reshapes intergenerational relations and caregiving patterns, requiring families to negotiate who provides daily supervision, who manages schooling, and who assumes emotional support roles. Educational migration therefore intersects with caregiving decisions: when parents continue working in rural or distant urban settings, caregiving services become

essential intermediaries ensuring children's daily routines, supervision, and educational engagement. These dynamics form an important backdrop for understanding why parents in regions such as Hechi view caregiving services as extensions of the schooling process and to support their children's academic performance.

Educational migration also reflects parents' aspirations for their children's future mobility. Rural families increasingly perceive county or urban education as a pathway to better secondary school placement and eventual social advancement. This aligns with the findings in later chapters, where parents describe caregiving services as providing not only academic support but also structured routines, emotional stability, and social development, reinforcing children's ability to thrive in more competitive educational environments.

In sum, educational migration in China is a response to both structural constraints and aspirational goals. It is shaped by demographic changes, uneven educational resources, and the broader dynamics of rural – urban migration. These conditions lay the foundation for the rise of child caregiving services, which complement formal schooling and support families in navigating the challenges of distance, work demands, and limited rural educational options.

2.2 Schooling solutions resulted from rural-urban migration

2.2.1 Children migrate to cities

In China today, the official school structure is pre-primary (ages 3-5), primary (ages 6-11), secondary (ages 12-17), and tertiary (ages 18-22), with nine years of

schooling compulsory. According to the Statistical Bulletin of the National Education Development of the Ministry of Education, in 2022, 5,610 kindergartens were reduced, and the number of children studying in kindergartens decreased by 17,766 million compared to the previous year, indicating the negative growth for the first time after the founding of the People's Republic of China. In addition, the country is greatly affected by the number of children, and the number of schools has decreased (Gyauyuzdingh, 2022). According to the 2020 National Education Development Report, the total number of schools decreased, with fewer rural schools and more urban schools. In 2020, there were 158,000 primary schools nationwide, a decrease of 2,169 from the previous year. Depending on these, urban primary schools increased by 746, while rural primary schools decreased by 2,915. There were 53,000 middle schools nationwide, an increase of 390 from the previous year. Among these, urban middle schools increased by 591, while rural middle schools decreased by 201. In summary, the migration of numerous children to urban areas to live with their parents has led to a decline in student numbers in rural schools, resulting in the closure or consolidation of these schools (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2021).

Children's migration to cities is therefore deeply intertwined with the changing educational landscape. While some children migrate with their parents as "migrant children," others move alone or with relatives to access urban schooling. Peng (2020) highlights that when children join migratory processes, family life becomes more complex as parents must reassess how to balance work, childcare, and long-term aspirations. These complexities multiply in regions such as Guangxi, where rural schools are sparse, and transportation between villages and county towns is difficult.

For many families, relocating children becomes a necessary step to ensure access to stable schooling and daily supervision.

Existing studies emphasize the academic and developmental consequences of migration. Research shows that children who migrate with their parents often perform better than left-behind children in early academic and social skills, although challenges remain in emotional and social development (Hu et al., 2020). Conversely, parental absence due to migration is associated with greater risks of injuries, psychosocial stress, and behavioral difficulties among left-behind children (Chen et al., 2020).

Regarding child-care services in China, most studies emphasize the need for stricter regulation to ensure compliance with safety, hygiene, and established standards. For example, Zhao (2022) argues that the construction of child caregiving services for primary school students in Shanghai should coordinate the roles of the four main responsible parties, namely the local government, the caregiving services, the community, and the parents of primary school students, and propose countermeasures for the development of child caregiving services according to the different roles and competences of the parties, to solve the outstanding problems in the construction of existing child caregiving services through concerted efforts. Dingfeng (2019) suggests that the government should revise relevant laws and regulations governing child caregiving services for primary school students to make them operational and sustainable.

However, there is limited research on a growing phenomenon: children who migrate for education while their parents remain in rural areas or work elsewhere.

This group includes many families in regions such as Hechi, where parents cannot afford full urban relocation but still aim to secure better schooling for their children. Such families often rely on a distributed caregiving system, combining relatives, caregiving services, and digital communication to maintain continuity in their children's daily lives (Jingzhong & Lu, 2011; Han, 2023).

In this context, child-caregiving services serve as essential intermediaries. They bridge the gap between children's migration for schooling and parents' limited ability to provide daily supervision. Parents view these services not only as practical solutions but as extensions of the schooling process, ensuring safety, discipline, homework supervision, and structured routines that support their children's academic engagement. This aligns with the broader pattern of caregiving reconfiguration shaped by migration: families recalibrate responsibilities across distance, actors, and institutions to sustain children's well-being and educational progress.

In summary, children's migration to cities represents a strategic adaptation to structural inequalities in educational access. It reflects both demographic pressures and parental aspirations while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the development of child-caregiving services as a complementary support system for families navigating long-distance parenting.

2.2.2 Child caregiving services

Child caregiving services have expanded rapidly in China alongside rural-urban migration, school consolidation, and parental labor mobility. While existing scholarship emphasizes caregiving as a broad set of support activities addressing children's physical, emotional, and educational needs (Baldassar et al., 2006; Shifren,

2009). The form of caregiving examined in this study reflects a distinctly commercialized, structurally embedded model. Parents pay third-party providers to supervise children before and after school, during evenings, and in some cases, full-time throughout the semester. This model occupies a space between family-based care and formal childcare, shaped by economic pressures, migration patterns, and the uneven distribution of educational resources.

In practice, caregiving services emerged as a response to three structural conditions widely documented in China. First, rural school closures and the consolidation of small village schools into township centers made daily commuting impossible for many children (Zhou, 2019). Second, the hukou system continues to restrict children's access to urban public services, pushing many migrant parents to adopt alternative schooling arrangements (Li et al., 2023). Third, parents working long hours in agriculture, construction, or service-sector jobs cannot meet the four daily pick-up and drop-off requirements of primary schooling. As a result, caregiving services have become a pragmatic bridge between rural families and urban educational opportunities, providing a solution that neither schools nor kinship networks can fully absorb.

The rapid growth of these services underscores their increasing necessity. National statistics show that between 2011 and 2018, the number of caregiving services rose from 43,100 to over 57,300, a 32.95 percent increase (Xu, 2020). Additional data cited in Chapter V indicate that this trend continued through 2022 and 2023, surpassing 75,000 services and nearly five million childcare slots nationwide. This expansion aligns with the broader commodification of care, where

responsibilities traditionally undertaken by families are increasingly outsourced to market-based providers in response to migration-related constraints.

Unlike boarding schools, which are regulated, age-stratified, and primarily serve adolescents, caregiving services vary widely in size, staffing, and quality. Some operate small, family-run homes with fewer than twenty children, where relationships between caregivers and children tend to be close, personalized, and emotionally responsive. Others are medium-sized centers structured around routines, study rooms, and meal schedules. Large-scale services, however, often resemble semi-formal institutions with standardized management procedures but looser emotional ties. As Chapter IV notes, children in smaller services frequently develop stronger relationships with caretakers, while children in larger settings experience more impersonal, efficiency-driven supervision.

Existing research on caregiving services has primarily focused on regulatory concerns—hygiene, licensing, safety, and institutional compliance (Dingfeng, 2019; Zhao, 2022). However, these studies rarely examine how caregiving services define their own role, nor how parents interpret the meaning of care within these arrangements. This study addresses this gap by investigating caregiving services as both commodified services and relational caregiving environments, revealing how parents and providers jointly shape the daily practices of children whose families navigate rural-urban mobility.

2.2.3 Boarding schools

Boarding schools have long served as an institutional response to rural-urban migration, particularly at the middle and high school levels. While boarding arrangements are common for adolescents aged 12 to 18, they remain largely unsuitable for primary school students, who require close, daily supervision and often cannot manage routines independently. As a result, boarding schools and child-caregiving services offer fundamentally different forms of support to rural families navigating educational migration.

The expansion of boarding schools in rural China must be understood in the context of two structural dynamics. First, as rural schools closed or merged due to declining student populations, many children, especially those in remote mountainous areas, had no choice but to attend township or urban schools (Tang et al., 2020). Second, because parents often migrate for work, children cannot rely on daily parent-led supervision, increasing their dependence on institutional care. Boarding schools, therefore, emerged as a stopgap solution for older children who could not commute long distances or did not have caregivers available at home.

Existing research shows that boarding school environments have significant implications for children's well-being. Studies consistently point to mixed outcomes: while boarding may reduce commuting burdens, it can also contribute to loneliness, reduced parental contact, and heightened psychological stress (Tang et al., 2020; Xing et al., 2021). Boarding has been linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and alienation from both parents, suggesting that the absence of close adult attachment can shape children's emotional development in critical ways. Further evidence indicates that boarding students may experience lower levels of social-emotional

competence than children who live at home or commute daily (Wang et al., 2017). These findings underscore the emotional costs of institutional living, particularly for younger children.

Given these patterns, the care for primary school children diverges sharply from that of adolescents. Most primary school students are too young for independent boarding and too dependent on adult supervision for boarding schools to accommodate them safely. Parents and caregivers in Hechi confirmed this limitation: boarding schools do not accept first- to third-graders, and even older primary students struggle with meals, hygiene, and bedtime routines without direct adult assistance. In place of boarding schools, parents rely on child-care services, which provide daily routines, emotional stability, and supervision that younger children require.

In this study, child caregiving services therefore occupy a distinct space within the broader trajectory of educational migration. They function as the primary alternative for young children who cannot board and whose parents cannot provide daily care due to migration or long hours. While boarding schools address logistical barriers for adolescents, caregiving services address a deeper set of needs for younger children—structured supervision, relational closeness, and consistent adult presence. The comparison highlights why caregiving services have become indispensable for rural families and why their rapid growth parallels the limitations and age boundaries of boarding school arrangements.

2.3 Parenting strategies

2.3.1 Long-distance parenting

Long-distance parenting has become a common arrangement among rural families in China, especially as parents migrate to urban areas for work. At the same time, their children remain in their hometowns or relocate to county-level schooling facilities. Puspitasari et al. (2021) describe long-distance relationships through three dimensions, the duration of separation, the frequency of physical contact, and the geographical distance involved. These dimensions closely align with the realities of Chinese rural-urban migration, in which parents may be away for months and rely on scheduled visits and regular communication to remain involved in their children's daily routines.

In this context, digital communication tools play an essential role in maintaining parent – child connection. Dittman (2018) notes that when parents work away from home, technology becomes a necessary means of sustaining family routines. Similarly, Liang et al. (2022) identify specific patterns in mobile phone parenting that characterize how parents provide emotional support, guidance, and behavioral monitoring across distance. These patterns are also evident in Hechi, where parents communicate with children through phone watches, WeChat calls, and class chat groups, using these tools to supervise homework, ask about daily meals, and provide encouragement from afar. Although these forms of communication cannot replicate the physical presence of co-residential parenting, they allow parents to maintain involvement and oversight despite migration-related constraints.

Gender norms also shape long-distance parenting practices. Existing studies show that fathers often migrate while mothers remain as primary caregivers (Dittman, 2018). However, in many rural Chinese households, mothers also migrate for work, which shifts caregiving responsibilities to grandparents or other relatives. Samonte (2011) highlights that in such situations, girls may take on caregiving duties traditionally associated with mothers, reflecting gendered expectations within extended family structures. These dynamics are visible in Guangxi, where siblings, aunts, and grandparents often share caregiving responsibilities when both parents migrate.

Importantly, long-distance parenting is not always driven by economic necessity alone. Srivastava and de Guzman (2017) argue that separation can be a planned strategy to secure better educational opportunities for children. This is consistent with the experiences of many families in Hechi, who send their children to caregiving services near county schools while parents continue to work elsewhere. For these parents, separation becomes a pragmatic decision balancing household income, educational aspirations, and the constraints of the hukou system and rural school closures.

Overall, long-distance parenting is a coordinated and adaptive strategy shaped by migration, communication technologies, kinship norms, and unequal educational access. Parents reorganize their roles, relying on caregiving services and extended family networks to ensure children's academic and emotional needs are met. Parenting across distance is sustained through regular digital contact, weekend visits, and close collaboration with caregiving service providers. Understanding these

dynamics is essential for analyzing how families negotiate care and maintain parent – child relationships within the structural context of rural-urban migration.

2.3.2 Grandparenting guardianship

Grandparenting guardianship has long been a central caregiving arrangement in rural China, particularly among families affected by migration. Because the hukou system restricts migrant parents' access to urban social services and public education, many parents are unable to relocate with their children. As a result, grandparents become the primary caregivers in a significant proportion of rural households (Liang et al., 2022). This caregiving model represents an adaptation of the traditional Chinese family system, in which intergenerational support is expected and normalized within kinship networks (Chen & Jiang, 2019).

Research across different regions demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of grandparent-led caregiving. Studies show that grandparents often provide emotional reassurance, supervision, and stability, especially when children experience prolonged parental absence. Li et al. (2021) note that grandparents can play a positive role in children's emotional adjustment by offering consistent companionship and guidance. This aligns with the Confucian emphasis on intergenerational responsibility, in which caregiving flows across family members according to need and obligation. In many rural families, grandparents not only manage household responsibilities but also coordinate children's schooling routines, daily meals, and moral instruction.

However, grandparenting guardianship also presents notable challenges. Several studies highlight emotional strain, limited authority, and difficulty addressing

children's academic or behavioral needs. Yang and Liu (2020) found that children raised by grandparents alone often report more emotional symptoms compared with those living with parents. Additionally, Jendrek (1993) and Waldrop and Weber (2001) emphasize that grandparents, in many contexts, lack formal guardianship rights, which restrict their ability to make decisions regarding schooling, healthcare, or discipline. Similar dynamics are observed in rural China, where many grandparents—due to age, health limitations, or low literacy—struggle to provide consistent academic support or supervision.

These complexities are visible in Guangxi as well. In many families in Hechi, grandparents cared for younger children, while older children were placed in caregiving services near county schools. This distribution of responsibilities reflects a pragmatic adaptation to migration-related constraints: grandparents manage home-based care, while caregiving services support schooling and weekday routines. Such arrangements illustrate the flexibility of kinship networks, in which caregiving roles shift depending on the parent's location, the child's age, and available local resources.

Grandparenting guardianship, therefore, operates as part of a broader family caregiving system shaped by necessity and cultural expectation. It remains an essential caregiving strategy for rural migrant families, but its limitations, especially in education, discipline, and emotional regulation, contribute to parents' increasing reliance on caregiving services. As discussed in later chapters, this creates a hybrid caregiving model in which grandparents, caregivers, and parents collectively support children across distances.

2.4 Conceptual framework

2.4.1 Parenting

- Family system

Traditional Chinese parenting is embedded in a family system shaped by Confucian *jia xun* (family instruction), in which parenting responsibility is morally defined through intergenerational hierarchy, role-based obligations, and collective family involvement rather than individual autonomy (Goh, 2011). Within this framework, parental responsibility is understood as a lifelong moral duty that persists regardless of physical co-residence, while authority flows through socially recognized roles rather than continuous face-to-face supervision. Parenting, therefore, is not confined to the nuclear household but is embedded in a broader family system that includes extended kin and shared caregiving responsibilities.

Rural – urban migration disrupts this co-residential family structure by producing multi-sited family arrangements: parents work in cities, children reside in caregiving services in county towns, and grandparents often remain in rural villages. Family systems theory offers a useful lens for understanding these arrangements, as it conceptualizes families as interdependent systems in which changes affecting one member reverberate across the entire system (Kerig, 2019; Dunst, 2023). Rather than signaling family disintegration, migration reshapes the organization of parenting and caregiving roles across spatial and institutional boundaries.

In this context, parenting becomes distributed across multiple actors. Children's daily routines and academic supervision are largely managed by caregiving service staff, while grandparents provide weekend care and emotional support. Parents, however, retain primary authority over major decisions related to education, discipline,

and financial provision. This configuration aligns with what Rotheram-Fuller et al. (2010) conceptualize as “distributed parenting,” in which parental responsibilities are shared among several caregivers while parents remain the central moral and decision-making figures. Distributed parenting differs from simple delegation of care, as parents do not relinquish their parental role but instead exercise it through coordination, supervision, and mediated involvement.

From a Confucian perspective, these arrangements are morally intelligible rather than contradictory. Confucian role ethics emphasize the fulfillment of parental responsibility (fu mu zhi ze) through moral commitment and accountability, rather than constant physical presence. As such, parents’ continued involvement through digital supervision and coordination with caregivers reflects an adaptation of Confucian parenting norms to conditions of migration. Parenting within this distributed family system thus becomes a hybrid practice, combining institutional caregiving, kinship support, and technologically mediated parental authority within a coherent moral framework.

- Kinship system

Kinship has long been central to caregiving arrangements in China. Grandparents’ availability, shared residence patterns, and moral expectations of intergenerational support from the social foundation that enables parents to migrate (Goh, 2011). This kin-based logic aligns with classical anthropological insights that kinship represents not only blood ties but a network of obligations and reciprocal care (El Guindi & Al-Othman, 2013).

Even when children stay in caregiving services, kinship remains deeply embedded in daily routines. Grandparents often supplement institutional care by providing weekend supervision, moral guidance, and emotional support. This aligns with findings from recent literature on left-behind children, which show that grandparents significantly shape children's emotional well-being, either positively or negatively (Yang & Liu, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Chen, 2023).

The kinship system also influences how parents choose caregiving institutions. Parents rely heavily on recommendations from relatives, neighbors, or clan networks. This mirrors observations from studies on China's semi-legal childcare institutions, where trust is often based on lineage ties rather than formal regulation (Peng, 2018; Wei, 2022; Zhong & Long, 2025).

Building on Baldassar et al. (2006) and Mazzucato & Schans (2011), kinship in migration contexts can be understood as “circulating care,” in which emotional support, supervision, and economic resources flow among family members according to need. In this study, the caregiving service becomes an additional node in this network—not replacing kinship but operating within it.

- Parent-child relationship

The parent – child relationship remains central despite physical separation. Research suggests that these relationships are interactive and negotiated, rather than simply hierarchical (Goh, 2011). Parents emotionally support children through weekly video calls, daily WeChat supervision, or voice messages on phone watches. This aligns with findings that digital communication mediates long-distance parenting and

allows parents to perform emotional labor at a distance (Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Han, 2023).

