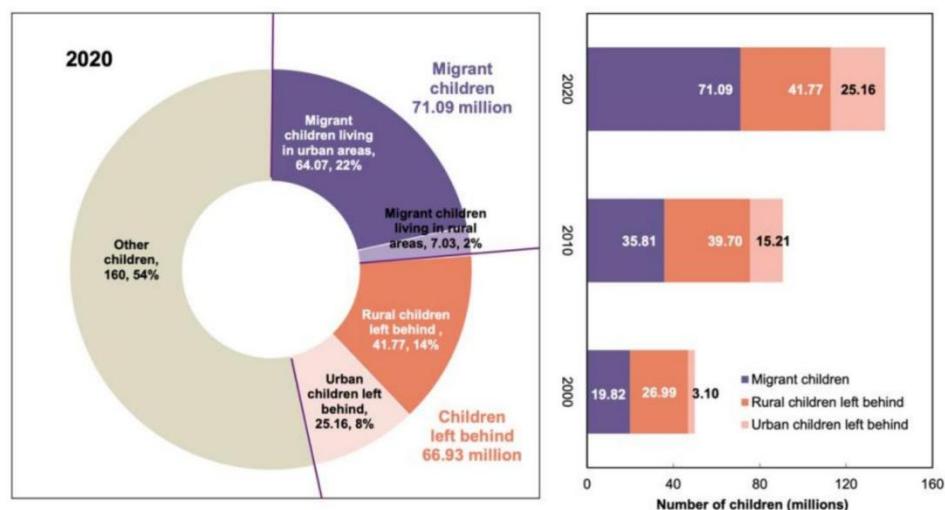


# Dinghang Hu: Empowering China's Left-Behind Children Through Education

## Introduction

In China's rapid urbanisation context, left-behind children—those who remain in rural areas while their parents migrate to cities for work—represent a significant and often overlooked societal challenge. As of 2020, over 41 million rural children fall into this category (UNICEF, 2023), facing unique hardships such as emotional neglect, limited educational opportunities, and restricted social mobility. These challenges are not just individual tragedies; they reflect systemic issues that could block China's long-term development and social stability.



Note: In the doughnut chart the number refers to the child population in millions, and the percentage refers to its share of the total child population.  
Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 2000, 2010 and 2020 National Population Censuses

This raises the question: **Can education help China's left-behind children escape poverty?** The answer is crucial, as China's future economic growth and global competitiveness depend on equipping its younger generations, particularly in rural areas, with the skills and opportunities needed to succeed. Bridging the educational gap is vital for reducing urban-rural inequality, fostering human capital, and sustaining the country's manufacturing and export-driven productivity (World Bank Open Data, n.d.). Left-behind children, who comprise a significant portion of the rural population and future labour force, are at risk of being left behind in this progress. Addressing their educational needs is not just a matter of fairness but a strategic necessity for China's long-term development.

## The Story of *Tough Out*

The documentary *Tough Out* (棒！少年) follows a group of underprivileged boys from across China who join a baseball training program on the outskirts of Beijing. Under the mentorship of a former national baseball player and a 70-year-old coach, these boys, many from broken families and impoverished rural areas, are given a rare opportunity to change their lives. Baseball becomes more than a sport—it represents discipline, teamwork, and a chance to escape the hardships of their circumstances.

The film captures their struggles and growth at the baseball base. One boy, Ma Hu, from a remote mountain village in Ningxia, begins his journey as a mischievous and rebellious child.

Raised by his grandmother after being abandoned by his mother, Ma Hu initially resists authority but gradually transforms into a key pitcher for the team, finding confidence and purpose through baseball. Another boy, Xiao Shuang, from Hebei Province, is quiet and introspective, burdened by family responsibilities and emotional isolation. Though he bonds with his teammates, his loyalty to his sick uncle eventually compels him to leave the team, reflecting the difficult choices faced by many left-behind children.



Xiao Shuang (Left) and Ma Hu (Right)

### From *Tough Out* to Cambodia's Classrooms

Watching *Tough Out* was a profoundly moving experience that evoked both heartbreak and hope. The boys' resilience—facing poverty, fractured families, and uncertain futures—was inspiring. Their transformation through baseball training, under the guidance of dedicated coaches, reinforced my belief in the transformative power of education and mentorship. This theme deeply resonated with my volunteering at Old School in Cambodia, where I witnessed children overcome similar struggles through education.



the Old School



classrooms

Old School, located on the rural outskirts of Siem Reap, was founded by the Cambodian Children's Organization (C.C.O.) to provide free education to children from impoverished families and orphans. The school operates without a permanent teaching staff, relying entirely on volunteers worldwide. Walking into the classrooms,

I saw traces left by Japanese and Korean volunteers—notes on blackboards, drawings, and teaching materials—all part of a collective effort to offer these children opportunities they might not otherwise have.



