

FLOATING CHILDREN IN CHINA

*The problems of street, migrating, trafficked children,
out of school and out of place*

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s an increasing number of apparently unattached children, in various guises, have become visible on urban streets in China. The appearance of these 'street children' (an inadequate translation of *liu lang er tong* - see below) at a time of rapid economic and social change, has brought responses from government and from international non-government agencies. In the 1990s many countries experienced an increase in the numbers of street children, and a corresponding rise in public awareness of their existence. Despite problems of definition, the English term street children passed into popular and world-widespread use, presenting a threat of homogenisation of a category of children supposedly with a set of common characteristics both across China and around the globe. Given the apparent globalisation of this phenomenon, and the definitional difficulties it presents, this article attempts to explore aspects of the context and issue in China (1). The focus is on adults perceptions and responses to the 'problem' of street children in China: the voices of some street children provide both a counter to prevailing social views and offer different solutions (2).

GLOBALISATION

The theme of 'globalisation' has become prominent in media and academic analysis. Two aspects of a globalising tendency are relevant here. First the increase in numbers of street children in many places around the world, and the context of economic change associated with their appearance in several states. Second, the internationalisation of responses to children's issues, particularly the espousal of children's rights.

As a phenomenon in the 1990s, the rise in numbers of street children (3) is often linked to changes both in economic systems and social provision, such as diminishing state welfare services. For example, it has been claimed that there were no street children in Mongolia prior to 1990 (Childhope 2001) and the economic reforms following political change: now many children take refuge in winter in underground heating systems (field visit 2000). In Romania street children have notoriously taken to living in sewers (field visit 1999): a recent attempt by police to round them up and send them away failed (Bran 2001).

Western countries undertaking market reforms also experienced an increase in street children. In Britain, large numbers of homeless 16-17 year olds appeared on the city streets in the late 1980s following changes in government welfare policy, while in 1995 in one northern city, groups of children under 14 years were visibly living on the streets.

In some countries the existence of street children has become institutionalised, for example, where children have established and/ or run their own unions. The fifth meeting of the African Movement for Working Children and Youth was held in Mali in November 2000. Street children's groups in South America have become widely known, and the official practice of killing street children was recently admitted by the government in Guatemala (The Guardian 2001).

But the search for a common definition of 'street children' remains elusive. There have been attempts to make distinctions between categories of children who live and/ or spend much time on the street (and who are not in school), such as that by UNICEF attempting a separation between children of the street and children on the street (see Ennew 1994: 15). But some experienced commentators have spoken of the need to seek out and provide for 'real street children' (field visit, Vietnam, see West 2000). Also, 'while I seemed to know intuitively which street children were, and which were not, 'children of the street' when meeting them in the course of my daily work, I found myself having difficulties explaining the generation of the categories' (Glauser 1997: 146). The uncertainty over which are real street children has led some international non-government organisations to shy away from establishing projects for 'street children' preferring instead, for example, vulnerable and poor urban children as the named target group (pers comm). Yet the term continues in use, even as a shorthand for some, and one purpose of this article is to try and unpick meanings, associations and implications in China.

A second aspect of globalisation is the introduction of international standards for the lives of children, coincidentally contemporary with the onset of economic reforms following political change in the former Soviet Union, and the use of Structural Adjustment Policies, or austerity programmes, required by World Bank and IMF. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has now been ratified by virtually all countries with a recognised government, except the USA.. The impact of the CRC is not limited to responsibilities of ratifying states in implementation and reporting, because donor agencies and states increasingly use the concept and practice of human and child rights as a measure, standard and framework for financial and other aid.

The use of children's rights, notably the CRC, as a set of principles for developing project work with children is not entirely without controversy. The CRC has been critiqued as deriving too much from a standard or idealised Western model of childhood, and the circumstances of street children have been described as falling outside the Convention. Ennew (1995: 210-11) proposed additional rights for street children, including the rights not to be labelled, and to be correctly described, research and counted. Underlying these rights is the problem not of academic definition but of popular labelling - homogenisation in

a discriminatory fashion. In China the term street children covers children in a wide range of circumstances, revealing something of the changing social structure and reforms of welfare systems. The issues are of significance not least because street children have been used as a marker of social change in China for some 60-70 years.