In many cases, parenting becomes a hybrid between “in-person guidance” from caregivers and grandparents and “remote emotional and academic supervision” from parents. Studies on transnational and internal migrant families confirm that digital tools reshape how authority, affection, and discipline are expressed (Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010; Liang et al., 2022; Guo, 2025).

When viewed through a care ethics lens, these findings highlight that parent – child relationships are built through continual acts of responsibility and moral attention (Tronto, 1993; Rummery & Fine, 2012). Even in separation, care flows through emotional messages, economic provision, monitoring routines, and coordinated communication with caregiving service staff. Thus, the parent – child relationship in this study is understood as dynamic, multi-sited, and technologically mediated, yet anchored in strong moral expectations and emotional commitment.

2.4.2 Caregiving

Caregiving is a broad concept that encompasses the provision of care and support to individuals who may require assistance due to age, illness, disability, or other challenges. It involves various activities aimed at meeting the physical, emotional, and, at times, financial needs of another person who is unable to care for themselves fully. Care is essentially understood as a private, individual concern, a one-way activity in which the active agent, the carer, does something to the other, the passive, recipient (Fine, 2004). Rummery and Fine (2012) discuss that in the context of caregiving, care can be understood as both an emotion and a social relationship that

encompasses a disposition towards others. This involves personal concern for the well-being of individuals, including strangers and less familiar people such as neighbors. Care is both cognitive and emotional, incorporating culturally accepted moral sentiments.

Caregiving in this study is understood as a set of relational practices through which children's physical, emotional, educational, and moral needs are met by multiple actors across different sites. Rather than a one-directional activity performed by a single caregiver, caregiving is conceptualized as a shared and coordinated process embedded within family systems and shaped by migration, caregiving services arrangements, and cultural norms (Fine, 2004; Rummery & Fine, 2012). This understanding aligns with the concept of distributed parenting, in which caregiving responsibilities are dispersed among parents, grandparents, and institutional caregivers, while parents remain morally and decisionally central.

Bradley and Caldwell (1995) note that this framework, comprising two tiers, is based on the notion of caregiving as a pivotal influence on human behavior and development. The first tier categorizes caregiving elements by their intended functions and forms, identifying five primary tasks: sustenance, stimulation, support, structure, and surveillance, reflective of caregiving's role in facilitating a child's adaptation and goal pursuit. Additionally, this tier organizes inputs by their source and primary mode of reception. Transitioning to the second tier, emphasis is placed on the dynamic nature of caregiving, with acts and conditions classified by intensity, reactivity, and complexity, underscoring its adaptive response to evolving circumstances. Whether it be parental, grandparental, or child caregiving, all

caregiving activities are conducted within the framework of sustenance, stimulation, support, structure, and surveillance. These findings echo research showing that caregiving responsibilities increasingly shift from family members to paid institutions in urbanizing societies (Peng, 2018; Fang, 2019)

Migration-driven caregiving introduces a new form of what Baldassar et al. (2006) call “care circulation”—the ongoing exchange of emotional support, practical assistance, and supervision among different actors. Caregivers supervise homework and daily life, grandparents offer emotional comfort on weekends, and parents provide long-distance involvement through digital communication. This pattern aligns with evidence from other Chinese separated families where digital technologies help parents remain present despite physical distance (Clark, 2013; Liang et al., 2022; Han, 2023).

At the same time, caregiving remains deeply embedded in China’s cultural and kinship norms. As Goh (2011) emphasizes, caregiving is rarely the responsibility of a single person. Instead, it is shared among family members and shaped by obligations rooted in Confucian relationships. Even when caregiving is commercialized, these cultural expectations do not disappear.

Finally, caregiving in this migration context cannot be separated from attachment. Solomon and George (1996) argue that caregiving is part of an organized behavioral system tied to the parent’s own experiences and the child’s need for security. Your interviews show that even when mediated through a screen, children rely on parental reassurance to maintain emotional balance. This indicates that caregiving—whether

provided through parents, grandparents, or services — continues to operate within attachment-based expectations, especially in moments of stress, conflict, or transition.

Goh (2011) argues that in urban China, grandparents commonly take on full-time childcare duties, even when their adult children's families are complete. They often provide regular care while their adult children work full-time outside the home. From this perspective, it is apparent that within parent-child relationships in China, the upbringing of a child typically involves not only parents but also extended family members, collectively nurturing the child into adulthood. This suggests that parental responsibility for child-rearing extends beyond just the parents themselves, often necessitating assistance from others. Care is also part and parcel of familial regimes that normalize roles and relations of daughters, sons, and other relatives (Van der Pijl, 2018). Within the cultural context of China, the intricate network of family ties and obligations plays a pivotal role in child caregiving services. This framework of sustenance, stimulation, support, structure, and surveillance not only defines the duties and responsibilities of the parents but also encompasses the role of extended family members, including grandparents.

Caregiving is not a new role for family members, people have always provided emotional, physical, and financial support to family members and others that they feel close to. What has changed in the past three decades is the number of individuals who take on this role, the duration and intensity of care provided, and the complexity of the care delivered (Schulz et al., 2020). Distinct from the usual caregiving, caregiving in this study was conducted in rural primary schools that were closed due to rural-urban migration, resulting in a significant decrease in rural populations. In

response, parents send their children to child care services, which offer comprehensive support and care. Childcare services, provided by agencies or facilities, assume responsibility for caring for children in the absence of their parents. These services extend beyond meeting basic physical needs, such as nutrition and shelter, to encompass emotional and educational support that promotes the overall well-being and development of children.

Solomon and George (1996) propose that the patterns of parent-child interaction are primarily influenced by the parent's own childhood experiences within their family of origin. They also suggest that caregiving is an organized behavioral system that is connected both developmentally and behaviorally to attachment. This perspective considers parents' backgrounds and past experiences when examining caregiving relationships and their influence on children's attachment and development. In my study, where parents entrust child care to others and engage in long-distance parenting, it becomes crucial to examine how secure attachment relationships are cultivated and how emotional and developmental support is delivered in the absence of parents.

There are five types of caregiving or mutual support: economic, accommodation, personal, practical, and childcare, and emotional and moral (Baldassar et al., 2006) In my study, we find that parents practice long-distance parenting by offering various forms of support, such as economic aid and emotional encouragement, from a distance. Similarly, the caregiving services available to migrating children may encompass these same types of support, providing not only childcare but also emotional, moral, and practical guidance.

Childcare and education include the care and education of preschool children, as well as state-provided care and education for those under 18 without caregivers (Shang & Wu, 2011). Most children in China are cared for by their family – their parents, grandparents, or other family members. Outside of their home, they may receive early care from institutions such as preschools and kindergartens, which can be supported by the government, by employers, or by for-profit or non-profit services. However, with the implementation of the delayed retirement policy and the increased age of grandparents when their adult children have a second child, grandparents' available time, along with their health status, has declined. Consequently, the traditional model of the elderly caring for children is unsustainable (Hong, Liu et al., 2023). Families must find additional sources of care in the private sector (e.g., live-in caregivers and caregiving services) when they are unable to provide proper care (Shang & Wu, 2011).

Child caregiving services operates outside of regular school hours and during holidays, providing guidance and development in academic and life skills for students whose parents lack the time, energy, or professional qualifications to educate them effectively (Zhou, 2019). This responsibility is entrusted to third-party educational institutions. Generally, student care services adhere to the principles of serving parents and educating students, effectively expanding and complementing the comprehensive, balanced, and quality education that schools may lack or find challenging to provide. In addition to reinforcing academic knowledge, emphasis is placed on fostering students' reading abilities, general knowledge, legal literacy, and physical and linguistic competencies, as well as cultivating positive learning attitudes and study skills.

Based on this, we can roughly infer that child-care services are services provided to meet the needs of parents who are too busy to educate their children. Typically, these services are entrusted to third-party educational institutions or individuals by parents to foster students' learning and life skills.

2.4.3 Commoditization of caregiving

The commoditization of caregiving refers to the transformation of caregiving activities, typically considered personal and relational, into commodities that are bought, sold, and exchanged within market systems. When a geographic area or a domain of human behavior is marketized, it is almost inevitably accompanied by commodification. Thus, one person's labor becomes equivalent to another's, one bunch of bananas becomes interchangeable with another, and one mass-produced object can be replaced with another identical object (Belk, 2020). Care work can be performed under different conditions— at home or outside domestic spaces, or as a professional or a compulsory social relation, and in paid or unpaid forms (Guimarães, 2016). Care is a complex, cyclical concept with multiple dimensions and meanings. It encompasses emotional concern, responsibility, giving and receiving care, and is both asymmetrical and reciprocal in relationships. Additionally, care is culturally constructed and influenced by social, economic, political, and ethical factors within institutional contexts (Van der Pijl, 2018).

In the context of rural–urban migration in China, commoditization does not emerge in isolation but develops alongside distributed parenting and distributed caregiving arrangements. As parents migrate for work and children reside in caregiving services, caregiving responsibilities are reorganized across parents,

grandparents, and institutional providers. While caregiving tasks such as daily supervision, homework assistance, and routine management are increasingly performed by paid caregivers, parental authority and moral responsibility remain central. Commoditization, therefore, does not signal the withdrawal of parents from caregiving but reflects a restructuring of how care is delivered within a distributed family system. (Aulenbacher et al., 2018; Coe, 2024; Liu, 2024)

Care remains a complex and relational concept encompassing emotional concern, responsibility, and moral commitment, even when delivered through paid services (Van der Pijl, 2018). Although caregiving services operate within market logics of payment, pricing, and service provision, they are simultaneously embedded within culturally specific expectations about family responsibility and moral care. In China, Confucian role ethics continue to shape parental expectations of caregivers (Goh, 2011).

This hybrid form of commoditization aligns with Baldassar and Merla's (2014) argument that care, even when mediated through institutions and markets, remains fundamentally relational. Scholars note that the rapid closure of rural schools (Lu & Xia, 2016) and limited public provision of primary-level care (Wei, 2022) have expanded demand for private caregiving services, many of which function within a regulatory "grey zone" shaped by informal norms, parental trust, and local reputation rather than formal state oversight (Xu, 2020; Zhong & Long, 2025).

This process of commoditizing caregiving involves the commercialization and monetization of caregiving services, where care becomes a product or service traded for profit rather than solely provided through personal relationships or altruistic

motives. Anything that is delivered and paid for is a commodity, this is what care is becoming (Ungerson, 2005). Caregiving is a multifaceted social relationship shaped by personal histories and contextual factors. It exists in diverse forms and involves individuals across different ages and social backgrounds, including partners, friends, parents, children, relatives, and even strangers. However, gender, age, and social circumstances often influence caregiving patterns (Armstrong & Kits, 2003).

Commoditization, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, involves treating something as a purchasable product. When caregiving becomes a commodity for sale, questions arise about its conceptualization. For instance, caregivers in child care services provide services to parents who have migrated for employment. In this context, care assumes a commercial dimension, potentially impacting its societal perception. While caregiving as a vocation and its associated practices may hold lower status, particularly when involving hands-on care, compared to the moral attributes of being a caring individual, the notion of care expands to encompass diverse positionalities and attitudes (Green & Lawson, 2011). As caregiving becomes commoditized, it may be subject to market forces, such as supply and demand dynamics, pricing mechanisms, and profit motives, potentially altering the quality, accessibility, and ethics of care provision.

Van Den Berg et al. (2008) define informal care as “a quasi-market composite commodity consisting of heterogeneous parts produced by one or more members of the social environment of the care recipient”. Granberg (2014) distinguishes nursing as commoditized work that combines caring, technological, bodily, and emotional dimensions, and notes its gendered subtext. Nursing, as it relates to gender

signification, has thus been conceptualized as a specific femininity based on a capacity for caring combined with the technical aspects of the job.

The commoditization of caregiving refers to the transformation of care from a relational act embedded in family obligations into a purchasable service shaped by market logics. In the context of China's rural-to-urban migration, this shift has accelerated due to structural pressures, including school closures, limited kin availability, and the high cost of living in cities. When parents migrate for work yet need to ensure their children's safety and academic progression, caregiving becomes something that must be bought, not only performed within kinship networks.

At the same time, commoditized care does not eliminate its emotional and cultural dimensions. Caregiving services in Hechi take on responsibilities historically associated with kinship — monitoring children, mediating conflicts, supporting academic routines, and providing emotional comfort. This reflects Baldassar and Merla's (2014) argument that care, even when distributed across distance and institutions, remains relational. This mirrors patterns described by Coe (2024), who emphasizes that paid caregivers often act as China's structural context intensifies this process. The rapid closure of rural schools (Lu & Xia, 2016) and limited government provision of primary-level care (Wei, 2022) have expanded the demand for private caregiving services. However, these services operate in a semi-regulated environment, particularly in smaller cities like Hechi. Scholars like Xu (2020) and Zhong & Long (2025) note that the lack of clear supervisory frameworks pushes many institutions into a "grey zone," where operations rely heavily on informal regulation, personal reputation, and parental trust rather than state oversight. This ambiguity mirrors your

findings that parents evaluate caregiving services based on moral character and perceived care attitude rather than formal credentials.

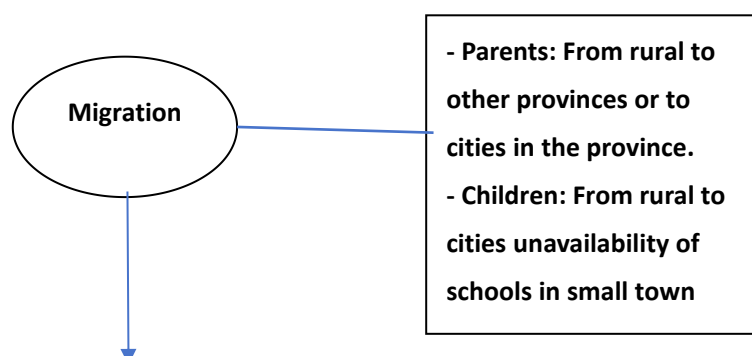
The commoditization of care also intersects with China's kinship norms. While hiring caregivers represents a shift toward market-based care, parents' expectations remain rooted in the morality of family responsibility. As Goh (2011) notes, caregiving in Chinese culture traditionally involves grandparents and extended kin, who embody moral obligation rather than contractual terms. Even when parents pay for caregiving services, they still perceive themselves as the moral center of the caregiving system, expecting caregivers to align with their parental intentions. Findings show that many parents describe caregiving services as extensions of their own parenting rather than independent institutions. This reinforces the idea that commoditization does not erase cultural meanings—it coexists with them.

Finally, commoditized caregiving interacts with long-distance parenting and digital communication. Liang et al. (2022) and Han (2023) show that digital parenting adds an emotional and supervisory dimension to care across distance. Your interviews reflect the same: parents continue performing caregiving roles emotionally and morally through calls and video chats, while paid caregivers manage the child's daily life. This hybrid arrangement confirms that commoditization does not replace parental involvement.

Most studies in China use the terms “trusteeship,” “custodians,” and “hosting institutions” to describe the phenomenon of parents sending their children to child-care services due to work migration, educational opportunities, or other reasons. In this study, I use child caregiving services instead. Parents are the child's primary

caregivers. The term "caregiving services" better captures the commodification of caregiving. This concept involves treating caregiving as a commodity that can be bought and sold. When parents pay for caregiving services, caregiving becomes commercialized, introducing new dynamics to the child-caregiver relationship.

This research will examine how parents and caregiving services perceive and define child caregiving services in the context of Chinese rural-to-urban migration. By exploring the perspectives of both parents and caregiving service providers, my work will offer insights into the multifaceted definitions and understandings of caregiving in this specific context. Furthermore, my study will contribute to a new understanding of child caregiving services within the Chinese rural-to-urban migration landscape. It will highlight how these services are commoditized, considering the economic and practical aspects of providing care to children separated from their parents due to migration.



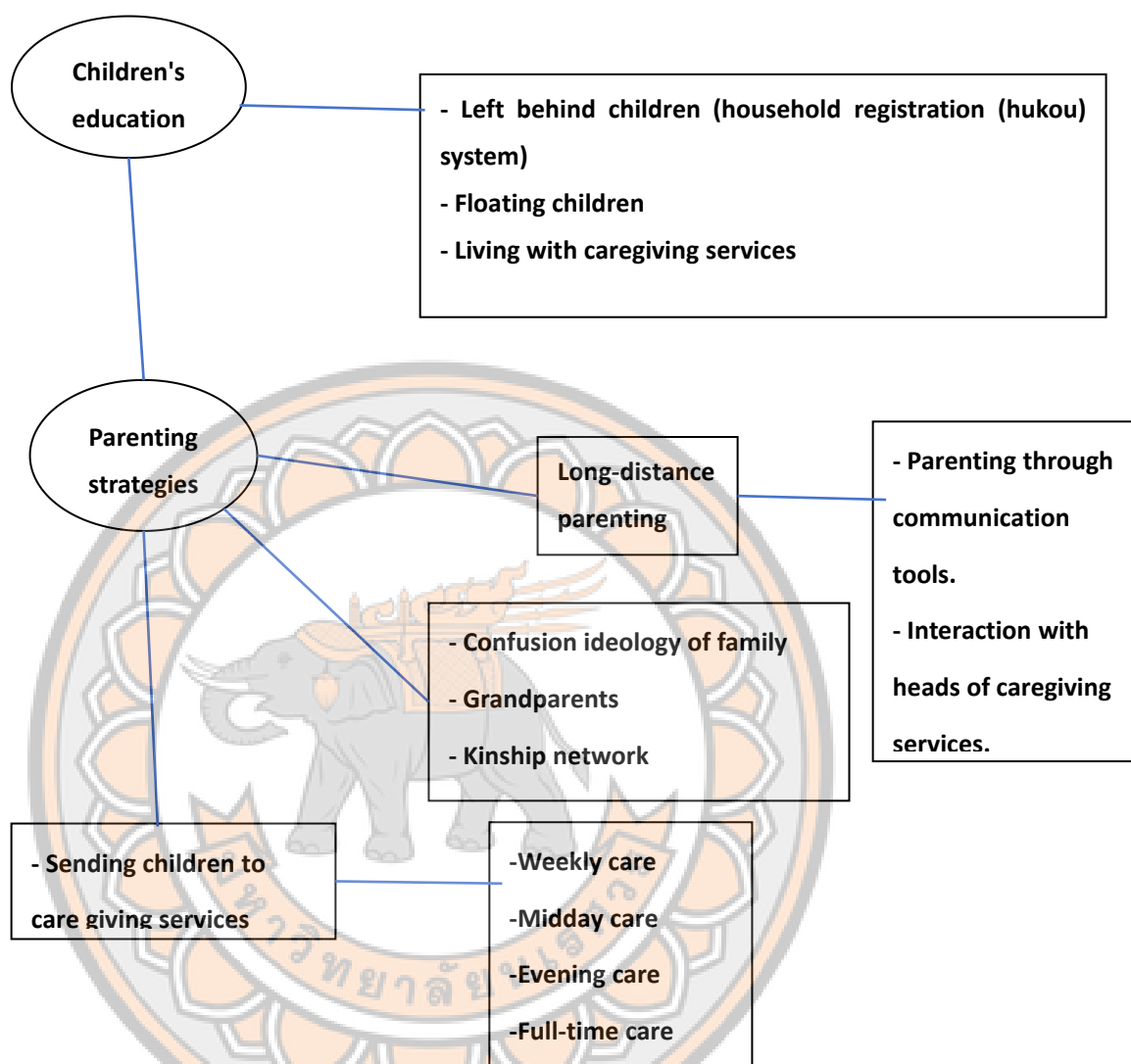


Figure 1 Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Source: Author, 2024

Conclusion

This chapter reviews rural-urban migration and its impact on education, as no pupils remain in rural schools and rural schools face merger with towns or dissolution. Some rural students migrate to cities with their parents, while others use child-care services without their parents. During urbanization, there is a trend of rural-urban migration. On the one hand, the migration of the rural population to urban areas can

support the economic development of the urban. On the other hand, rural children deserve adequate educational resources, but in fact, rural people cannot afford the high cost of living in cities and buy school district housing. Therefore, child caregiving services have been the best choice for them.