group photo of students



drawings by other volunteers

Like the boys in *Tough Out*, many students faced significant challenges in pursuing their education. They walked miles along dusty roads to attend class, balancing household chores with their studies. One shy boy, the youngest in the class, stood out to me. While the older children played during breaks, he always sat alone, avoiding eye contact and speaking only in whispers. Concerned about his isolation, we decided that one of us would sit beside him during lessons to offer guidance and encouragement. Overtime, he began to smile and express himself more openly. His transformation—from a withdrawn and lonely child to one who participated confidently—reminded me of Xiao Shuang, whose growth stemmed from mentorship and a supportive environment.



the boy like “Xiao Shuang”



a simple “Chemistry” class

Both the documentary and my time in Cambodia revealed that while education can be a lifeline, its impact is often constrained by barriers like familial neglect and resource inequality. Programs like sports-based mentorship address emotional needs, but sustained institutional support is vital for lasting change. Old School’s dependence on volunteers and resource struggles emphasized the need for systemic reforms to ensure stability and effectiveness. These parallels deepened my understanding of the research question: effective educational initiatives must integrate mentorship, emotional support, and systemic reforms to create meaningful impact and opportunities for vulnerable children.

## **Breaking Barriers: Targeted Education Initiatives for China's Left-Behind Children**

China's left-behind children face challenges rooted in rapid urbanisation and longstanding regional inequalities, which have significantly limited their opportunities for growth and development. The Hukou system lies at the core of these issues, restricting access to urban educational resources and social welfare (Why China Matters Module 7, 2024). Many migrant parents are unable to transfer their Hukou, forcing their children to remain in rural areas where schools are underfunded, teachers are overburdened, and learning outcomes lag behind urban counterparts. This disparity reinforces entrenched inequalities, perpetuating cycles of poverty for rural families. To ensure the effectiveness of targeted education initiatives, bridging the gap between rural and urban education systems is essential by providing equitable resources and addressing the systemic discrimination embedded in the Hukou system. Without these foundational changes, even the most well-designed programs risk being underutilised or ineffective.

Moreover, while academic education is vital, it is insufficient without addressing left-behind children's emotional well-being and psychological needs. Many of these children experience profound emotional neglect and psychological stress as a result of prolonged separation from their parents, leading to feelings of abandonment and low self-esteem (Wanget al., 2020). Effective education programs must, therefore, extend beyond academics to integrate mental health support, counselling, and safe spaces for emotional expression. Programs like the sports-based initiative depicted in *Tough Out* demonstrate how mentorship, teamwork, and structured extracurricular activities can empower children to develop resilience, self-confidence, and life skills. These programs provide emotional support and foster a sense of community and belonging, which is critical for children who often feel isolated. Additionally, addressing physical health is also important, as the absence of parental care usually results in inadequate nutrition and general health problems, hindering academic performance (Jin et al., 2020). Collaborative efforts between schools, families, and communities can create a comprehensive support network, enabling children to thrive despite challenging circumstances.

From an economic perspective, targeted education initiatives are critical in alleviating rural poverty and promoting sustainable development. Recent studies showed that enhancing primary and junior secondary education has the most significant impact on poverty reduction, as these levels of education directly increase the skill sets and employability of rural populations (Liu, Li and Zhao, 2021). Moreover, spatial econometric analysis reveals a positive spillover effect, where improvements in educational quality in one region can also reduce poverty in neighbouring areas through regional economic interdependence and shared resources. This underscores the importance of coordinated policies addressing local and regional disparities. For China to sustain its economic growth and reduce inequality, education investments must prioritize compulsory education and expand vocational training particularly in underdeveloped regions. Policymakers should also implement region-specific strategies that leverage the strengths and address the unique challenges of each area, ensuring that no community is left behind in the journey toward equitable growth (Why China Matters Module 3, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

This blog examined whether targeted education initiatives can effectively tackle the complex challenges faced by China's left-behind children and help them break free from poverty. The documentary *Tough Out* showcased how mentorship and extracurricular

programs can build resilience, confidence, and essential life skills in vulnerable children. At the same time, it revealed the shortcomings of these efforts when systemic issues, such as the Hukou system and the rural-urban divide, are not addressed. Together with findings from broader studies, this highlights the necessity of combining educational reforms with structural changes to achieve lasting progress.

The stakes for China's future are significant. Left-behind children form a substantial part of the rural population and represent a critical segment of the country's future workforce. Bridging the educational gap between rural and urban areas is crucial for reducing disparities, fostering social mobility, and ensuring a skilled workforce supporting sustained economic growth. Failing to address these challenges risks widening inequality and jeopardizing long-term stability.

For other countries, especially those facing similar rural-urban disparities like Cambodia, China's challenges and potential solutions offer valuable lessons. Policies that prioritize holistic education, vocational training, and emotional support can help vulnerable populations break the cycle of poverty. Globally, a collaborative effort to address educational inequities and systemic barriers will foster not only individual empowerment but also inclusive and sustainable development. By committing to these strategies, nations can ensure that no child is left behind in the pursuit of a brighter and equitable future.

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