SAN MAO

An important icon of street children in China is the boy known as San Mao (three hairs). He is a cartoon character, easily identified by his bald head with three long forehead hairs, created by Zhang Le Ping, and featured in the press from 1935. San Mao's adventures chronicled the social problems of the Republican, especially the later Guomindang regime. The cartoons were published in book form in 1948. After the 1949 Liberation (4), a series of new cartoons featuring San Mao highlighted the differences between the old society and the new, and again were published in book form. A film was made in 1948.

San Mao continues to resonate in contemporary society. When asking groups of adults to draw a street child in workshops, the features of San Mao have always appeared among one group at least. Recently, San Mao emerged again in the media. A television series features him living a substantially better life than he did in the past, to the extent that one child who had read the cartoons, upon seeing the television version, revised his previous opinion that he was glad to be living with his parents, because the life portrayed on film seemed more exciting. A new, redrawn San Mao has also featured in the children's supplement to the Chinese magazine *Fu Mu* (Parents World). He is accompanied by a small dog and has adventures on another planet.

The imagery is important, and some of the ambiguity expressed by the child seeing the television version, is inherent in the Chinese term which is conventionally translated as street children. This translation into English - street children - holds at least among children's or welfare agencies; those who are not familiar with the Western term 'street children' tend to translate the Chinese - *liu lang er tong* - as 'vagabond children' or, very rarely, although more directly as 'floating children'. *Liu lang er tong* has some stigmatised associations, hence the use by some knowledgeable translators of 'vagabond', but the term floating is in widespread use, referring not only here to 'street children' but also used in reference to the 'floating population' - that is to unregistered adult migrants. Although the phrase *liu lang er tong* has some stigma, it has another connotation, heroic in nature, which provides an altogether different perspective (and hence the appeal of the cartoons).

An article on street children in China (Ting and Tao 1990) suggested that, since 1949, they have appeared three times in significant numbers. First, in the two to three years immediately after Liberation, when the country was being resettled; second, in the three years of 'natural disasters' (the dreadful famine after the Great Leap Forward), and third, in the 1980s. In contrast to the first two appearances, which was not seen as children's responsibility, the third appearance in the 1980s, was explained as children's fault in large part: their

bad habits and mischievousness, alongside problems of work and family difficulties. This focus on personal culpability reflects a new emphasis on 'population quality' *renkou suzhi*, a discourse which 'has replaced class as the primary official framework organising and classifying Chinese people' (Xu 2000: 17). Some explanations attribute growing inequalities in China to 'personal competence', clearly associated with population quality, rather than to structural problems (ibid: 18).

MODERN CONTEXT

The context of China as a whole is important, with population size and diversity suggesting some of the complexities involved in any attempt to describe or interrogate the lives of children in China as a whole, and the difficulties in making any generalisations. The national population is some 1.2 billion people, and individual provinces have greater numbers than many nation-states (for example, Henan - over 90 million, Anhui - over 60 million, Yunnan - over 40 million people). There are 56 nationalities, with the 55 minorities constituting over 90 million people. The major language has many dialects but one script, and some other languages in everyday use (such as Uighur and Dai) have their own script. Population density varies, and climate and geography ranges from the major Himalayan mountains to the eastern plains, from the northwest deserts to the tropical south.

Since 1978 and the onset of economic reforms, which were revitalised in the late 1980s and again in the early 1990s, a period of change has seen new dimensions of inequality developing. Some state owned enterprises have closed, unemployment increased and the previous urban welfare system based on the *danwei* (work unit) is changing. While the Chinese economy is described as changing to a market system, the shift is different to the increasing 'marketisation' reforms in other states. Xu (2000: 3) points out that elsewhere in the world the labour market is being deregulated for the market, while in China the process is of building a labour market, commodifying labour.

The countryside-city divide has always been apparent, and significant in China, and has been maintained through a household registration system, although rural-urban migration increased in the 1980s and 1990s. Regional variations in economic development since the early 1980s provided a pull for potential migrants, particularly to the eastern seaboard areas. By the turn of the century, the variation was such that the government launched a campaign to 'Develop the West'. Cohesion throughout the country comes from a government system which reaches down to officers and ultimately community volunteers, from national, provincial, municipal, prefectural, to county, village, and in urban areas street committees. Currently there are few non-government organisations in China in the form that they take in the West. There are mass organisations such as the Women's Federation, Youth League, Disabled Person's Federation.