This chapter also reviews the parenting strategies when parents migrate to urban areas to seek work, most of them choose to send their children to child caregiving services or let them live with grandparents or other relatives. The parents are therefore doing long-distance parenting through smartphones and phone watches. There have been many studies on child caregiving services in China; most of these studies focus on how to standardize child caregiving services and improve related policy measures. My concern is about how children living in child-care services without parents do long-distance parenting and what kinds of parenting they receive. How do parents and private care providers give and perceive the meaning of care provided by the caregiving services that are being commoditized?

Understanding the concepts of parenting, caregiving, and the commodification of caregiving can provide valuable insights into the social phenomenon of long-distance parenting and child-caregiving services resulting from rural-urban migration in China. Firstly, understanding parenting practices helps analyze the impact of long-distance relationships on children's upbringing and development. Secondly, examining caregiving practices helps assess the quality of care provided to children left behind and the potential effects on their emotional and physical well-being. Finally, understanding the commoditization of caregiving allows us to explore the implications of treating caregiving as a marketable service, including the potential impact on children's experiences and outcomes.

This chapter outlined the structural, educational, and familial contexts that shape how rural families in China navigate care and schooling amid rapid rural-urban migration. Three intersecting forces emerged across the literature. First, demographic shifts and economic restructuring have accelerated the outflow of rural labor, produced widespread parental absence, and placed pressure on families to reorganize childcare arrangements (Lu & Xia, 2016; Ma et al., 2018). School closures and consolidation in rural areas further intensified this movement, leaving many children with limited access to local schooling and pushing families toward urban-centered educational solutions (Ministry of Education PRC, 2021).

Second, the review demonstrated that families respond to these structural pressures through a range of schooling and caregiving pathways — from migrating with parents to studying in boarding schools to relying on child-care services. The literature on caregiving services in China remains limited and often focuses on regulation and management (Xu, 2020; Wei, 2022; Zhong & Long, 2025). Existing studies seldom address how parents understand these services or how caregiving practices unfold within daily routines. This gap would need an empirical, ground-level examination of caregiving services as both educational support and emotional infrastructure, particularly in smaller counties such as Hechi (Zhou, 2019).

Third, the chapter situated parenting within broader theoretical lenses. Long-distance parenting reshapes how parents maintain emotional bonds, authority, and supervision when separated from their children (Dittman, 2018; Liang et al., 2022; Han, 2023). Kinship remains a vital source of childcare, yet demographic change and migration have weakened grandparents' capacity to assume full responsibility (Goh, 2011; Li et al., 2021). These gaps create demand for formalized caregiving services,

where care becomes structured, routinized, and purchased. The commoditization of caregiving—rooted in capitalist transformation and the shifting boundaries between paid and unpaid care—offers a crucial conceptual lens for understanding how caregiving services function in contemporary China (Ungerson, 2005; Peng, 2018; Belk, 2020).

Taken together, these strands of literature establish a coherent foundation for the study. Rural-urban migration disrupts traditional arrangements of parental presence and schooling. Families respond by combining kinship care, market-based services, and digital parenting practices. Childcare services emerge at the center of this restructured care landscape, providing daily supervision, academic support, and emotional support in the absence of parents. By integrating insights from migration studies, education research, care theory, and family systems, this chapter provides a conceptual framework for analyzing how parents and caregiving services in Hechi define and negotiate care, and how they give and perceive the commoditization of care in the present Chinese society.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

To understand how parents practice long-distance parenting for their children who migrate to urban areas for education, and how parents and private care providers perceive the meaning of care, this research has three research questions; 1) How do parents practice long-distance parenting in the context of rural–urban migration in China?, 2) How do parents define and perceive caregiving provided by child caregiving services?, and 3) How do child caregiving services in urban areas define their caregiving roles and provide care for migrating children? The qualitative research method was applied as it can be defined as the study of social phenomena that needs to be observed to demonstrate the complexity (Busetto et al., 2020)

Qualitative researchers use the terms constructivist, interpretivism, feminist, methodology, postmodernist, and naturalistic research. Within these worldviews, and through these lenses, are approaches to qualitative inquiry, such as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies (Creswell, 2013). Case studies allow for an in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon in a specific context. Since my study focuses on the experiences of parents and child caregiving service providers in a particular region of Hechi, a case study can provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of these experiences within the local context.

In addition, qualitative research involves the verbal description of real-life situations, and much qualitative research is based on researcher-provoked data derived from methods like interviews or focus groups (Silverman, 2002). Therefore, as qualitative research was employed in this study, the researcher shared the researcher's views with the participants because the researcher shares experiences being a long-distance parent due to work migration in Chinese society.

Research design

In this study, an interpretive paradigm was adopted as the most suitable. The research questions explore how parents and child-caregiving services define and understand long-distance parenting and caregiving, and an interpretive approach can help capture participants' subjective experiences and interpretations. A paradigm comprises several components that can be categorized as follows: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods. The interpretivism paradigm would enable researchers to gain further depth by seeking experiences and perceptions of a particular social context (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Interpretivism is a research approach that prefers qualitative methods for data collection. There is a connection between interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology, as one is a methodological approach, and the other is a means of collecting data. Researchers who are using interpretive paradigms and qualitative methods often seek experiences, understandings, and perceptions of individuals for their data to uncover reality rather than rely on numbers and statistics (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

Interpretive methodology requires that social phenomena be understood “through the eyes of the participants rather than the researcher.” The goal of interpretive methodology is to understand social phenomena in their context. Interpretivists collect mostly qualitative data from participants over an extended period (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). An interpretive approach would involve delving deeply into the subjective experiences of parents, children, caregivers, and other stakeholders involved in long-distance parenting and child caregiving services. Researchers aim to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of their roles, relationships, and experiences within the context of rural-urban migration in Hechi.

As explained in several works of literature regarding long-distance parenting, migration, and child caregiving services reviewed in Chapter II, parents practice long-distance parenting for their children who migrate to urban areas for education. The purpose of this research is to analyze how child caregiving services play a vital

role in facilitating children's migration to urban areas and to examine how parents engage in long-distance parenting when they send their children to the caregiving services. Therefore, a qualitative method was used in this study to examine patterns among long-distance parents who send their children to child care services. Researchers who conduct interpretive research incorporate their subjective notions into their research because they believe that, through the exploration of human language, meanings can be understood and shared in qualitative research. Therefore, it is important to understand who is interpreting, why they are interpreting, and how they are interpreting (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The principle of interaction between the researchers and the research participants requires critical reflection on how the data were socially constructed (Gichuru, 2017). The interpretive paradigm enables us to explore the relationships and processes involved in long-distance parenting and caregiving services. In this approach, I will interact with parents in different situations: those who engaged in long-distance parenting and those who worked within child-caregiving services.

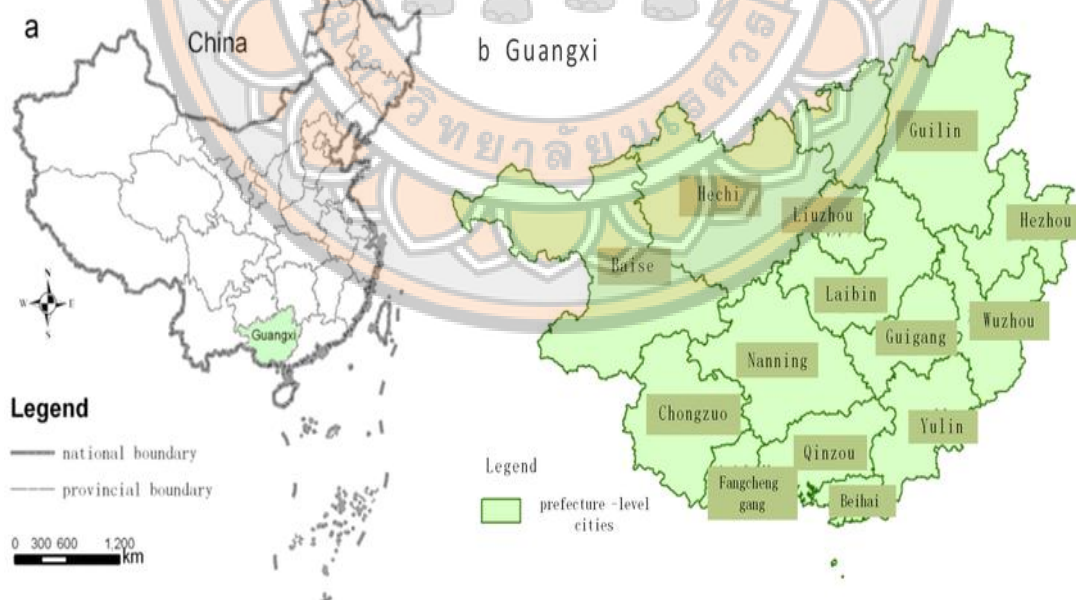


Figure 2 Map of the administrative divisions of Guangxi, China

Source: Nie et al., 2014

Table 1 Hechi City Administrative Division

Hechi city	County	Huanjiang	Township
		Maonan	
		Autonomous	
		County	
Jinchengjiang District		Si'en Township	
Yizhou District		Chengxi Street	
Nandan		Shuiyuan Township	
Tian'e		Luoyang Township	
Fengshan		Chuanshan Township	
Donglan		Minglun Township	
Luocheng	Mulao	Dongxing Township	
Autonomous County			
Huanjiang	Maonan	Dacai Township	
Autonomous County			
Bama	Yao	Xiaonan Township	
Autonomous			
County			
Du'an	Yao	Da'an Township	
Autonomous			
County			
Dahua	Yao	Changmei Township	
Autonomous			
County			
		Longyan Township	
		Xunle Miao Township	

Source: Author, 2024

Research Tools/ Instruments

1.Data Collection

1) In-depth interview

When conducting in-depth interviews, researchers need to adopt a respectful, open approach to engage interviewees effectively. Reach out to parents, managers of child-caregiving services, and teachers with a clear, concise invitation that explains the purpose of the research and its goals. Then provide details about the interview process and its duration, ensuring they understand the study's significance. Interviewing is a conversational research method where researchers design interview guides to obtain firsthand research data through conversations with interviewees on

relevant topics. The purpose of interviews is to engage in in-depth communication and dialogue between researchers and interviewees, to understand how they interpret their life experiences (Wang, 2020). The interview answers were translated from Chinese into English because most key informants do not speak English. Notes were taken during the interview to memorize the data, and tape recordings were used to back up the data, with interviewees' permission granted beforehand.

2) Observation

In social sciences, observation is more than a 'technique' or a 'tool', it is a broader epistemological position to study a phenomenon, so one must observe it and at length (Bardon et al., 2020). Observation involves systematically watching and recording behavior and interactions within a specific setting. In this research, observation can provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of parents, children, and managers and teachers in child caregiving services. Moreover, observation can be either participant or non-participant, direct or indirect (Ciesielska et al., 2018). Non-participant observation allows me to maintain an outsider's perspective of the child caregiving services for a long time, over a period of two months.

This study interviewed three types of child caregiving services: large, medium, and small, ten child caregiving services teachers who can provide insights into the daily experiences, challenges, and successes of teaching in child caregiving services, six child caregiving services staff who can shed light on the overall functioning of the services and the broader context of caregiving. Ten parents from nine families of child caregiving services students, including a larger number of parents in this study provides a diverse set of perspectives and experiences related to long-distance parenting and the caregiving services their children receive.

Table 2 Selection of Key Informants

Key Informant	Family structure	Type of caregiving services	Qualification of teachers
1. Parents	1) Both parents migrating 2) Father migrating 3) Mother migrating 4) Both parents remaining home 5) Single mother 6) Single father	Non-applicable	Non-applicable
2. Managers of caregiving services	Non-applicable	1) Small 2) Medium 3) Large	1) Primary school or below 2) Junior school or below 3) High school or below 4) College's degree 5) Bachelor's degree 6) others
3. Teachers	Non-applicable	1) Small 2) Medium 3) Large	1) College's degree 2) Bachelor's degree 3) Master's degree 4) Doctor's degree 5) others

Source: Author, 2024

Data Analysis

Thorne (2000) mentioned that Morse believes that all qualitative analysis, regardless of the specific approach, involves: comprehending the phenomenon under study; synthesizing a portrait of the phenomenon that accounts for relations and linkages within its aspects; theorizing about how and why these relations appear as they do, and; recontextualizing, or putting the new knowledge about phenomena and relations back into the context of how others have articulated the evolving knowledge.

Qualitative inquiry requires that collected data is organized in a meaningful way, and this is referred to as data analysis, through analytic processes, researchers turn what can be voluminous data into understandable and insightful analysis, which qualitative researchers can use to make sense of their data including thematic analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and semiotic analysis and discusses the ways that qualitative researchers can analyze their data (Liamputtong, 2009).

The qualitative researcher must provide some coherence and structure to this bulky data set while retaining a hold of the original accounts and observations from which it is obtained. Besides, qualitative data analysis is concerned with transforming raw data by searching, evaluating, recognizing, coding, mapping, exploring, and describing patterns, trends, themes, and categories in the raw data, to interpret them and provide their underlying meanings (Mezmir, 2020).

According to its purpose, research can be divided into exploratory, descriptive, and causal research. The objective of causal or explanatory research is to set up causal relationships between variables to explain the relationship between them (Mayer, 2015).

The data analysis will focus on identifying patterns and themes related to the experiences and perceptions of long-distance parenting and caregiving services. This includes examining how parents maintain relationships with their children from a distance and how caregiving services support these relationships. By relating the collected data to research questions, I will be able to explore the unique dynamics and complexities of caregiving in this context. This analysis will help uncover the

strategies parents and caregivers use to navigate the demands of long-distance parenting and caregiving, as well as the impact of these practices on children's well-being and development.

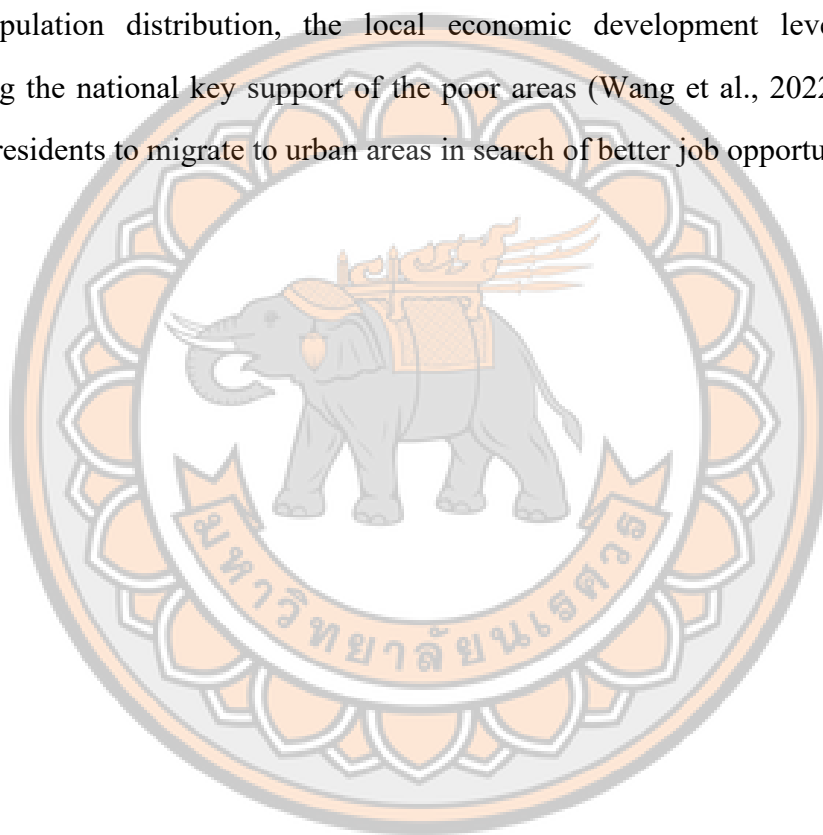
In this research, data from interviews and observations will be systematically collated by categorizing them according to the different groups listed in Table 2. An outline of the interviews will be presented in the appendix.