One further contextual element must be noted, the well-known 'one child' policy. This is something of a misnomer, for it is only to Han Chinese in urban areas that the policy effectively applies. Minority nationalities and parents in

rural areas may have more than one child. The policy has raised debate on issues of child raising. Since the 1980s there have been perceptions among the public and media that children in one-child families are spoilt, and they have been referred to as 'little emperors'. Conversely, there is enormous pressure on single children, manifest especially in pressures to do well at school, which have proved intolerable for some children. A further much discussed dimension, is the socialisation of children in one-child families, fear of psychological and other problems since they have no siblings for play and interaction, and questions over time available for children to spend with peers and develop relationships. Some of this context is presumed to have bearing on the lives of some who become street children.

WHO ARE STREET CHILDREN?

Those children who are visible on the streets fall into several working occupations. Those most obvious are probably the flower sellers, who are often in small groups. Shoe shiners, and beggars are also frequently seen, and in some places there are guitar players (usually girls), who will sing by request. Less visible are the bottle collectors and scavengers, and the children involved in criminal activities (such as bag snatching/ street robbery) try to be completely unseen. There are adults who also work at all of these activities.

The circumstances of the children vary in terms of links to home and family. They may be living in their home town, but more likely have travelled to another place. They may be living with their parents, but others are without parents or other adult guardians. Many are working with or for adults, who may provide some accommodation and food for them. These adults are sometimes family friends with whom the children have gone or been sent with parent's knowledge and acquiescence to earn some money. Other children have been persuaded or coerced by adults (who may have been known to them) to leave home, and are now 'controlled' by them and forced to engage in criminal activities.

The children may have travelled long distances, by themselves or in the company of others, or have been transported by adults. Children may travel, for example, from Xinjiang in the far west to Shanghai on the east coast. Both long and short distances may be covered by any children who are on the move. The movement is from rural areas to urban, but although a direction of travel eastwards (toward the developed areas of the coast) has been highlighted, in fact there is some movement in all directions. Some children are indeed taken to Xinjiang in the west, although that is generally not popularly perceived as a destination province for 'street children'.

Why is the existence of street children in China seen as a problem, apart from reactions of sympathy or repulsion? The reasons often given are that these children constitute a potential problem for the future, in terms of social disorder and disintegration of society. The cause is said to be the children's lack of moral education and moral development: they are all seen as being out of place in society now, which has implications for the order of society in the future.

To explore the nature of the problem further we look briefly at four areas where street children are perceived to be out of place in China: out of school, out of home locality, working, and out of family. These areas are related to articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but are taken up here in terms of local meanings. Each area has strong underpinning in terms of moral education and development, such as the reciprocal intergenerational relationships within family, and linked to adherence to home locality.

OUT OF SCHOOL

An increasing number of children apparently not in school was one of the initial reasons for escalating interventions in what became identified as street children issues at the end of 1980s (FURC 1991). The concern was partly that children were working, but the main emphasis was the importance attached to education. Lacking an education can be seen as a problem in China for several reasons. It contravenes traditional Confucian values of learning and self-cultivation (see Stafford 1995: 18). Second, and especially from the modern urban perspective, there is a very practical importance of education for status and for job prospects, and hence the educational pressure on children for the family's future prosperity. Pressure from parents and teachers on school students to work hard and gain success in examinations, has been the subject of government concern, for example over the quantity of homework and out of school tuition, and an emphasis on knowledge at the expense of moral education (Cui 2000; Xu Lan 2000). A third reason stems from the importance attached to school education from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, reinforced in Chinese law and national planning.

The problem essentially conflates children not being in school with not receiving an education, and much of this concern with school is with education validated through exams which offers key to practical success. But there is also anxiety about moral education, seen to maintain social standards, and hold society together. Some anthropologists have questioned a distinction between formal (school) and non-formal (in family, outside school) education (see Stafford 1995). Moral education takes place at school and in the family. In his work on rural children in Taiwan, supplemented by fieldwork in north-east mainland China, Stafford argues that children learn about morality largely not through direct teaching but in their involvement out of school, in daily life, especially in activities associated with cycles of reciprocity. The value of school, in terms of exam success, and the time required for homework, especially in urban areas, must reduce time available for students participation in family activities and reinforce emphasis on the need for moral education at school.

But the importance attached to school education varies, and is changing, especially in rural areas. In 1983 Gittings reported officials in Fuzhou noting 'a falling off of peasants enthusiasm for education, with children being kept back to work in the fields' (1999: 87). This was linked to changes in the rural economic system, particularly the household responsibility system, when farmers were initially permitted to sell surplus produce. The contribution of

children to family wealth in this way seems to be viewed as more important than any potential benefits from schooling. Ting and Tao (1990) also reported that 'the atmosphere of the school has been influenced by the market economy, and people do not attach much importance to school education'.

Other issues may influence school non-attendance. Some suggested that 'teachers in rural areas are of low quality' (Ting and Tao 1990), an area the government has sought to remedy. In remote areas travel to school is difficult, and children may have to board, adding further costs to parents. Tuition is free but there are other fees required by individual schools. Children are taken out of school when parents migrate, and may not attend in the new location of the family: there are additional costs for migrants that parents find prohibitive, and special schools for the floating population are now being developed in some cities.

For some parents there are practical reasons for children not being in school - cost and their potential contribution to family through work - whilst others fear children's lack of moral education through not attending school. The differences in adult perceptions appear to highlight both the urban-rural divide, and the increasing inequality apparent as some areas and people 'get rich first'.

WORKING

The extent of children working in China is not known, although the issue achieved international prominence in 2001 with an explosion at a factory where children were assembling fireworks to pay school fees. Children work in China in various circumstances but definitions and perceptions of what is work vary. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics, published early in 2001, showed some '5.84 million rural Chinese children aged 7 - 15 were "economically active" in 1997': meaning they were 'out of full time education and engaged in full time work for at least two weeks per year' (Chinabrief 2001a: 9). Perhaps in line with the emphasis in the CRC on primary education, older children working in rural areas (living with parents) or who migrate to cities for employment are more accepted while there is debate over urban school students working part-time. It is younger children involved in flower selling, guitar playing, begging etc. in urban areas who are seen to present problems: sometimes they are ignored, sometimes they are collected by police. Perceptions of a problem appear to revolve around immoral exploitation of children, by parents or other adults, and that the work and its timing is inappropriate. The question of exploitation also links children involved in other types of work. For example, trafficked and other children controlled by adults and used for criminal activities such as theft and sex work. This last category, of sex work, raises a tangential issue, over how to categorise older children who are controlled and used by adults as sex workers: those who work from the street might be designated as street children, while their peers in hairdressing shops and other places, would not. Yet all are vulnerable to a range of problems and involved in similar work. Furthermore, many street children do get involved in sexual activities occasionally with adults for money or with other children.

The perceived problem of children working follows the dominant current global interpretation of CRC, and position of the ILO against exploitative child labour. In addition, when children are working in the city, and on the street (as opposed to those working in rural areas) they are seen as likely to come into contact with immoral persons and activities. As with perceptions on the problem of education, attitudes vary depending on which children are involved and from where they come. For example, children from Xinjiang are particularly stigmatised, because those from Uighur and other minority northwestern groups, are easily recognised, seen as different and distrusted (part of a discriminatory construction of Xinjiang minorities held by some people). But their difficulties are parallel to those of rural children working in the city - that they are seen to be out of place not metaphorically but physically, whether with parents or not.

OUT OF PLACE – MIGRATION

The place from which a person or their family comes is important for family and lineage identity: '*jiguan* (place of origin) is central to Chinese conceptions of self and community' (Xu 2000: 8); it is also legally designated. The home village or place was important traditionally because of links to ancestors and reciprocity arising out of that relationship (see below): even younger people now living in towns, will speak of their 'home village' or home area, often situated in the countryside. At the lunar New Year (*Chun Jie*, Spring Festival), people will often return to their home place for the most significant celebration of the year.

The official designation of home place lies in the *hukou*, the household registration system established in 1958. This system provides an urban or rural *hukou* for every person, a specific place where they are registered as living and where they can claim a number of services. The system is effectively a continuation of earlier practice, in the Republican period, Qing, and Ming dynasties. Alongside the *hukou*, people over 16 years receive and carry an identity card. Urban *hukou* are seen as more desirable, and difficult to obtain. Children inherit the *hukou* of their mother. The *hukou* has been viewed as a barrier to population movement, especially before the 1980s. Concern for being away from home locality is both moral (family home - reciprocal and other local relationships), and legal.