Study Site

Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region is located at the juncture of Eastern, Central, and Western China and is also the only region that connects to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). In 2012, Guangxi produced 1303.51 billion Yuan of GDP, accounting for only 2.51% of China's GDP, and had a per capita GDP of 27.95 thousand Yuan, 72.75% of the national average. As one of China's five autonomous regions, it has over 20 million Zhuang, the country's largest ethnic minority. Guangxi is also known for its environmental problems and rocky land desertification. Karst landforms are widespread in this region, accounting for 67% of the total area, and in turn, have exacerbated the poverty level in the rural areas (Dai et al., 2018). Given this context, focusing on the region for this study offers valuable insights into the complexities of long-distance parenting and child-caregiving services amid rural-urban migration.

In China, rapid urbanization rate, from 2001 to 2017, the population of cities has almost doubled, from 480 to 813 million, which led to a shift in the workforce from rural to urban areas (Zhang, 2021). Most interprovincial migration flows were between neighboring provinces and the direction of flows was from less developed middle and western economic zones to more developed eastern economic zones (Shen, 1996). The largest bilateral net migration of 2.1 million people from Guangxi to Guangdong, while there were only 0.3 million migrants from Guangdong to Guangxi (Qi et al., 2017). This movement of people has implications for long-distance parenting, as families face the challenge of adapting to migration and urbanization.

Hechi, as the research location, can provide me with unique opportunities to explore the impact of long-distance parenting and child caregiving services within the context of rural-urban migration. Hechi, which lies on the north-west edge of Guangxi, today contains two districts and nine counties and has a total area of 33,500 km², or around 14.10% of Guangxi. Hechi's topography is predominantly mountainous and hilly, with a high northwest and low southeast terrain (Shuai et al., 2023). The extensive mountainous terrain in Guangxi poses significant challenges to its economic development. With a large proportion of forested land within Hechi and a relatively sparse population distribution, the local economic development level is poor, considering the national key support of the poor areas (Wang et al., 2022). This has led many residents to migrate to urban areas in search of better job opportunities.



CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION (1)

LONG-DISTANCE PARENTING AND THE DEPENDENCE ON DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Introduction

This chapter examines how parents continue to provide care to their children who live away from home due to educational migration, as well as to parents themselves who migrate for work in other places. While the physical distance may seem to limit their roles, the findings reveal that parenting continues through various forms of remote engagement, such as emotional connection, supervision, communication, and value transmission (Han, 2024; Guo, 2025). Drawing on interviews with parents and individuals involved in the chosen caregiving services, this chapter demonstrates that long-distance parenting is not merely about absence. Rather, it is a reconfigured form of active caregiving shaped by available kinship, technology, trust, and intentional effort. This chapter focuses on parents' own long-distance parenting practices, aiming to address the first research question: How do parents practice long-distance parenting in the context of rural – urban migration in China? Long-distance parenting practices encompass daily communication via mobile devices, managing school performance, offering moral guidance, coordinating with caregivers, and maintaining parental responsibilities while remaining distant. As discussed in Chapter 2, long-distance parenting in rural-urban migration is a common strategy among families navigating educational inequality, limited resources, and household separation (Yiu & Yun, 2017; Zheng, 2025). The chapter that follows details how these parenting practices are not only maintained but often negotiated and intensified to meet children's needs in the absence of co-residence.

4.1 Demographic Overview of Study Participants

Understanding who the participants are—and how their caregiving decisions are shaped by context—is essential to unpacking the dynamics of care under rural-urban migration. This section introduces the demographic backgrounds of the families and caregivers involved in this study. It categorizes participating families into two configurations: single-parent households and migrant couples.

4.1.2 Profile of Parents

This study includes in-depth interviews with nine families, comprising eight married couples and one single father. All participants originated from Hechi. At the time of the study in June-August 2024, seven families were living and working in Xunle Miao Township (It is about 87 kilometers away from Huangjian, hereafter referred to as Xunle). In Xunle, job opportunities remain limited primarily to small-scale agriculture, seasonal cash crop production, and modest participation in regional poverty alleviation workshops. While the area is rich in mineral and ecological resources, industrial and service-sector employment remains scarce (China Daily, 2022). Three parents had migrated to Guangdong Province for employment in factories (It is about 600 kilometers away from Huangjian). At the time of the interviews, nine families had a total of thirteen school-aged children. Most families had one child enrolled in school, while a few had two or three children who had already gone to school. Among these children, four were attending elementary schools and receiving full-time caregiving services in Huanjiang. Two children were in kindergarten and receiving full-time caregiving services in Xunle. Two others lived with relatives—such as grandparents or aunts—but also stayed in night care in caregiving services during school terms. Two children had advanced to middle school and were enrolled in boarding schools. The remaining three children were in various stages of transition, either preparing to enter high school or completing their elementary or middle school education.

Table 3 below presents an overview of the parental demographic profiles, including age, gender, number of children, marital status, and current occupation.

These background details provide essential context for understanding each family's caregiving decisions and long-distance parenting practices.

Table 3 Profile of Parents

Family code	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Number of children	Marital status	Current occupation
Family 1	Ms. Xiaoyan	51	Mother	Two	Married	Fertilizer store owner
Family 2	Ms. Manman	48	Mother	Two	Married	Grocery owner
Family 3	Ms. Xixi	45	Mother	Two	Married	Pork vendor
Family 4	Ms. Tingzi	49	Mother	Two	Married	Hairdressers
Family 5	Ms. Huihui	45	Mother	Three	Married	Farmer
Family 6	Mr. Dali	52	Father	Two	Divorced	Construction worker
Family 7	Mr. Dakun	53	Father	One	Married	Manual Labor
Family 8	Ms. Lijun	51	Mother	Two	Married	Supermarket owner
Family 8	Mr. Dehua	52	Father	Two	Married	Supermarket owner
Family 9	Ms. Fang	46	Mother	Two	Married	Agricultural Supplies Store owner

Source: Author, 2024

4.1.2 Family Patterns

While previous research has focused on migrant parents in a homogenous familial circumstance, this study adds a new perspective by examining three parent categories: 1) parents who remain in rural areas while their children migrate to urban schools and stay in the caregiving services, 2) migrant parents who leave their children in caregiving services, 3) split-care families: rotational support network. The nine families interviewed represented a range of caregiving arrangements shaped by rural-urban migration and access to schools. Some families placed their children in full-time care services in Xunle or Huanjiang due to a lack of schooling options in their villages. Others relied on kinship networks, with grandparents or aunts providing

primary care and a combination with caregiving services during the school term. A smaller number had children who had transitioned to boarding schools for middle school or high school education. These variations reflect the different strategies families employ to support their children's education while managing long-distance parenting.

- Parents who remain in rural areas while their children migrate to urban schools and stay in the caregiving services

Seven out of ten parents interviewed fit the profile of those who remain in rural areas, living and working in Xunle Miao Township. At the same time, their children attend urban schools and receive full-time caregiving services. Their choices were motivated by necessity and ambition: to secure better educational opportunities while balancing economic survival.

If we didn't send him to the caregiving service, we were worried he wouldn't have the opportunity to attend the good middle school in Huanjiang. Ms. Manman ([pseudonym], 2024) shared.

Ms. Ting ([pseudonym], 2024) also shared: "In our town, there's no primary school anymore, so children have to go to the county for their education."

Parents in this study consistently linked caregiving services in the city to their aspirations for better educational opportunities for their children. Their decisions reflected a belief that urban environments offered stronger academic preparation, more structured learning, and pathways toward well-regarded primary schools.

Ms. Xixi (pseudonym, 2024) shared that she first sent her daughter to caregiving services when the child was in kindergarten. She felt that local early childhood programs in the township were limited in both structure and content. *"At that time, the kindergartens in our town didn't teach children much. They just let the kids play. So, I chose to send her there. The teacher there taught her writing and "Pinyin" (Pinyin is a system that uses the Roman alphabet to represent the pronunciation of Mandarin*

Chinese. It is mainly used to help children and learners read and pronounce Chinese characters.)” For her, caregiving services provided more than supervision. They represented an early introduction to literacy and foundational skills that township facilities were unable to offer.

A similar motivation appeared in the accounts of other parents, including Ms. Ting and Ms. Lijun. Both described their decisions as driven by a desire to secure stronger educational preparation in the city. They believed that caregiving centers in urban areas delivered more systematic instruction and could better position their children for the competitive admissions processes of top primary schools. Ms. Lijun (pseudonym, 2024) explained, “Because I wanted him to attend the best school. That was the reason I sent him to caregiving services.” Her statement reflects a strategic approach to schooling. She viewed caregiving services as an essential first step to accessing higher-quality education in the city.

Together, these accounts show that parents not only sought safer or more structured childcare. They used caregiving services as an educational strategy and a bridge to better-resourced schools. This aligns with broader patterns in China, where urban schools are perceived to offer stronger academic environments and where competition for top-tier placements can be intense. For the parents in this study, sending their children to caregiving services was a deliberate response to these pressures and a way to invest in their children’s educational futures.

In China, admission to middle school (junior high) typically follows an “assign-by-locality” (school zone) principle aimed at ensuring equity, especially in public schools. However, in many urban areas, this system has become increasingly competitive due to high demand for enrollment in prestigious or specialized schools. Meanwhile, students seeking to enter top-tier or private schools often face selective processes such as academic assessments, interviews, or even computerized lotteries—making competition intense (Wang et al., 2021; X. Cao et al., 2023). This pressure is amplified by the high-stakes nature of secondary school placement, which lays the foundation for future success in the gaokao (高考) college entrance exam and

access to elite high schools.

- Migrant parents who leave their children in caregiving services

Three of the interviewees were migrant parents who left their children in caregiving services. One striking case was that of Mr. Dali ([pseudonym], 2025), a single father whose caregiving choices reflect both personal hardship and resilience. He has worked as a construction worker for over twenty years, and his workplace is not stable; he goes wherever work is available. Most often, this includes Guangdong Province (about 350 kilometers from Huangjian), Hainan Province (approximately 750 kilometers from Huangjian), and Fujian Province (around 900 kilometers from Huangjian), keeping him away from his child through long-distance parenting. Following the divorce, he entrusted his child to a caregiving service. Through physical distance, he occasionally contacted the caregiver, relying heavily on trust in the services. “There’s nothing I can do. Someone has to work outside to earn money,” (Feb, 2025), he stated. His story illuminates how caregiving becomes a logistical solution: parenting through absence (Dittman, 2018; Puspitasari et al., 2021).

- Split-Care Families: Rotational Support Networks

Educational restructuring and widespread rural school closures have placed multi-child families under significant strain, as seen in the case of Ms. Huihui (pseudonym, 2024). Faced with no local school, she struggled to choose between relocating the entire family or enrolling her children in external care services, a decision that reflects how caregiving becomes a form of crisis navigation, where responsibility intersects with structural inequity (Chen et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2022).

This dilemma is further illustrated across other family arrangements. For instance, Mr. Dali (pseudonym, 2024) adopted a split-care approach: he enrolled his younger daughter in a full-time caregiving service while renting a house in Xunle where his mother assists with caring for the elder daughter. His mother helps wake the eldest child, who then walks to school unaccompanied—a strategy that relies heavily on intergenerational support and spatial separation (Goh, 2011; Chen & Jiang, 2019).

In another case, Ms. Xixi (pseudonym, 2024). Her son, placed in a caregiving

service in Huanjiang, ran away following a conflict with a caregiver. Ms. Xixi recounted tracking her son's location via his smartwatch and urgently calling her cousin to locate him and return him to the caregiving services.

Taken together, these three categories reveal how rural Chinese families have adapted their caregiving arrangements in response to ongoing migration and educational mobility. First, parents who remain in rural areas while their children attend city schools illustrate a partial separation of household functions, in which economic and social responsibilities remain in the village while educational ambitions are pursued in the city. This pattern reflects a shift away from the traditional model in which parents and children live and study in the same community. Second, migrant parents who leave their children in caregiving services show how migration restructures the family into a dispersed form. The parents follow labor opportunities, while caregiving institutions temporarily assume parental roles. This arrangement highlights the growing institutionalization of childcare, which historically relied on extended kin. Third, the split-care or rotational support model demonstrates how families negotiate between formal services and kinship networks to meet the demands of migration. Rotational caregiving among grandparents, siblings, and caregivers signifies an evolving “circulatory” family structure shaped by mobility, economic pressure, and the pursuit of better schooling. Altogether, these three patterns show that migration has transformed rural families into more flexible, multi-local units, with caregiving redistributed across institutions, kinship, and geographic spaces.

4.1.3 Profile of Caregiving Services

There are three categories of caregiving services available in Huanjiang, based on the number of children each type can accommodate. Small-scale caregiving services serve fewer than ten students, with a single individual performing all functions—teaching, administration, and direct caregiver. Medium-scale caregiving services have ten to thirty students and employ three workers: teachers, caregivers, and a domestic worker who handles cooking and cleaning. Large-sized services employ over thirty staff members and are supported by another five or more workers,

reflecting a more professionalized and diversified workforce.

Fieldwork in Huanjiang showed that, in the majority of cases, caregiving services were provided in leased apartments in residential communities, typically three-bedroom, one-living-room units located near schools. One room can accommodate around five to six bunk beds, with a maximum capacity of approximately twelve students. Small providers, such as Ms. Xiaomei ([pseudonym], 2024), often function as sole caretakers, teachers, and managers. Larger services were operated in complex buildings and involved several staff members, such as life teachers. According to interviews with all caregiving services, the fees for full-time care in September 2025 for one child amount to approximately 7,000 RMB (\$984.20) per semester, totaling 14,000 RMB (\$1,965) for two semesters in the Chinese academic year.

In the existing literature, I have not found studies that examine full-care caregiving services from the same perspective as this research. International English publications focus more on after-school programs, boarding schools, or community learning centers, which differ structurally and functionally from China's full-care caregiving services. As a result, these sources do not offer a direct comparison. Chinese studies on caregiving services mainly discuss policy measures, management standards, and strategies to improve institutional quality. These works provide helpful insights into regulation, but they rarely analyze how services of different scales operate or how children experience their daily routines within them. They also tend to overlook the relational dynamics between caregivers and children in services of varying sizes.

The fieldwork observations, however, show that the scale of caregiving services shapes children's everyday experiences in meaningful ways. Children living in small and medium caregiving services often develop closer relationships with their caretakers. Limited staffing and compact living spaces mean that one caretaker performs multiple roles in teaching, daily supervision, and emotional support. This creates a higher level of familiarity and dependence between children and their caregivers. In larger caregiving services, management tends to be more systematized.

Tasks are divided among tutors, cooks, cleaners, and administrative staff. The broader division of labor reduces the intensity of children's emotional attachment to any single caregiver. These findings add a new perspective to the literature by showing that the scale of caregiving services affects not only organizational structure but also the nature of children's social and emotional interactions within these environments.

In this study, six people from five caregiving services were interviewed: two small, two medium, and one large service. Among the six informants, two had dropped out of secondary school, three had completed elementary level, and one had completed tertiary level.

Table 4 Profile of Caregiving Services

Type (size)	Qualifications	Staff	Facilities	Capacity (Number Children)	Parental Factors	Trust
Small-Scale	Home-based, often run by one person	1-2	Living quarters, study space	1-10	Kinship, familiarity	
Medium-Scale	Rented house near the school	2-3	separate rooms, shared bathroom	10-30	Location, modest affordability	
Large-Scale	Registered, multi-staff facilities	4+	Multiple floors, an external kitchen, and a classroom	30+	Professional image, supervision	

Source: Author, 2024

Table 5 Profile of Caregivers

Caregiving Services code	Key Informant	Age	Type Care-giving Services	of Positions in Care-giving Services	Education Level
A	Ms. Xiaomei	32	Small	Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver	High school or below
B	Ms. Wangfang	52	Large	Caregiver	Primary school or below

B	Ms. Xiuying	49	Large	Caregiver	below High school or below
C	Ms. Lili	36	Medium	Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver	Primary school or below
D	Ms. Liumin	50	Small	Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver	High school or below
E	Mr. Zhangwei	45	Medium	Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver	College's degree

Source: Author, 2024

The field observations reveal a structured daily routine that reflects the rhythm of full-time caregiving services in Huanjiang. Caregivers begin their day at around 6:30 a.m. They prepare breakfast, wake the children, supervise washing and dressing, and ensure that everyone is ready for school. By 7:45 a.m., they escort the children to the school gate. The regular school day in China begins at 8 a.m. and continues until noon, so once the children enter school, caregivers return to the caregiving service to eat breakfast, clean the apartment, and take a short rest. Because children receive lunch at school, caregivers do not prepare midday meals.

At noon, caregivers arrive at the school gate at about 12:30 p.m. to pick up the children. Some children buy small snacks on the way back, while others return directly to the caregiving service. Rest time begins at 1 p.m., and caregivers often nap alongside the children. At 2 p.m., an alarm signals the end of nap time. Caregivers wake the children and walk them back to school for the afternoon session, which resumes at 2:30 p.m. and ends at 5 p.m. This period gives caregivers a short window of personal time. Some spend it meeting friends or relatives, while others remain at the service to prepare for the evening routine. By 4 p.m., caregivers begin cooking dinner. Once the meal is ready, they walk to the school gate again to pick up the children.

Evening activities follow a predictable structure. After dinner, children clean their dishes and begin their homework. In small caregiving services, the caretaker provides one-to-one guidance and helps children with complex tasks. Medium and large caregiving services often employ staff specifically responsible for homework supervision. After completing their assignments, children have one to two hours of playtime in the shared living area. Bedtime is set at 9 p.m., when all children go to

sleep under the caregiver's supervision.

The routines for half-day and after-class stays differ slightly. Half-day students spend only the noon rest period at the caregiving service. After waking from their nap, they return home instead of staying for homework or dinner. After class, students rest at home at midday and join the caregiving service only after school. They eat dinner, complete homework, and wait for their families to pick them up in the evening.

These observations complement the structured observation procedures used in this study, which focused on pickup and drop-off routines, daily supervision, meals, rest periods, and homework arrangements. The daily rhythm described above provides an overview of what caregiving services do in practice and illustrates how caregivers manage children's education, rest, and well-being across different types of stays.



Figure 3 Two children are drinking their beverages before nap time at the caregiving services A.

Source: Author (June, 2024)



Figure 4 Computer room for children at caregiving services B.

Source: Author (June, 2024)



Figure 5 Girls' dormitory at caregiving services B.