Although the term 'migrant' is much used in translation, an official distinction is drawn between migrants (who move and register in their new place of residence) and the floating population (who do not). Different official categories have been used over the years, in particular a distinction between the floating population (from one night to under one year) and *de facto* migration (not necessarily registered). Length of stay is an important feature because many in the floating and migrant population move out to seek work, and return home after a period up to a few years.

Although many commentators seem to treat migration as a new phenomenon, and the numbers increased significantly in the 1990s, there was a tradition of population movement even after 1949. By 1986 there were 50-60 million

people still surviving who had migrated from rural to urban areas since Liberation (Chinese Academy of Social Science survey, quoted Davin 1999: 11). Official estimates suggest 25-30 million *hukou* transfers (thus migrations) between provinces 1949-78 (ibid 10), which does not include movement *within* provinces. Current estimates suggest between 40-100 million people in the floating population, but the figures as a proportion do not 'indicate the Chinese population, even in the 1990s, has been highly mobile by international standards' (Davin 1999: 26).

Research in 1986 indicated that migrants are predominantly young men aged 20-24 years. The next age groupings in terms of quantity are 15-19 years and 25-29 years (Davin 1999: 31), so a significant proportion of floating people even in the 1980s were actually older children. In fact older 'street children' might be described as migrants in their own right. Most are 'economic migrants' who have moved in search of work, or better paid work. Many remit money home (for example, child shoeshiners, Kunming field visit): most are from rural areas.

Younger children are rarely alone on the street, and may stay in groups by themselves or under formal or informal supervision of an adult. Although some of these may have left home alone, their definition as migrants would be contested: a calling into account of their autonomy and vulnerability, although the motives of some younger children are similar to those of young people and adults - to make money in the city. In some towns and cities a migration 'chain' has become established, where people from one particular village or area will move to. Potential migrants know where to go and have contacts. Children may be part of a migration chain: for example, many flower-sellers in Beijing are from a particular part of Hunan province, and have apparently been sent by parents under charge of an adult.

While some children are themselves migrants, others have moved with their parents. But given the predominantly young age of migrants (under 30 years, noted above), any children are often left behind in the care of grandparents or other relatives. Conversely, being in the floating population has been cited by some (see Dutton 1998) as a vehicle for having more than one child in the city. Such children are not registered, and face additional difficulties in accessing services. In some cities (notably Beijing) special schools for the children of migrants have been established (although teaching quality is dubious) but many children living with parents in the floating population do work during the day.

Drawing a boundary between floating population, migrant and street children is difficult and perhaps a futile and misleading task. There are certain similarities in the situation of some 'street children' and adult migrants: the pull of the eastern seaboard is said to apply to both, but movement is not all in one direction, and many travel westwards (even to Xinjiang on the borders of Central Asia) or south-west (to Yunnan). The problem of 'surplus labour' in the countryside is said to affect all groups, particularly in explanations of poverty as cause for migration and street children, and both adults and children remit money home, whilst remaining out of place.

TRAFFICKING

The problem of trafficking also involves movement of children over long distances. There are again problems definition, but trafficking does encompass persuasion, that is tempting children and women away from home with tales of available work and the bright city lights - rather than forcible abduction. Although it is associated especially with older children (both sexes) and young women, trafficking in much younger children is also prevalent. Children trafficked usually end up in criminal activities, for example, forced into street theft, or into sex work.

There are also reports of families selling children, sometimes also seen as an aspect of trafficking, and is related to the blurring of boundaries with some other practices - for example, marriage brokering involving money exchange. The practice of 'bride price' in some places (exchanging goods or money on marriage), has meant that poverty may cause difficulties in getting a bride, but the practice may obscure payment for marrying a trafficked young woman or child.

A perceived increase in trafficking in the last 20 years, within China and across Chinese borders (in both directions), has been attributed to traffickers taking advantage of opportunities from the opening up to market reform. The government has been very concerned about the problem. A national campaign was launched in April 2000, and by September it was reported that 13,000 children had been rescued (Monitor 2001: 9). Between 1993 - 95, 33,000 women abducted and sold (Davin 1999: 148). But the question is not simply of quantity, but 'quality', since statistics can obscure the variety of problems and impact on individual lives. Trafficking has been found to be a significant factor in the numbers of children moving to the street, especially from Xinjiang. Trafficked children are clearly out of place, engaged in immoral activities within an immoral project, without education and most especially, out of family protection.