Source: Author (June, 2024)



Figure 6 Children from caregiving services E doing homework after school.

Source: Author (July, 2024)



Figure 7 Children from caregiving services E doing homework after school.

Source: Author (July, 2024)



Figure 8 Children from caregiving services D playing before dinner.

Source: Author (July, 2024)



Figure 9 Children's clothing hanging on the balcony at caregiving services C.

Source: Author (June, 2024)



Figure 10 Caretaker Ms. Wangfang from caregiving services B waiting at the school gate with a student list.

Source: Author (June, 2024)



Figure 11 Caretaker Ms. Xiuying from caregiving services B preparing dinner for the children.

Source: Author (June, 2024)

4.2 Family Configurations and Parenting Strategies

4.2.1 Distributed Parenting on Kinships

In this study, parenting does not end with physical absence. For many families originally residing in the rural area, especially fathers like Mr. Dali ([pseudonym], 2024), caregiving becomes a distributed practice. Both Mr. Dali ([pseudonym], 2024) and Mr. Dakun ([pseudonym], 2024), the two fathers enrolled their children in medium-scale, full-time caregiving services in Xunle. Mr. Dali, a single father and construction worker, had no choice but to entrust his three-year-old daughter to a caregiving service for four years while he moved between jobs in Hainan and Guangdong. Though physically absent, he relied on a deeply trusted relative—the caregiver was his cousin's daughter—and continued to remain emotionally involved. When needed, he would take the earliest bus home or ask his sister to help. His own mother, at 82, also supported the care of his elder daughter, highlighting how parenting became a multi-generational, networked effort. This pattern reveals what

Rotheram-Fuller et al. (2010) refer to as “distributed parenting”, wherein parents share caregiving roles with others—especially kin—across spatial and social boundaries. While Western frameworks often assume direct parent-child interaction, in this context, relational continuity is maintained through delegation based on trust, kinship, and obligation. The physical absence is mitigated by a moral presence—a commitment to remain available and supportive despite structural limits.

Mr. Dakun’s case demonstrated a similar narrative. As a father of one, he sent his child to caregiving services not only because of necessity, but because he “knew the caregiver personally” and “could not find anyone else to look after her” while doing part-time jobs nearby. Though the caregiving center charged 16,000 RMB (\$ 2264) annually, he chose to stay close and reachable in case anything happened. When his daughter was bullied, he acted immediately, reminding us that distance does not negate responsibility; it reshapes how responsibility is enacted. These accounts echo what Baldassar and Merla (2014) describe as care circulation, the multi-directional flows of caregiving shaped by obligation, affection, and social ties.

Some children experienced rotational care, spending weekdays in caregiving services and weekends or holidays at home or with relatives. Like Ms. Fang ([pseudonym], 2024), who runs an agricultural supply shared, “We arranged evening tutoring services for her. After school, the teacher would pick her up to do homework at the caregiving service. When she finished, her aunt would pick her up and take her home. This pattern reflects hybrid caregiving arrangements, in which parents manage logistics and care through distributed networks of kin.

This rotational pattern can also be understood in light of Confucian family norms and the Chinese kinship system, where caregiving is distributed across parents and extended family members as a moral and practical obligation, particularly under conditions of migration (Goh, 2011; Jingzhong & Lu, 2011; Van der Pijl, 2018). Traditional Chinese family life, shaped by Confucian teachings and *jia xun* (family precepts), emphasizes shared obligations among generations and expects family members to cooperate in raising children and managing household affairs (Goh, 2011). In Ms. Fang’s case, the aunt’s involvement in daily pickup routines, combined with

the paid evening tutoring at the caregiving service, reflects the moral expectation that kin should “step in” when parents’ work limits their availability. Rather than weakening the family, rotational care reorganizes the elementary family unit across space, with parents, relatives, and caregiving services jointly forming a coalition of caregivers for one child (Goh, 2011). At the same time, this arrangement shows how Confucian ideas of filial responsibility and extended kin support now operate within a semi-commodified context, where care circulates between family members and market-based caregiving services, but remains anchored in family decision-making and kinship obligations.

4.3 Staying Emotionally Present through Mobile Communication

4.3.1 Technology as a Parenting Tool

For parents separated from their children by geography and necessity, digital tools like smartwatches, online platforms like WeChat, and voice notes became lifelines. These technologies offered more than convenience—they represented continuity, albeit in mediated and often diluted forms. This dynamic, where digital tools sustain yet simultaneously dilute familial bonds, is not unique to China but reflects a broader global experience. Research on Filipino migrant families shows that mothers also rely on communication technologies to maintain a sense of connection and care across borders, often finding that these technologies transform the quality of communication (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Similarly, studies of transnational families have highlighted that while communication technologies are indispensable for sustaining connections across distance, they cannot fully replicate the intimacy of co-present caregiving (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). This limitation is echoed in research on Canadian transnational families, which found that despite using information and communication technologies to create a sense of co-presence, family members still experienced the distance as a significant emotional challenge (Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012).

Across these diverse contexts, a typical pattern emerges. Parents rely on digital tools to maintain contact with their children, and these tools provide an important

channel for continuity in the parent–child relationship. At the same time, the connection becomes more task-focused and less emotionally rich than face-to-face interaction. For example, Ms. Xiaomei ([pseudonym], 2024) noted, “I joined the class WeChat group for parents, where the teacher posts the daily homework assignments. Parents are expected to supervise their children’s completion of these tasks.”

Caregivers played a mediating role in these communications. Ms. Xiuying([pseudonym], 2024), one of the caregiving staff, explained:

The children can use our phones to contact their parents anytime. Some parents also give their children smartwatches so they can contact their parents directly. Sometimes, when children want pocket money, their parents transfer money to us through WeChat, and we either give the children cash or make purchases on their behalf (June 17, 2024).

These tools acted as emotional bridges, allowing children to hear familiar voices, even if for a few seconds. Parents, too, tried to initiate conversations or send updates when possible. As Ms. Liumin (pseudonym) noted, “Some children miss home and call, but often it’s short—just ‘I’m okay’ or to ask for money” (June 20, 2024).

Parents used digital communication to check on their children's daily routines, even if the conversations were brief. One caregiver Ms. Xiaomei ([pseudonym], 2024) pointed out:

The father rarely inquired about the child. He only contacted me when necessary or during holidays when he needed to pick up the child. Sometimes, I took the initiative to update him about the child (June 28, 2024).



Figure 12 Children with smartwatches are playing on the bench near the school gate.

Source: Author (July, 2024)

Still, for many parents, maintaining this basic line of communication was a way to stay involved and fulfill their role as providers and protectors from a distance. However, in rural China, mobile communication has become more about discipline and logistics than about emotional intimacy. Parents may ask about meals or schoolwork, but struggle to convey warmth over brief, mediated calls.

The reliance on technology also created a triangular model of connection—parent, caregiver, and child. Caregivers, such as Ms. Xiaomei ([pseudonym], 2024), often mediated communication and updates:

Most of the time, I attend school activities. His father rarely attends. Each class has a WeChat parent group, and I'm part of the one for his class. Teachers usually post assignments or event announcements there (June 28, 2024).

This mediation reflects a layered dynamic of trust and delegation. While parents held on to their role as moral anchors, caregivers embodied the everyday routine of affection and oversight. At times, this delegation blurred roles. As one father, Mr. Dali ([pseudonym], 2024) shared, “She contacts me using her teacher’s phone. If the teacher didn’t help her, I wouldn’t know what she ate or how she did in class.” (February 10, 2025).

Parents depended not only on devices but on the caregivers’ willingness to facilitate contact, a situation that complicated direct bonds and further abstracted the act of care. Despite their functionality, smartwatches and WeChat groups rarely delivered the emotional closeness that children craved. One child’s mother, Ms. Xixi([pseudonym], 2024), recounted her daughter crying during calls, whispering that she missed home but could not say it in front of others.

4.3.2 The Caregiver as Messenger and Mediator

In the absence of parents, caregivers were not merely custodians. They became translators of affection, accountability, and parental intent. As Ms. Xiaomei ([pseudonym], 2024) reflected: “He stays with me during weekends and short holidays. Wherever I go, he goes.” For the upcoming Maonan Dragon Festival, Ms. Xiaomei ([pseudonym], 2024) plans to: “I plan to visit my parents for a meal and have dinner with some friends. I will take him and my two children together.”

Her role extended far beyond logistics. She was a memory keeper, a proxy voice, and an emotional stabilizer. In many cases, children did not contact their parents directly. Instead, they relayed updates, frustrations, and even requests through their caregiver. This arrangement blurred boundaries and redefined what it meant to be a parent on the move. Studies show that migration often shifts caregiving responsibilities away from parents and toward alternative figures, including extended kin or surrogate caregivers, who help maintain family functioning in the parents’

absence (Chen & Jiang, 2019). Research on long-distance and mobile-phone parenting further highlights how digital and mediated communication reshapes parent-child interaction, often reducing emotional richness and redistributing caregiving roles to those physically present with the child (Dittman, 2018; Liang et al., 2022). These dynamics align with longstanding Confucian expectations that family members share obligations in raising children, with caregiving distributed across a supportive network when circumstances require it (Goh, 2011).

Ms. Lili ([pseudonym], 2024), who operated a medium-sized caregiving service, similarly noted that she often initiated updates to parents: “Sometimes they don’t ask, but I still tell them. I know they care, even if they can’t say it.” Her statement reveals the essential qualities of a caregiver—the ability to read unspoken concerns and respond preemptively. In this moral arrangement, the caregiver does not replace the parents but becomes the relational link that holds the system together. Tronto (1993) reminds us that care is not simply a task. It is a moral and emotional act—a performance of proximity when distance defines the family.

Technology also reinforced their mediating role. Caregivers managed the WeChat groups where homework and meal photos were sent. Some parents even requested caregivers to help their children record audio messages, because the children “felt shy” to speak directly. This kind of mediated affection, though indirect, became a habit—a rhythm of caring filtered through the body and phone of another adult. The caregiver as messenger also bore the brunt of emotional tension. When a child failed an exam or fell ill, the caregiver often delivered the news, softened the impact, and handled the fallout. As one caregiver, Ms. Wangfang ([pseudonym], 2024) put it,

There was a fifth-grade girl who started menstruating, but her period didn’t stop for a long time. We were very worried, so we contacted her parents and took her to the hospital. The doctor said she needed to be hospitalized, but I couldn’t stay at the hospital with her because I had to take care of other children. I informed her parents, who arranged for a relative to take care of her. Later, when she came back from the hospital, I made sure she took her medication on time and

supervised her (June 17, 2024)

In this way, caregiving becomes not just functional. It is about balancing attachment with limits, discipline with empathy, and, above all, presence with boundaries. Research on caregiving emphasizes that care is never confined to practical tasks. It involves emotional concern, relational negotiation, and culturally shaped expectations about how adults support children (Rummery & Fine, 2012). Studies on caregiving systems further note that daily acts of “sustenance, stimulation, support, structure, and surveillance” form the basis of children’s adaptation and development, requiring caregivers to constantly adjust emotional and behavioral boundaries (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995). These patterns are also linked to broader family systems, where caregiving reflects both personal histories and attachment-related behaviors (Solomon & George, 1996). Taken together, these works support the idea that caregiving in child caregiving services is both emotional and developmental rather than purely logistical. Additionally, a kinship system is needed to support.

Despite China’s rapid modernization and growing individualization, kinship networks remain central in childcare arrangements. Chinese families have long relied on shared caregiving responsibilities, where parents, grandparents, and extended relatives work together to raise children (Goh, 2011). Rural-urban migration reinforces this pattern, as many parents work outside their hometowns and rely on relatives to provide daily care in their absence, creating new forms of long-distance and intergenerational caregiving (Chen & Jiang, 2019). At the same time, structural constraints such as the hukou system and the decline of rural schools push families to rely on caregiving services as supplemental support (Zhou, 2019; Liang et al., 2022). As a result, childcare in these communities often takes the form of a hybrid system where formal caregiving services operate alongside enduring kinship obligations, reflecting both practical necessity and cultural continuity.

4.4 Emotional Strategies and Coping Mechanisms

4.4.1 Enduring the Guilt of Distance

The decision to send children into caregiving services may appear pragmatic, even strategic. However, for many parents, it left emotional fractures that rarely healed. Beneath the stoic justifications lay unresolved guilt—borne quietly, but deeply.

One mother, Ms. Xixi (pseudonym), recalled the moment she discovered her daughter's chat messages to her friends: "She said she didn't belong in this world... We didn't love her. I broke down." (July 4, 2024). Her voice, recorded during the interview, trembled. Though she explained the caregiving arrangement as necessary for her daughter's safety and schooling, this digital confession haunted her. It brought into focus a painful tension—between economic survival and emotional closeness. Between doing what is best and feeling like it still is not enough. In this framework, parenting at a distance is not emotionally cost-free. It demands an ongoing labor of justification. "We had no choice," many parents echoed. However, that refrain did not shield them from guilt.

Ms. Huihui ([pseudonym], 2024), a mother of three, shared a similar burden. She described a time when her youngest son became withdrawn: "He stopped talking to me. Even during video calls, he just looked down. I felt helpless. I cried after every call." (July 20, 2024).

For Ms. Huihui ([pseudonym], 2024), silence became the sharpest indictment. It was not anger but detachment—her child's way of expressing the slow erosion of intimacy. Still, some wounds ran deeper. One child, wrongly accused of theft at a caregiving service, packed his bag and tried to leave the facility. His mother Ms. Manman ([pseudonym], 2024) said that:

The teacher even searched for my son's bed, which upset him. Feeling wrong, my son yelled at the teacher and then packed his suitcase to leave. The teacher didn't stop him and even said, "If you leave, don't come back..." I was very worried about him, and I called my cousin to find my son and take him back to the

caregiving service. My son felt very aggrieved (July 26, 2024).

What becomes clear is that guilt does not signify failure. The parents in this study did not abandon their children. They reorganized parenting around sacrifice. They stayed up late to send money. They checked in with caregivers. They cried quietly after calls. They carried the invisible weight of love from afar. One father, Mr. Dakun([pseudonym], 2024), powerfully articulated this emotional logic when he said, “If she needed anything, I would be there any time” (February 11, 2025). Her words echo the affective terrain that many parents traverse: the silence of absence does not signal disengagement. It signals a deep internalized devotion—quiet, sustaining, and resolute.

4.4.2 Holidays as Emotional Reunions

For many rural migrant parents, holidays were not simply cultural obligations. They were lifelines. Amid year-long separations, Lunar New Year and school breaks in China emerged as rare moments of tangible presence. These reunions allowed parents to feel, touch, and see what they had missed—physical proximity became a form of emotional redemption. These reunions were not about recreation. They were about recalibration—restoring bonds that had been stretched thin by economic necessity and daily distance. Ms. Fang (pseudonym), whose daughter was in a caregiving service while she managed an agricultural store, shared a reflection: “I count the days to see her again.” (February 15, 2025).

As Mazzucato and Schans (2011) call affective anchor points—moments that stabilize emotionally fragmented family structures. As a mother, Ms. Manman ([pseudonym], 2024) said that: “My husband often visited him on weekends, as he didn’t have classes then. He would take him out to buy things and eat his favorite foods.” (July 26, 2024). Some parents tried to bridge the gap with gestures—gifts, cooked meals, shared photos.

Reunions during school breaks or the Chinese New Year held deep emotional significance for many parents. These brief visits were more than opportunities to check on academic progress—they were moments to reestablish bonds that distance

had strained. As one mother, Ms. Lijun ([pseudonym], 2024) said, “Just holding him makes everything I do worthwhile.” (February 15, 2025). These reunions became vital moments of reconnection, allowing parents and children to reaffirm their emotional ties, however briefly.

The physical presence, even if brief, offered reassurance and helped reestablish the rhythm of long-distance parenting. In caregiving arrangements shaped by migration, these short visits served as an emotional anchor for both parents and children, supporting their ability to cope with prolonged separation. As noted in the literature, long-distance parenting relies heavily on intermittent face-to-face contact to maintain emotional bonds, complementing the limitations of mediated communication (Dittman, 2018). Research on left-behind and migrant families similarly shows that parental absence heightens children’s emotional vulnerability, while even temporary reunions can strengthen attachment and provide needed stability (Yang & Liu, 2020; Li et al., 2021). These patterns reflect broader caregiving dynamics in migrant households, where physical presence remains a crucial component of emotional support despite ongoing separation.

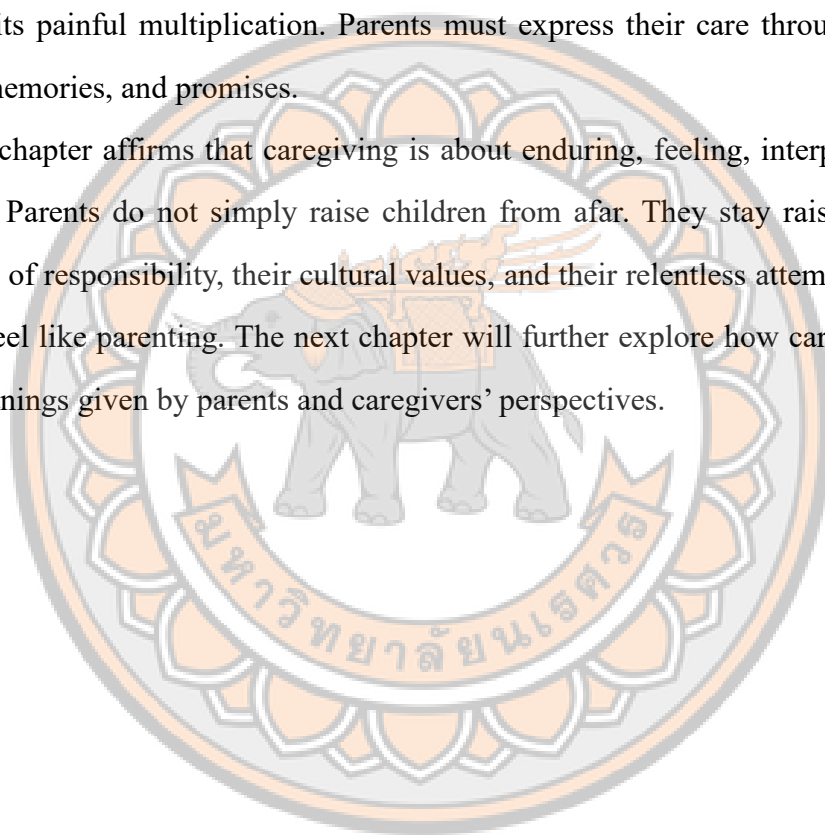
4.5 Conclusion

Long-distance parenting, as experienced by rural families in this study, is not defined solely by parents’ physical absence. Instead, it is marked by ongoing presence—mediated through phone calls, remittances, and emotional reassurance. Parents continue to care for, advise, and support their children even when separated by physical distance. As this chapter has shown, parenting from afar involves consistent effort, emotional intention, and creative adaptation. Whether through regular phone check-ins, instructing relatives to watch over the child, or supporting caregiving services needs from a distance, parents find ways to remain involved. Despite the constraints of geography and economic hardship, their caregiving reflects love, responsibility, and a deep commitment to their children’s growth.