OUT OF FAMILY

Children being away from family further pushes them 'out of place' in a society placing particular values on morality and the connotations of moral learning and moral reciprocity perceived as fundamental to development and social well-being. It is not just physical separation, but moral or emotional separation from family, which especially poses a problem. Children may be separated from parents in the ordinary course of life, for example, to board at school (in rural areas), if parents migrate, to go to university etc., but retain a connection and through visits home, at least at Spring Festival or New Year, will fulfill aspects of reciprocal obligations.

Since Liberation, the law maintained earlier traditions emphasising children's place in the family: that parents have responsibility to rear and educate children, and that children have a duty to care for parents (for example, the

1950 Marriage Law). The official view is that 'socialist welfare services are seen as a supplement to family care and not a substitute for it' (cited by Sydenham in 1993, quoted in Calloway 2000:16). The law reflects ideas of a moral reciprocity between parents and children, which continues throughout life.

There are two major perceived problems when children are out of the family. First, they are out of the reciprocal relationship required through the traditions of Confucian filial duty, effectively ratified in law. Second, failure of this moral obligation has practical implications, in terms of who will protect and raise children, and who will care for older people. The feeling of moral obligation is very strong, encompassing the practical, and points to alarm at the nature of problems within the family which may cause children to leave home, become lost, be trafficked. Although child migrants who remit money home may be seen to be following a moral path of making contribution to the family, especially if the work is not immoral, such a role (reinforcing the paramountcy of family prosperity as a whole) challenges the emphasis in the CRC that children should live with families.

The introduction of the CRC and relevant laws in China has increased recognition of problems faced by some children within families. These issues have come to the fore in particular where children are not attending school, but perceptions of problems in the way some parents treat their children has brought a call to 'solve the family education problem' (comment on television by a vice-director of a municipal civil affairs bureau). This view is held in several provinces and a need for education in 'parenting' knowledge and skills has been identified. The Street Children Protection Centre in Xinjiang has run workshops for parents in five locations (with the support of Save the Children UK) – which appears to have contributed to a significant reduction in the numbers of street children from those areas. In 1990 Ting and Tao suggested that the problems arose because of the economic changes: 'there is a vacuum of social norms in the transitional period. Traditional ideas have been cast away while new values and behavioural norms have not been established in people's minds'. They added that 'The abnormal family atmosphere brings about the abnormal psychology of children', and suggested that broken and reconstituted families, through increased divorce, were a major problem for children. But they also noted that 18-19% of street children in Shanghai were 'educated with fists and rods and thus feel no love'. Changing perceptions on family life and problems were marked by the first seminar in China on child abuse and neglect was held in Xi'an in 1999 which touched on issues of family education and relationships.

Tradition is upheld as useful, for example, intergenerational reciprocity within the family while other aspects remain contentious, such as physical punishment, not yet widely recognised as physical abuse. Other traditions are condemned, for example where the whole family of a convicted criminal is shunned: children whose parents are imprisoned have often become street children, and charity provision has been established for them in some cities. Concern for the development of children away from family, is focused on their protection from harmful influence, and provision of care: away from home children are perceived to be vulnerable to corruption from television and other

sources. For example, children living away from home on city streets, may often sleep in shops offering all night access to video games.

SEPARATION FROM FAMILY

The expectation that children live with their parents or other family members, who will provide proper care for their development (especially since it is in their interest in terms of later reciprocity), has had practical implications. Although it is legally possible to remove a child from family in cases of, for example abuse or neglect, the mechanisms for doing this (procedures and responsible agencies) are not yet developed. State care is available for orphans – children who have no parents or whose parents cannot be found (5), but where possible government (through Street Children Protection Centres and Civil Affairs Bureaux) seeks to locate children's family and return children to parent's care. When younger children are separated from parents, return can be difficult since they may not know their address. For older children it is usually possible, and so the Street Children Protection Centre's role is to return children to parents as soon as possible: the Centres have no guardianship rights and so are anxious when children are in their protection that no harm comes to them.

There are several processes and degrees of children's separation from family. An attempt at defining such categories draws in causes of separation, and perceptions of causality in turn evoke and determine the nature of a response. The categories outlined below are not absolute but intended to suggest degrees or emotional distances of separation. The ever-increasing complexity of possible categories highlights the need to see children as individuals if their needs are to be met. The degree of emotional separation from/with family, may influence children's decisions to leave home, just as other children maintain family contact having made a rational choice to migrate for work - physical separation.