In this landscape, parental love travels. It moves through voice notes on WeChat, silent remittances, school holiday reunions, and checks with caregiving services.

Parents adapt their roles with fierce intentionality. Trust in caregivers is cultivated not from obligation but through delicate negotiations, sometimes based on kinship, sometimes on sheer necessity. Communication technologies stretch parenting across distances (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Nonetheless, the caregiving arrangement remains a fragile compact. As explored earlier, when caregivers fail to uphold emotional or ethical responsibilities, parents respond swiftly and decisively, transferring children, expressing outrage, or vowing never to delegate again. These reactions highlight a critical insight: long-distance parenting is not the abdication of duty, but its painful multiplication. Parents must express their care through proxies, devices, memories, and promises.

This chapter affirms that caregiving is about enduring, feeling, interpreting, and believing. Parents do not simply raise children from afar. They stay raised by their own sense of responsibility, their cultural values, and their relentless attempts to make distance feel like parenting. The next chapter will further explore how care is diverse in the meanings given by parents and caregivers' perspectives.



CHAPTER V

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION (2)

NEGOTIATION AND MEANINGS OF CARE IN THE COMMODITIZATION OF CARE

Introduction

This chapter examines how caregiving is defined, negotiated, and practiced by both parents and caregiving service providers in Huanjiang within the framework of care commoditization. While the previous chapters outlined the structural forces that shape parents' decisions—including school closures, educational inequalities, and the hukou system, this chapter addresses Research Questions 2 and 3 by focusing on the meanings parents assign to childcare and the ways caregiving services interpret and enact their roles.

Parents' narratives show that caregiving services are not merely stopgap solutions but deliberate strategies that reconcile migration-driven separation with aspirations for their children's development. Their accounts reveal how caregiving becomes a shared, distributed responsibility that extends beyond supervision to include academic guidance, emotional reassurance, daily routines, and moral instruction. These expectations reflect the caregiving functions of structure, support, stimulation, surveillance, and sustenance outlined by Bradley and Caldwell (1995), and also align with Confucian-based kinship traditions where caregiving is relational, moral, and collective (Goh, 2011).

Caregiving service providers, meanwhile, describe their work through a blend of professional structure and familial-like commitment. Their daily routines—waking children, preparing meals, escorting them to school, supervising homework, and

responding to health needs—illustrate how caregiving services operationalize tasks traditionally embedded in family life. At the same time, caregivers recognize the boundaries of their surrogate role, balancing emotional investment with the institutional constraints of caring for multiple children. This dynamic reflects the tension between marketized care and relational expectations (Ungerson, 2005; Aulenbacher et al., 2018).

Together, the perspectives of parents and caregivers reveal a hybrid caregiving system shaped by migration, cultural norms, and the commodification of care. Care is distributed across parents, caregivers, and kins; coordinated through digital communication; and enacted within both relational and transactional frameworks. Rather than viewing long-distance parenting as an erosion of responsibility, the findings show that it represents a strategic reconfiguration of caregiving that seeks to preserve continuity, stability, and emotional connection in the face of spatial separation. The sections that follow present parents' perceptions of caregiving, caregivers' own definitions and practices, and the broader ideological frameworks that guide these understandings.

5.1 Parents' Perception of Child Caregiving Services

For migrant parents in Huanjiang, enrolling their children in child caregiving services is not simply a practical response to work-related migration. It represents a strategic reshaping of parenting aimed at securing educational opportunities, maintaining daily routines, and ensuring emotional and physical well-being. Parents consistently described caregiving services as the most viable arrangement for reconciling migration demands with the desire to raise healthy, disciplined, and

academically successful children.

Parents' narratives reveal that caregiving is understood through a combination of educational aspirations, daily care needs, and moral expectations—all of which correspond to the caregiving functions of structure, stimulation, surveillance, support, and sustenance (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995). Moreover, their decision-making reflects long-standing cultural expectations regarding Chinese kinship, in which caregiving involves shared responsibility, relational trust, and intergenerational coordination (Goh, 2011; Chen & Jiang, 2019).

5.1.1 Caregiving Services as a Pathway to Better Education

Parents frequently emphasized that their primary motivation for choosing caregiving services was to secure access to better schooling. This belief aligns with longstanding research showing persistent inequalities between rural and urban education in China (Hannum, 2003; Li et al., 2020). Interviews confirmed this gap clearly. As Ms. Xiaoyan (pseudonym, 2024) noted, “The elementary schools in the county have better resources than those in the town. Also, the number of students in the town school was decreasing as many parents transferred their children to county schools.”

School consolidation reinforced this dynamic. As Ms. Huihui (pseudonym, 2024) explained,

The primary school in town has closed, and my children have nowhere to study. Now I have to rent a house in the township. There's no other choice. The children can't go without an education—they must go to school. However, moving the whole family to the county would be beyond what we can afford with our current

income.

Her statement echoes broader patterns of systemic restructuring, in which rural school closures and uneven educational resources compel families to relocate their children to county-based education as a pragmatic response to migration and schooling constraints (Hannum, 2003; Lu & Xia, 2016; Ministry of Education, PRC, 2021).

Within these constraints, caregiving services emerge as an affordable alternative to full family migration. Parents framed this choice as an investment in their children's future, not a temporary measure. Ms. Manman (pseudonym, 2024) described her decision clearly: she wanted her son to access better educational resources and have a chance at attending a good middle school. *"If we didn't send him to the caregiving service, we were worried he wouldn't have the opportunity to attend middle school in the city."* Similarly, Ms. Lijun (pseudonym, 2024) and her husband emphasized that enrolling their son was "for the sake of his future."

Parents' limited educational backgrounds further shaped their decision. Many felt unable to provide academic guidance themselves. As Ms. Lijun acknowledged, "We needed to run our shop and couldn't tutor him due to our low education levels, so we had to send him to the caregiving services. We trusted the teacher to take good care of him." This reflects the outsourcing of stimulation and structure, caregiving functions traditionally provided by parents but now delegated to paid services due to migration constraints (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995; Peng, 2018).

Ms. Fang (pseudonym, 2024) also shared: "I felt it was good for her to study there—education in Huanjiang is definitely better than in the countryside".

Thus, parents perceive caregiving services as educational gateways that

compensate for structural disadvantages in rural schooling and for the academic support they cannot provide from afar.

The strongest motivation for parents is the conviction that urban schools offer higher-quality education than rural schools, a belief widely reinforced by the persistent rural – urban educational divide in China (Hannum, 2003; Li, Li et al. 2020). Structural changes in rural schooling also shape parents' educational decisions. Within this context, child caregiving services emerge as a pragmatic and attainable bridge to urban educational resources. Parents frame their choice as an active investment in social mobility rather than a temporary arrangement.

5.1.2 Caregiving Services as a Well-being Provider

Beyond academic advancement, Hechi's migrant parents view child-care services as crucial to ensuring their children's overall well-being. These services provide a structured, safe, and supportive environment that compensates for the parents' physical absence due to labor migration. The decision to enroll children is not solely instrumental; it reflects parents' concern for emotional stability, routine, and personal development.

Parents also rely on caregiving services to maintain their children's daily stability and emotional well-being. Their accounts show that caregiving is not limited to academic support; it extends to discipline, routine-building, and the moral formation associated with traditional parenting.

A number of parents emphasized the role of caregiving services in providing consistent behavioral guidance. As Ms. Xixi (pseudonym, 2024) explained, “When she was at home, she wouldn't listen. At least in the caregiving service, she was safe and listened to the teacher.” Her perspective shows that structure and behavioral

regulation remain central components of effective caregiving (Baldwin, 1948; Puspitasari et al., 2021).

Parents' migration often makes it impossible to enact such routines themselves. As Mr. Dakun (pseudonym, 2024) said, "Of course, parents should take care of their children... but I can't do that for the sake of making a living." His perspective aligns with the long-distance parenting patterns described in Chapter II, where mobile-phone communication plays a supportive but limited role (Liang et al., 2022). Parents know that emotional encouragement and smartphone monitoring cannot substitute for daily supervision, meal preparation, or establishing bedtime routines. By providing sustenance, structure, and surveillance, caregiving services effectively occupy the caregiving space parents cannot maintain due to migration. Parents, therefore, view these services as essential partners in nurturing stable, secure, and well-regulated children.

5.1.3 Beyond Education: Caregiving Services in Nurturing Child

In addition to educational support, parents view caregiving services as essential contributors to their children's holistic well-being. These services not only provide physical care, such as meals, hygiene, and safe supervision, but also support emotional stability, social development, and the cultivation of habits and self-discipline. For migrant parents, the decision to rely on these services is thus both practical and strategic, reflecting an understanding that children's daily routines and social environments significantly shape their growth.

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the emotional and behavioral advantages of structured care. Ms. Tingzi([pseudonym], 2024) noted: "From my experience, the

teachers at the caregiving services my son attended were quite good. They treated my son as if he were their own child.” Similarly, Mr. Dali([pseudonym], 2024) emphasized the consistency and reliability of caregivers:

If something happened, the caregiver would handle it. If the child had a fever, she would take her medicine. Once the child recovered, she would send me the bill and ask for money. The child would only return home during summer or winter holidays.

These accounts show that parents perceive caregiving services as capable of providing both immediate safety and long-term emotional support, bridging the gap created by their physical absence.

The dual role of caregiving services—balancing discipline, routine, and affective attention—reflects a reconfiguration of traditional parenting responsibilities. They demonstrate the Confucian ideals that emphasize family co-residence and moral guidance within the home (Goh, 2011), while acting as an extension of parental care, taking on responsibilities that parents cannot fulfill. As Han (2023) notes, digital communication alone is insufficient to replace embodied care; structured services offer children the supervision and relational continuity that parents cannot provide in person.

Moreover, parents’ reliance on caregiving services demonstrates a negotiated trust, blending kin-based expectations with professional responsibility. Many parents actively select caregivers they know personally or who are recommended by social networks, reflecting both emotional comfort and perceived competence. Ms. Liumin([pseudonym], 2024), a caregiving service manager, summarized this

trust-based dynamic: “Most of the children who come here are introduced by friends.” Such arrangements allow parents to maintain oversight and moral guidance at a distance, while simultaneously ensuring that children receive daily care that supports their social, emotional, and physical development.

Parents in Hechi perceive caregiving services as a comprehensive support system: a mechanism for education, emotional security, and daily management. This perception situates child caregiving services not merely as functional substitutes for parental presence but as integral actors in the reconstitution of parenthood and childhood under the conditions of rural-urban migration (Hunt, 2003; Jingzhong & Lu, 2011; Peng, 2018; Han, 2023)

5.2 Child Caregiving Services’ Perception of Caregiving

Caregiving service providers in Huanjiang articulate their work as a combination of structured routines, moral responsibility, and relational care. Their accounts reveal how caregiving is enacted across both professional and affective dimensions, reflecting the hybrid nature of care. On one hand, providers maintain clear operational frameworks, fee structures, and daily schedules that reflect the marketization and commodification of care (Ungerson, 2005; Aulenbacher et al., 2018). On the other hand, they describe their roles in familial terms, emphasizing affection, trust, and moral obligation consistent with Chinese kinship-based caregiving traditions (Goh, 2011; Qi, 2015).

In this way, caregiving services embody a dual identity: they function as formal institutions that deliver paid services, yet they also act as surrogate caregivers who assume many responsibilities historically embedded within the household. Providers’ narratives demonstrate that caregiving is defined through daily practices of structure,

support, sustenance, stimulation, and surveillance (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995), while simultaneously reflecting the dynamic, adaptive nature of caregiving ((Jingzhong & Lu, 2011; Van der Pijl, 2018).).

Providers of caregiving services in Hechi occupy a structured and strategic position within the caregiving ecosystem. Their role reflects how rural-urban migrant families negotiate long-distance parenting, ensuring children's daily supervision and education continue despite parental absence. The section is divided into two key aspects: the structured, professional nature of care, and the practical surrogate parental functions these services perform.

5.2.1 Care as a Professional and Structured Service

Caregiving services are highly organized institutions that operate within clear operational and financial frameworks. Providers articulate the services they offer in explicit terms, as seen in the fee structures for full-time care, which are around 7,000 RMB (approximately \$982.2 in October 2025) per semester per child, and for partial care, 3,500 RMB (approximately \$491.1 in October 2025), as described by Ms. Lili([pseudonym], 2024). Expenses for daily activities, medical needs, and additional purchases are carefully communicated, as shown by Ms. Wangfang ([pseudonym], 2024) and Mr. Zhangwei ([pseudonym], 2024). This professionalism ensures accountability and predictability, which are critical for parents who cannot be physically present.

This structured approach also allows services to meet parents' expectations for routine, discipline, and academic support. Caregivers manage daily schedules for meals, homework, and rest, often maintaining separate spaces for study and living, as

Ms. Lily([pseudonym], 2024) explained in her account of the caregiving services. By enforcing consistent routines, caregivers effectively extend parental authority across distance, addressing parents' desire for their children to remain disciplined, academically engaged, and safe.

Moreover, these structured arrangements reassure parents that their children's education and well-being are maintained in a professional and predictable environment. In the context of long-distance parenting, such institutional reliability functions as a critical substitute for direct supervision, bridging the gap created by rural-urban migration.

5.2.2 Care as Surrogate Parental Responsibility

While providers clearly operate within the care market, they often articulate their role in terms of kinship and parenthood. Their narratives reveal that caregiving is not purely transactional; it is rooted in emotional involvement and moral responsibility toward children.

Several caregivers described feeling like parental figures. As Ms. Xiaomei (pseudonym, 2024) expressed:

I feel like I'm the child's biological mother. He can be temperamental with me and often clings to me. Sometimes, he doesn't want to do his homework, so I coax or motivate him with snacks. Once, he did very well on his homework, and his teacher praised him at school. He came back, hugged me excitedly, and shared the news. However, unlike a biological mother, I can't scold or discipline him harshly—I must be cautious and gentle.”

Her statement illustrates the tension between emotional closeness and

professional boundaries. She experiences caregiving relationally, yet she recognizes institutional limitations, especially the need to avoid excessive discipline when caring for multiple children. Other caregivers similarly described their work as deeply relational. Ms. Liumin (pseudonym, 2024) shared:

When parents entrust their children to me, I treat them as my own. They eat what I eat. On weekends, I take them to my home, and they eat what my family eats. My husband even says that I take care of these girls better than I did our daughter. Now, I can talk freely and casually with these two girls.

Providers often participate in children's weekend routines, outings, and playtime. As Ms. Xiuying (pseudonym, 2024) recalled:

We usually organize activities on weekends. I feel very happy, especially when I play with the children. At first, they thought I was too old to connect with them, but later we got along very well.

They supervise homework, regulate nutrition, attend school events, and integrate children into broader social activities, ensuring that parental expectations for academic and personal development are realized in their absence. These practices reflect support, stimulation, and emotional care, mirroring parenting styles observed in kin-based caregiving settings (Goh, 2011).

However, caregivers also recognized the limits of their surrogate role. Their responsibility for many children constrains the depth of individual care they can provide. When a child required hospitalization, Ms. Wangfang (pseudonym, 2024) explained:

I feel a lot of pressure. For example, there was a fifth-grade girl who started menstruating, but her period didn't stop for a long time. We were very worried, so we contacted her parents and took her to the hospital. The doctor said she needed to be hospitalized, but I couldn't stay at the hospital with her because I had to take care of other children. I informed her parents, who arranged for a relative to take care of her.

However, caregivers are conscious of the limits of their surrogate role. Ms. Wangfang ([pseudonym], 2024) cannot personally accompany a sick child to the hospital when attending to multiple children. Ms. Xiaomei ([pseudonym], 2024) noted that, as a parent, she cannot discipline children as a parent might. Mr. Zhangwei ([pseudonym], 2024) emphasized that communication with parents remains essential, showing that caregiving services operate as partial, strategic extensions of parental authority, rather than full replacements.

These dual functions—structured care and surrogate parenting—highlight how caregiving services are integral to the long-distance parenting strategy. Parents rely on these institutions not merely to supervise, but to implement their educational and disciplinary goals, ensuring children remain safe, disciplined, and academically engaged. This approach demonstrates how rural-urban migrant families creatively reconstruct caregiving networks, blending institutional support with parental oversight to navigate the challenges imposed by migration and educational restructuring.

5.3 Commodification of Childcare Services

The expansion of child caregiving services in Huanjiang reflects a broader shift in China's caregiving landscape, where caregiving responsibilities traditionally

managed within families are increasingly outsourced and organized as purchasable services (Peng, 2018; Fang, 2019). Parents rely on caregiving providers to fill gaps in daily care, academic support, and behavioral guidance—roles once fulfilled by parents, grandparents, or kin networks. This process corresponds to the commodification of care, in which caregiving labor becomes a paid service shaped by market demands and structured routines (Ungerson, 2005; Aulenbacher et al., 2018; Peng, 2020). However, studies of childcare commodification in China demonstrate that paid caregiving rarely displaces kinship norms. Rather, caregiving services combine market transactions with expectations of moral responsibility and relational closeness, resulting in hybrid, kin-like forms of care (Peng, 2018; Goh, 2011).

This section examines how commodification shapes caregiving practices in Huanjiang, focusing on 1) care as a purchasable substitute for parental presence, 2) the marketization of childcare, 3) negotiated power relations between parents and caregivers, and 4) the inherent limits of commodified care. These themes illustrate how caregiving services redefine the boundaries between familial obligation, paid care, and relational trust.

5.3.1 Care as a Purchasable Replacement for Parental Presence

Parents frequently described caregiving services as practical substitutes for aspects of parenting they could not perform because of migration. Their narratives reflect the shift from unpaid, kin-based caregiving—once central in rural China—to paid caregiving arrangements that compensate for their physical absence. This aligns with Peng's (2020) argument that care functions traditionally located in the household are increasingly outsourced to market-based providers as families adapt to economic and spatial constraints.

As Ms. Lijun (pseudonym, 2024) explained:

We called him every week. He would contact us, or we would reach out to the teacher to get in touch with him. We missed him while he was away, but there was no other option. We needed to run our shop and couldn't tutor him because of our low levels of education, so we had to send him to the caregiving services. We trusted the teacher to take good care of him. Although the teacher was generally good, I still believe that no one could care for children better than their own parents. We sent him there out of necessity, but we felt sorry for him."

Her statement shows how caregiving services assume the stimulation and structure functions (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995) that parents cannot fulfill from a distance. Parents also described caregiving services as solutions for daily routine management that long-distance communication cannot replace. Digital contact supplements the relationship, but it does not substitute for the supervision and discipline children receive in person. For example, Ms. Manman (pseudonym, 2024) recounted how she bought a smartwatch for her son:

He calls me about twice a month. I call him when I want to tell him something. I bought him a smartwatch so he could contact me through it, or he could ask the caregiving service staff for their phone to call me."

Her experience reflects the limitations of technology-mediated parenting, as digital communication can sustain contact but cannot fully replace embodied care or daily supervision (Han, 2023; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Communication occurs, but daily caregiving demands—meals, homework, bedtime—remain embodied tasks that

must be managed by someone physically present. In this sense, caregiving services operate as an embodied extension of parental intent, filling the day-to-day spaces where parents cannot intervene.

In Hechi, migrant parents increasingly perceive childcare services as a practical, purchasable substitute for direct parental involvement, particularly for educational guidance and daily supervision. Parents accept that physical distance from their children necessitates this strategic reliance, reframing care not as an exclusively familial obligation but as an actionable, purchasable intervention to safeguard children's development.

5.3.2 Marketization in Childcare Programs

Rather than informal or ad hoc arrangements, caregiving services in Huanjiang have developed predictable operational systems that parents can evaluate and compare. This reflects the transformation of caregiving into a structured service where time, supervision, and academic support are organized into purchasable units (Aulenbacher et al., 2018; Coe, 2024). For example, Ms. Lili (pseudonym, 2024) explained: "Partial care costs 3,500 RMB per child, and full care costs 7,000 RMB per child."

Additional expenses—food, clothing, medical needs—are documented to parents through photos or receipts. As Ms. Liumin (pseudonym, 2024) described:

I keep track of the expenses and send the bill to their parents. For instance, one of the girls' fathers is often away. She wanted to buy clothes yesterday, so I took her shopping. She knows exactly how much it was spent, and I paid first. I then sent her father a screenshot of the receipt.

Such practices show how caregiving providers frame their work through

accountability and transparency. This reinforces parents' sense of control and reduces the uncertainty associated with long-distance parenting—reflecting the surveillance and structure that parents expect even when absent (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995). Parents responded positively to this professionalized presentation of care. As Ms. Xixi (pseudonym, 2024) noted, her daughter “at least listened to the teacher,” and she felt assured that her child received proper meals and routines. The predictability of services thus becomes part of the “value” parents purchase. Ms. Xiaoyan (pseudonym, 2024) shared:

7,500 RMB per semester. That's the general price, but since I knew the person running the service, they gave me a discount, so I only paid 7,000 RMB.

Negotiable commodity prices, additional costs, such as medical expenses or clothing, are transparently communicated, establishing clear transactional boundaries. This marketization reframes care from an informal, relational practice into a professional service, where time, supervision, and educational support are commodified into consumable units (Fang, 2019).

5.3.3 Power Relations and Negotiation in Paid Caregiving

Commodified care introduces new forms of negotiation between parents and caregivers. Even as caregiving becomes a paid service, parents retain authority by setting expectations, selecting trusted caregivers, and monitoring their children's progress. At the same time, caregivers maintain power over daily routines, discipline, and household management. This negotiation reflects the hybrid nature of caregiving , where paid labor and relational care intersect rather than replace each other (Ungerson, 2005; Claassen, 2011).

Ms. Huihui devised a split arrangement to manage care for her three children. Ultimately, she arranged for her eldest child to live in a caregiving service in Huanjiang Maonan Autonomous County, while planning to rent a house in Xunle Miao Township so that her second and third children could stay with and be cared for by their grandparents. This arrangement illustrates the complex decisions rural parents must make—balancing financial limitations, educational access, and fragmented family caregiving structures. Such cases illustrate how institutional gaps and educational restructuring force parents to construct caregiving networks that span locations, generations, and beyond conventional kinship models.

Parents' reliance on kinship networks affects their choice of caregiving services. As Mr. Dali (pseudonym, 2024) said:

I knew my little daughter's personality well, so I wasn't worried. The caregiver was my uncle's daughter. My elder daughter is staying with my mother, so I give the money to my mother. I don't know how long my mother can continue to look after her.

Here, commodified care is intertwined with familial trust—reinforcing the argument that the market alone does not define caregiving in China; relational logics continue to shape decisions. Caregivers, in turn, emphasized the need to manage parental expectations. As Mr. Zhangwei (pseudonym, 2024) explained: “Some parents expect us to handle everything, but communication is essential.”

This reveals the dynamic caregiving described by Bradley and Caldwell (1995), where caregivers continuously adjust their practices based on children's needs and parents' demands. The power dynamic is therefore reciprocal: parents monitor and

pay for care, while caregivers determine how care is operationalized daily.

While commodified care provides practical benefits, it also introduces a negotiation of power between parents and providers. Parents exercise agency by selecting caregivers they trust, setting expectations, and monitoring outcomes. Meanwhile, caregivers maintain authority within the institutional space, managing routines, enforcing discipline, and mediating conflicts, balancing parentally defined goals with operational feasibility. This negotiation illustrates that commodified care is neither fully transactional nor fully relational but a hybrid practice in which parental intentions are mediated through professionalized services.

The dynamic also highlights a subtle redistribution of moral authority. While parents retain overarching control and expectations, caregivers operationalize these norms in daily practice, demonstrating how marketized care can reconfigure traditional family hierarchies (Han, 2023). Parents' oversight ensures alignment with their values, while caregivers' structured routines enforce discipline and continuity, illustrating the dual nature of power and responsibility within commodified childcare.

5.3.4 The Limits of Commodified Care

Despite its benefits, commodified childcare has inherent limitations. Providers can supervise homework, maintain routines, and ensure children's well-being, but they cannot fully replicate parental presence or authority. Structural constraints—especially staffing and time—limit the depth of individual attention providers can offer. When a child became ill, Ms. Wangfang (pseudonym, 2024) recalled: “I cannot stay overnight with every sick child when I have many to care for.” Caregivers also recognized that disciplinary authority differs from that of parents. As Ms. Xiaomei (pseudonym, 2024) admitted, “I cannot discipline him harshly... I’m not

his biological mother.” These limitations reflect the boundaries identified in studies of commodified childcare in China, where emotional closeness may emerge, yet caregivers’ authority remains constrained by their paid and institutional role (Peng, 2018; Tronto, 2020).

Commodified care thus becomes a partial, strategic extension of parental caregiving—not a replacement. Its limits reinforce the continued importance of parental engagement, oversight, and kinship support even when caregiving responsibilities are outsourced. These limitations reveal that commodified care is a partial, strategic extension of parenting rather than a complete substitute, highlighting the continued importance of parental oversight and coordination (Peng, 2018; Fang, 2019).

5.4 Defining Care in the Chinese Family’s Ideology

Care in rural–urban migrant families in Huanjiang is neither strictly traditional nor entirely market-based. Instead, it reflects an evolving interpretation of Chinese family ideology in which caregiving responsibilities are distributed among parents, kin, and caregiving services. Under migration-related constraints, families reinterpret care by drawing on Confucian family norms that emphasize moral responsibility and role differentiation (Goh, 2011; Jingzhong & Lu, 2011), kinship-based expectations of reciprocal support (Radcliffe-Brown, 1941; Baldassar & Merla, 2014), and the expanding caregiving functions of market-based services that operate alongside, rather than in place of, family care (Peng, 2018; Fang, 2019).

5.4.1 Continuity and Adaptation of Confucian Family Ideals

Traditional Chinese caregiving emphasizes the moral responsibility of parents to guide, discipline, and accompany their children, grounded in Confucian concepts of jia xun, filial obligations, and hierarchical family structures (Goh, 2011). In Huanjiang, these ideals continue to shape parents' expectations, but caregiving is adapted to fit contemporary realities. Instead of full parental presence, families now manage caregiving across multiple sites to ensure continuity in children's moral and educational development. For example, Ms. Huihui (pseudonym, 2024) divided responsibilities between a caregiving service and grandparents in another township:

If I were to stay in the county to take care of the three children, I wouldn't be able to work. The entire family would have to depend solely on my husband's income from working in Guangdong, so our eldest stayed in Huanjiang for school, and the younger ones stayed with my parents in Xunle Miao Township.

Another interviewee, Ms. Fang (pseudonym, 2024) also shared:

We arranged evening tutoring services for her. After school, the teacher would pick her up to do homework at the caregiving service. When she finished, her aunt would pick her up and take her home. She had lunch at her aunt's house and breakfast at school."

This arrangement illustrates how families extend the family system (Kerig, 2019; Dunst, 2023) across geographical distance—maintaining moral responsibility while delegating day-to-day tasks to trusted others. Digital communication allows parents to remain involved in decision-making, consistent with long-distance parental oversight (Liang et al., 2022). However, the embodied aspects of Confucian parenting—daily

routines, discipline, companionship—are carried out by caregivers and kins. Thus, caregiving becomes a distributed system that still reflects the moral logic of Chinese family life, even when parents are physically absent.

5.4.2 Kinship Networks as Complementary Support

The kinship system remains central to how families interpret “good care.” Even with the rise of commodified caregiving services, parents prioritize caregivers who are connected to their social or kin networks. This mirrors the role of grandparents and extended kins, where caregiving is often rooted in relational familiarity, trust, and shared moral expectations (Radcliffe-Brown, 1941; Goh, 2011). Mr. Dali (pseudonym, 2024) explained why he trusted his caregiver completely:

At first, a friend recommended it to me. When I went there, I found out that the caregiver was my cousin’s daughter. The caregiver was my uncle’s daughter, so I felt reassured entrusting her for four years.

This reflects how kinship ties reduce the social distance between formal caregiving and family caregiving. Even when payments are involved, the role is not understood as purely transactional. Instead, it aligns with the kinship logic that caregiving must be both reliable and morally anchored. Other parents who did not have direct kinship ties relied on “familiarity networks”—friends, acquaintances, or village connections. These networks perform a similar function, ensuring that caregiving aligns with cultural expectations of trustworthiness, attentiveness, and relational accountability. Thus, caregiving services become integrated into an extended kinship-like network, reinforcing the notion that care belongs within a moral

community rather than a purely market setting.

5.4.3 Hybrid Caregiving Across Multiple Actors

The caregiving that emerges in Huanjiang is hybrid in form: part paid service, part kin-like relationship, part long-distance parental oversight. Parents, caregivers, and relatives operate within a shared system of caregiving functions—sustenance, structure, stimulation, support, and surveillance (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995).

A typical example is Ms. Xiaoyan (pseudonym, 2024), who described how her daughter's care was divided:

After school, the teacher from the caregiving service picks her up, and she has dinner there and does her homework. Once she finishes her homework, she returns to my cousin's house to sleep. My cousin's wife has her children to take care of, and we don't want to trouble her too much. She didn't have a smartwatch, so if she wants to contact me, she use the phone of my cousin's wife.

Caregiving therefore shows a chain of responsibilities, not a single relationship. The caregiving service provides structure, supervision, and academic support, while the cousin offers evening reassurance and a sense of belonging in the household. The parent maintains oversight from afar through digital contact and decision-making. This reflects how rural–urban migrant families preserve the ideal of parental responsibility while reorganizing actual caregiving tasks across physical and institutional boundaries. The system adapts to migration without abandoning cultural expectations of family care.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined how caregiving is defined, negotiated, and enacted by both parents and caregiving service providers in Huanjiang. Drawing on interview evidence and the conceptual foundations established in Chapter II, the findings show that caregiving in rural–urban migrant families is neither fixed nor singular; it is a flexible and distributed practice shaped by structural constraints, cultural expectations, and the commodification of care.

From the parents' perspective, caregiving services represent both an educational strategy and a solution to the practical challenges created by migration. Parents view these services as essential extensions of their own responsibilities. They rely on them not only to secure access to urban schooling but also to establish daily routines, supervise homework, and provide safety and emotional reassurance. Parents' definitions of "good care" draw heavily on Chinese family ideology, where moral guidance, discipline, and protection are core parental duties. When distance prevents direct supervision, parents reorganize these duties across actors—caregiving services, kin, and digital communication—while maintaining strategic oversight. Their decisions reveal an adaptive form of long-distance parenting that aligns with family systems theory, where caregiving functions are redistributed without abandoning core familial responsibilities.

Caregiving providers, in turn, articulate their work through the combination of structured professionalism and relational commitment. They implement daily routines, maintain order, and support children academically, fulfilling the caregiving functions identified by Bradley and Caldwell (1995)—sustenance, structure, support,

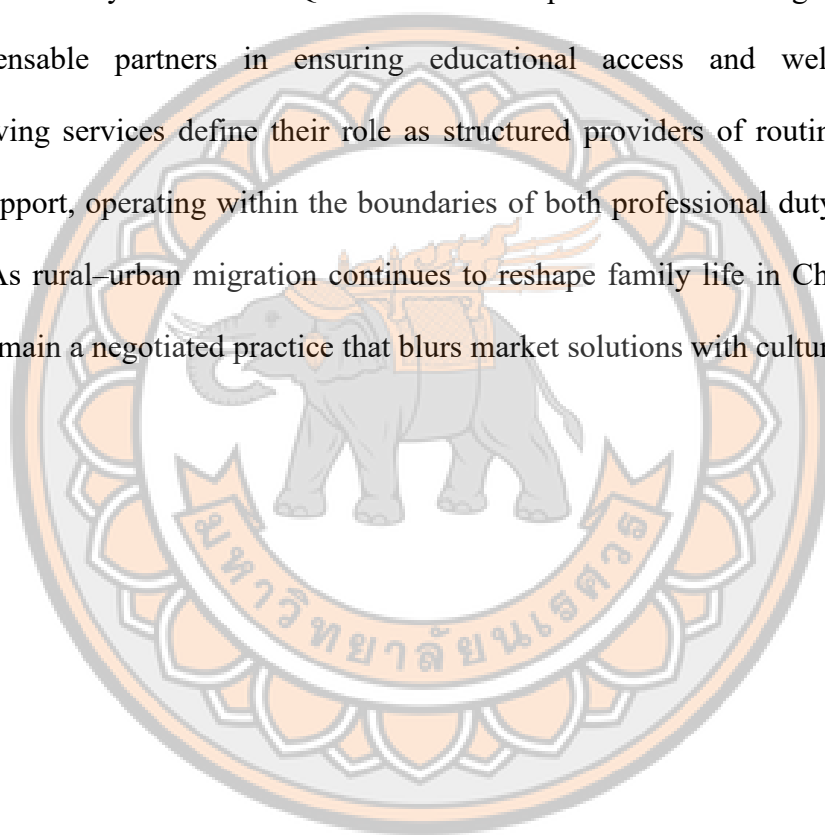
stimulation, and surveillance. At the same time, they perform surrogate parental roles within clear limits. Providers emphasize trust, responsibility, and attentiveness, yet acknowledge constraints in entirely replacing parental authority. Their role illustrates how commodified services can overlap with culturally embedded expectations of family-like care, producing a hybrid model situated between market provision and relational caregiving.

The findings also show that commodification does not displace traditional caregiving logics. Instead, paid child caregiving is layered onto existing kinship norms. Parents prefer caregivers connected through relatives or familiarity networks, ensuring that the moral and emotional dimensions of care remain intact even when financial transactions are involved. This blurred boundary between informal trust and formal payment reflects the coexistence of commercial care and family obligation. In Huanjiang, caregiving services do not replace families; they become part of a broader caregiving assemblage negotiated among parents, kin, and service providers.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that caregiving in migrant families is fundamentally negotiated and adaptive. Rural–urban migration, school consolidation, and economic pressures have restructured how care is practiced, but not the underlying values that guide it. Parents continue to uphold Confucian ideals of responsibility, discipline, and moral guidance, even as they outsource daily caregiving tasks to service providers. Caregiving providers, while operating within a commodified system, incorporate relational elements that align with familial expectations. Kin networks remain vital, offering emotional security and evening or crisis care that institutional services cannot always provide.

Ultimately, caregiving in Huanjiang reflects a reconfiguration of both childhood

and parenthood in the context of migration. Parenthood is no longer defined solely by physical presence but by coordination, oversight, and the capacity to mobilize multiple actors to meet children's needs. Childhood, likewise, is shaped by movement between caregiving sites—services, schools, relatives' households—each contributing different forms of structure, supervision, and emotional support. These findings respond directly to Research Questions 2 and 3: parents define caregiving services as indispensable partners in ensuring educational access and well-being, while caregiving services define their role as structured providers of routine, supervision, and support, operating within the boundaries of both professional duty and relational care. As rural–urban migration continues to reshape family life in China, caregiving will remain a negotiated practice that blurs market solutions with cultural continuity.



CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study examined how rural families in Huanjiang, Hechi City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, navigated the challenges shaped by rural-urban migration, urbanization, and the consolidation of rural schools. Within this context, many parents migrate for work in other cities or remain in agriculture while sending their children to county towns for schooling. As preceding chapters have demonstrated, these conditions have fundamentally reshaped family life and generated new expectations for both parents and caregiving services.

Formulated through three research questions regarding practices of long-distance parenting, parental perceptions of paid caregiving services, and how these services define and perform their roles. The findings reveal that child-rearing has transformed from a primarily household-centered duty into a distributed care system, a collaborative network involving parents, paid caregivers, and digital tools, all coordinated to sustain children's daily stability and educational advancement.

6.1 Long-Distance Parenting as Coordinated Communication and Supervision

In response to Research Question 1: How do parents practice long-distance parenting due to children migration and parents' rural-urban migration?, the study finds that parents maintain involvement through routine digital communication using mobile phones, smartwatches, and messaging groups. These practices enable them to monitor homework, remind children of daily routines, and stay informed about school activities. While these tools cannot fully replicate face-to-face interaction, they allow

parents to sustain a sense of responsibility and connection across distance.

Parents also rely heavily on caregivers to perform day-to-day tasks they cannot manage due to migration or work schedules. This reflects a form of “distributed parenting” (Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010), in which digital communication links parents to the on-the-ground care work performed by services. Thus, long-distance parenting emerges as an ongoing process of remote guidance, oversight, and emotional maintenance despite physical separation.

6.2 Meanings of caregiving by parents

Addressing Research Question 2: How do parents define caregiving provided by child caregiving services?, parents consistently describe caregiving services as crucial for ensuring their children’s safety, discipline, study habits, and daily-life routine. Their decisions are influenced by several structural factors: the decline of rural schools, access to higher-quality urban education, constraints imposed by the hukou (household registration) system, and their limited capacity to supervise children while working afar. Parents expect these services to fulfill multiple care functions—provision, routine, supervision, and guidance. They evaluate quality not only in terms of academic support but also in terms of the caregiver’s reliability, attentiveness, and ability to manage behavior. Even as a commoditized caregiving service, parental assessments remain infused with cultural expectations of trust and personal responsibility, reflecting the enduring influence of kinship ethics within a marketized context.

6.3 Care negotiation in the commonization of Care

Regarding Research Question 3: How do child caregiving services in the city

define and provide care for migrating children?, caregivers describe their work involving meal preparation, homework supervision, school escorting, bedtime management, and communication with children's parents and their teachers at schools, including participating in the school's activities on behalf of the children's parents. These routines provide the stability that parents cannot offer due to absence or long working hours. While caregivers do not see themselves as replacing parents, they perform many day-to-day tasks traditionally associated with familial care rooted in the Chinese ideology of family affairs. Their accounts illustrate how caregiving services operate as institutionalized, yet familiar environments designed to supplement parental absence, ensuring children's safety, routine, and academic progress. This model blends systematic organization with interpersonal familiarity, particularly when caregivers and parents are connected through kinship and close networks.

6.4 Dynamics of Caregiving in the Current Chinese Society

This study makes a distinct empirical and theoretical contribution by integrating the dual perspectives of migrant parents and local care providers. While existing literature often focuses either on the migratory strategies of parents or the burdens on caregivers left behind, this research bridges that divide. It reveals how care is co-constructed through a continuous, albeit mediated, negotiation between absent parents and present surrogates, each operating within shared cultural scripts but distinct structural positions.

This integrated analysis strengthens and extends the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter II:

1) Kinship and family structure in transition: The findings illustrate the adaptive stretching of kinship networks. Care responsibilities are dynamically redistributed along new circuits that connect migrant parents in cities, paid caregivers in county towns, and extended families in villages.

2) Care in daily caregiving services operates as a multi-functional practice rather than a single task. Drawing on caregiving and care ethics literature, these services perform at least five interconnected functions: sustenance (providing food and basic physical care), stimulation (supporting learning and cognitive engagement), support (offering emotional reassurance), structure (organizing daily routines and discipline), and surveillance (monitoring children's safety and behavior) (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995; Hunt, 2003; Tronto, 1993, 2020; Peng, 2018; Fang, 2019). This study shows how these functions materialized in the specific, time-bound routines of the care home, affirming the utility of this framework while grounding it in rural China's socio-economic context.

3) The case studies in Huanjiang Hechi City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, illustrate the co-constitution of the commoditized and the communal in contemporary caregiving arrangements. While caregiving services operate as market-based provisions, they are evaluated and practiced through Confucian moral expectations emphasizing responsibility, moral obligation, and relational propriety within familial ideology. Rather than functioning purely as contractual exchanges, caregiving relationships are shaped by ideals of ethical conduct, role-based duty, and affective responsibility traditionally associated with family life. This blurring of boundaries challenges rigid distinctions between paid and unpaid, formal and informal care, pointing instead to a dynamic caregiving economy characteristic of

Chinese families navigating rapid social and institutional transformation (Goh, 2011; Peng, 2018; Tronto, 2020).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings from Huanjiang, Hechi City, reflect social phenomena of families in China amid rapid urbanization and educational policies. Child-rearing has increasingly involved multiple actors and cross-location coordination, in which digital tools serve as vital mediators of parental responsibility. At the same time, market-based care services fill structural gaps in family functioning.

While this study provides an in-depth exploration of the distributed care system in Huanjiang, it faced some limitations. First, methodological constraints in accessing caregiving services: A significant challenge encountered during fieldwork was the difficulty in securing in-depth interviews with proprietors and staff of private caregiving services. These limitations resulted from the ambiguous regulatory status of such institutions. In the absence of a clear local policy defining their legality and scope, many caregivers maintained a cautious stance toward external research, viewing the topic as sensitive. Consequently, while parental perspectives are richly detailed, the direct voices and operational logics of some care providers may be partially filtered through this layer of institutional apprehension.

Second, the data for this study were collected during a specific period, offering a detailed cross-sectional snapshot of care arrangements. The dynamic, evolving nature of migration patterns, family strategies, and children's development illustrates the need for longitudinal research to trace how these distributed care systems and their impacts change over time.

Third, this research centered on the perspectives of parents and caregivers. The children's voices, the primary recipients of care, were not directly captured in this phase. Their subjective experiences, emotional responses to parental migration, and views on life within care services remain a crucial area for future, child-centered research.

Building on these limitations and the findings presented, first, future studies could benefit from a collaborative approach with local authorities. This may facilitate greater access to care institutions, enabling researchers to document their internal operations, challenges, and self-perceptions more openly. Second, future research can employ participatory and age-appropriate methods (e.g., diary studies, drawing, guided conversations) to understand children's own narratives of care, mobility, and belonging, which is essential for a holistic understanding of the system's outcomes. Third, future research is encouraged to include the perspectives of schoolteachers, local community leaders, and policymakers



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APPENDIX

Interviews

Mr. Dakun. (Pseudonym). (2025, February 19). Interview. Father. Huanjiang, China.

Mr. Dehua. (Pseudonym). (2025, February 22). Interview. Father. Huanjiang, China.

Mr. Dali. (Pseudonym). (2025, February 16). Interview. Father. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Fang. (Pseudonym). (2025, February 25). Interview. Mother. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Huihui. (Pseudonym). (2024, July 19). Interview. Mother. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Lijun. (Pseudonym). (2025, February 21). Interview. Mother. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Lili. (Pseudonym). (2024, June,20). Interview. Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Liumin. (Pseudonym). (2024, June,22). Interview. Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Manman. (Pseudonym). (2024, July 11). Interview. Mother. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Tingzi. (Pseudonym). (2024, July 18). Interview. Mother. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Wangfang. (Pseudonym). (2024, June,18). Interview. Caregiver. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Xiaomei. (Pseudonym). (2024, June,17). Interview. Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Xiaoyan. (Pseudonym). (2024, July 10). Interview. Mother. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Xiuying. (Pseudonym). (2024, June,18). Interview. Caregiver. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Xixi. (Pseudonym). (2024, July 15). Interview. Mother. Huanjiang, China.

Ms. Zhangwei. (Pseudonym). (2024, June,25). Interview. Teacher, Manager, and Caregiver. Huanjiang, China.

Interview guides

Section 1) Interview Guide for the managers of child caregiving services:

Can you describe your background and experience in managing child caregiving services?

How did you come to work in this field?

Do your child caregiving services have the necessary licenses? What is the approval process like?

Can you describe the structure and organization of your child caregiving service?

What types of services do you offer to children?

How do you define caregiving for children?

What standards and practices do you provide?

How do you communicate with parents of migrating children?

What information do parents typically seek from you about their children's care?

What challenges do you face in providing care for children?

How do you ensure the emotional, physical, and educational well-being of the children in your care?

What types of activities or programs do you offer to support their development?

How do you ensure the emotional, physical, and educational well-being of the children in your care?

What types of activities or programs do you offer to support their development?

Section 2) Interview Guide for Parents of Child Caregiving Services Students:

Can you tell me a bit about your family and your child who is attending the caregiving service?

What prompted your decision to enroll your child in child caregiving services?

How do you stay in touch with your child while they are in caregiving services?

What challenges do you face in parenting your child from a distance?

How do you maintain your role as a parent while your child is in caregiving services?

How would you describe the caregiving services provided to your child?

What are your expectations for caregiving services?

How do you evaluate caregiving services in terms of quality, safety, and educational support?

What feedback has your child shared about their experiences?

What concerns do you have about your child's well-being while in caregiving services?

How do you communicate with the caregiving service staff about your child?

How often do you receive updates about your child's progress or well-being?

Are there any cultural or social differences between the caregiving service and your family that you have noticed?

How do you envision your child's future in terms of education and development while they are in caregiving services?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

Section 3) Interview Guide for Child Caregiving Services Teachers:

Can you tell me about your experience working as a teacher in child caregiving services?

What led you to work in this field, and how long have you been working with children from child caregiving services?

How do you define and approach caregiving for children?

How often and in what ways do you communicate with your parents?

What are the most common concerns or questions parents have about their children's care and education?

How do you provide emotional and social support for children who are away from their families?

How do you see your role in children's overall development?

What training or professional development opportunities have been most helpful in your work?

Legal documents related to the child caregiving services:

Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the People's Government of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region on Strengthening the Management of Out-of-School Caregiving Service (General Office of the People's Government of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Issued [2019] No. 7)

People's governments of all cities and counties, all constituent departments of the regional people's government, and all institutions directly subordinate to them:

In recent years, for primary and secondary school students to provide meals, lunch breaks, care, transport, and other services outside the school caregiving services developed rapidly, to help parents solve the problem of children's school transport, food, and lodging and played a positive role, but part of the school outside the caregiving service set up is not standardized, the management is not in place, there are hidden safety risks. To strengthen the management of our region's out-of-school caregiving service, to create a safe and orderly caregiving service environment, and to

ensure the safety of students, the autonomous region's people's civilians agree, the following opinions are hereby put forward.

First, Clarifying the supervisory responsibilities of out-of-school caregiving service

(1) Implementing the main responsibility of governments at all levels. According to the reality that the service targets of out-of-school caregiving services are mainly primary and secondary school students, the management of out-of-school caregiving service is carried out by the principles of "territorial management, division of labor and responsibility, with the county taking the lead". The people's governments of all cities and counties bear the main responsibility for the management of out-of-school caregiving services under their jurisdiction and should study and formulate policies and measures to regulate the management of out-of-school caregiving service under their jurisdiction, establish a joint meeting system led by the government and participated by the relevant departments to standardize the management of out-of-school caregiving service and co-ordinate the supervisory and management of out-of-school caregiving service under their respective jurisdictions. The members' units of the joint conference shall include, but not be limited to education, market supervision and management, public security, housing and urban-rural construction, health, fire, and other departments. The governments of each city or county should, clearly, clearly the diversity of out-of-school caregiving services, and according to the specific local conditions, clearly contact the convenor of the out-of-school caregiving service joint conference and refine the work responsibilities of the relevant departments. In the act of providing out-of-school caregiving service in other ways in addition to institutional

custodianship, the governments of cities and counties shall also organize regular inspections by market supervision and management, health, public security, fire, and other departments, timely detection of potential safety hazards, and timely supervision and rectification, to ensure the orderly and healthy development of the out-of-school caregiving service industry.

(2) Implementing the supervisory responsibilities of relevant departments.

Education, market supervision and management, public security, housing and urban-rural development, health, fire, and other relevant departments should do a good job in the management of out-of-school caregiving services for students within their respective areas of responsibility. Education departments are responsible for guiding primary and secondary schools to grasp the situation of students participating in out-of-school caregiving services, strengthening safety education for students, and guiding students to choose legally compliant caregiving services. The market supervision and management department is responsible for issuing business licenses, food business permits and small catering registration certificates for out-of-school caregiving services registered as market entities following the law, supervising and managing the food safety of out-of-school caregiving services, and investigating and dealing with out-of-school caregiving service operating without a license that has obtained the relevant permits but not business licenses by the law. The public security department is responsible for supervising the security management of out-of-school caregiving services and maintaining the public security around the caregiving service places. The housing and urban-rural construction departments are responsible for supervising the housing safety of out-of-school caregiving services. The Health Department is responsible for supervising the hygiene of drinking water and the

prevention and control of infectious diseases in out-of-school caregiving services. The fire department is responsible for supervising the fire safety of out-of-school caregiving services. Other relevant departments should do a good job of supervision according to their departmental responsibilities, forming a situation of joint control.

(3) Implementing the responsibilities of organizers. The organizers of off-campus caregiving service, as the first person responsible for the safety of the students in their care, shall assume responsibility for the food safety, disease prevention and control, and fire safety of the students during the period of caregiving service, register their legal personality under the law, formulate and implement a safety management system, and equip full-time or part-time safety administrators, thus preventing the occurrence of safety accidents. Organizers of out-of-school caregiving services are encouraged to purchase public liability insurance for fires in custodial premises, and to purchase commercial insurance for students in caregiving services, such as personal accident insurance, to prevent and resolve the risk of safety accidents.

Second, strict safety management of out-of-school caregiving service

(4) Strengthening guidance on the location of caregiving services. The site of an off-campus caregiving service providing service should conform to the structural safety requirements of the building, should not be located in the same building as the production, operation, storage, or areas of hazardous chemicals, and should be at a legal safety distance from hazardous chemicals, and the floor space should meet the needs of the caregiving service, and it is prohibited to hold caregiving institutions or to provide caregiving services in such places as factories, basements, warehousing buildings, contaminated areas and hazardous zones.

(5) Strengthening safety precautions. The out-of-school caregiving service should under the principle combine human, physical, and technological defense, strengthen the construction of safety and technical prevention systems, and equipment with the necessary protective facilities and defensive equipment, to prevent and avoid accidents such as violence, falls, and electrocution, and to ensure the personal safety of the students being cared for.

(6) Strengthening fire safety management. The layout, building structure, interior decoration, fire-fighting facilities, fire-fighting electricity, and electrical fire prevention of out-of-school caregiving services should meet the requirements of the relevant standards. They should formulate and improve fire management systems, organize regular fire inspections, eliminate hidden fire hazards, carry out fire publicity and training and evacuation drills, and improve the level of fire safety management of the premises.

(7) Strengthening food safety management. Out-of-school caregiving service providing catering services should establish and improve food safety rules and regulations, comply with the code of practice for food safety in catering services, and leave samples of finished food products by the regulations.

(8) Strengthening the prevention and control of infectious diseases. Out-of-school caregiving services should regularly clean and disinfect the hosting premises and items and keep the premises and items clean and hygienic. During seasons of high incidence or epidemics of infectious diseases, the frequency of disinfection should be increased to ensure the effectiveness of disinfection.

Third. Regulating the service behavior of out-of-school caregiving service
Carrying out caregiving services following the law. Out-of-school caregiving service

carrying out caregiving service cannot in principle, engage in other business unrelated to the caregiving activity. Out-of-school caregiving services and cultural education and training institutions that can do so should report to the administrative department of education for approval per the regulations. Out-of-school caregiving services may not engage in cultural education and training activities without the approval of the administrative department of education.

Implementing the requirement of operating in good faith. Out-of-school caregiving service providers shall sign a commission agreement on caregiving service with the parents (guardians) of students, specifying the items and amounts of fees, refunds, and dispute resolution, and fulfill them conscientiously. To regulate the charging behavior, not to charge a one-time fee for a period of more than one semester. To register with the school where the caregiving service is provided, and consciously accept the daily supervision and management of the relevant departments. To continuously improve the quality of service and endeavor to enhance the satisfaction of the caregiving service students and their parents (guardians).

Ensuring the personal safety of students. The out-of-school caregiving service must put the protection of students' safety in the first place, the implementation of relevant safety management measures, equipped with staff appropriate to the scale of operation, to ensure that students have full-time staff during the caregiving service pick-up and drop-off, care. When an emergency arises in the caregiving service or the care students, the students should be protected and rescued the first time, effective measures should be taken to control the development of the situation, and according to the type of the situation, the relevant departments should be reported promptly, and the parents (guardians) and the students' schools should be notified on time.

Fourth. Strengthening the regulation of out-of-school caregiving services

Strengthening daily supervision and inspection. Under the leadership of the local party committees and governments, all relevant departments should, by their departmental responsibilities, strengthen the daily supervision of out-of-school caregiving services, and rectify any out-of-school caregiving services that have hidden safety problems in a time-bound manner, to promptly eliminate the hidden safety problems and ensure the safety of students.

Establishing a white- and black-list publicity system. Cities and counties shall establish a whitelist system, publish on government websites the list and main information of out-of-school caregiving services that have been registered and approved according to law, and update them promptly according to daily supervision, to guide students' parents (guardians) to choose legally compliant out-of-school caregiving services. Cities and counties may establish a blacklisting system by the needs of the setting up and management of local out-of-school caregiving services and should seriously investigate and blacklist out-of-school caregiving services that are held in violation of the law and whose safety is not guaranteed.

Strengthening accountability. If an out-of-school caregiving service fakes its registration, approval, and filing, or violates food safety, housing safety, and fire management regulations, the relevant departments shall order it to rectify the situation within a certain period, and if the situation is serious or if it fails to rectify the situation as required, it shall be dealt with seriously following the rules and regulations of the law.

Strengthen publicity and guidance. Relevant departments at all levels should carry out a wide range of forms of publicity, strengthen safety education for teachers

and students, parents (guardians) and out-of-school caregiving service practitioners, encourage the public to supervise out-of-school caregiving service, guide the community to care for and support the management of out-of-school caregiving service and create a favorable social atmosphere.