For example, children may be living with their family but not attend school and use the street as a place to be during the day. They probably remain attached to family physically but face problems that create a degree of emotional separation, such as when parents are themselves self-absorbed or self-injurious, or perhaps in difficult circumstances (for example using drugs). Children may have been rejected by school as a potentially harmful influence on others. They may not need to work on the street, since their parents continue to provide for them, but their use of the street makes them vulnerable, and a focus of concern is them potentially drawn into crime.

Children may be living with parent or a parent approved 'guardian' and working on the street: used by the parent or adult for economic value. While such children are not officially seen as street children, some, such as flower sellers, are often taken into Street Children Protection Centres, indicating that they are perceived as vulnerable and being in difficult circumstances - there is concern to seek out the adults who exploit children for their own benefit.

Although there are children living in their home or a new locality who are with parents or parent-approved guardian, and who use the street or work there, most 'street children' seem to be living away from parents or parent-approved guardian. They are not all without adult supervision, for some have taken up with, or been taken in by, adults. The children may work at, for example, collecting bottles, and receive food and accommodation. These children may first have come onto the streets by themselves or with peers: they are physically separated from their family. The reason for them having left home initially is likely also to include a large degree of emotional separation from and poor relationship with parents to whose care they do not wish to return.

It is the mode of physical separation that most obviously raises the issue of causality. Children may simply have become lost, been abandoned by parents, run away or left home themselves, been trafficked. Although abandonment of children in China is generally associated in the Western press with abandonment of babies, older children too may be left (or, it seems, deliberately lost) by their parents.

The issue of children leaving home through 'running away' or being trafficked, asks the question of pull and push factors - what causes children to make a decision to leave home? Family circumstances, particularly parenting issues including the question of abuse and neglect are important and may influence a decision to leave, or play a part in the openness of children to persuasion by traffickers. Some adults have cited the supposed attractions of city life to rural children as factors that help lure them away. The circumstances of poverty have also been seen as significant, and have clearly influenced older children who migrate for economic reasons. Yet it would seem that a major factor is the nature of relationships within the family. Many children, once they have left, and even when in Street Children Protection Centres, do not want to return home; others do. But once returned home, many children leave immediately or very soon to go back to the street. These children are castigated by some adults as immoral - a lawyer referred to an eleven year old girl as 'a typical undisciplined youth' for apparently 'cheating' the people who help her. Such cases raise complex issues of perceptions of childhood, the role of children, the scale and type of possible actions by agencies to respond to need, and the nature of children's rights in practice.

RESPONSES

Current responses tend to divide children into several groups. Abandoned younger children, usually under the age of five years, are cared for in welfare homes run by Civil Affairs Bureaux at several levels of government. It is not expected that there would be older abandoned children, but they, and children whose address is not known, are also eventually cared for in a welfare home. Trafficked children, when identified, are rescued by the police (public security bureau) and sent home - sometimes with the assistance of the Civil Affairs Bureau and any local Street Children Protection Centre. Concern for the children of migrant parents tends to focus on their access to education, unless parents and children become destitute, when they are taken back to their home

locality, again through Civil Affairs Bureaux. Children selling flowers, doing other street work, living with parents or other adults who have migrated, may be seen as street children and taken to the Street Children Protection Centre. In fact, all of these children may come under the umbrella of the Street Children Protection Centre or relevant department of Civil Affairs Bureaux. While the term *liu lang er tong* is something of a catch all category (except for very young abandoned children), the Centres work to a definition of street children: 'a person under 18 who has left his/her family or guardian and lives a vagabond life for more than 24 hours without reliable safeguard for basic survival with the result of falling into dire straits' (Lauter 1998). In practice Centres are now broadening their role and looking to the development of multi-sector work, partly in response to their experience of increasing complexity of children's circumstances, and because some children (particularly those who have returned to the street several times) are posing a challenge to the preconceived moral order and raising questions about the changing nature of social life.

VIEWS OF CHILDREN

These are not the views of every street child, but a group then staying in the Street Children Protection Centre in Kunming, who were from various provinces. Their main points concerned their life now: that if their parents did not love or care for them, then they needed to find another form of living, but would not necessarily lose contact with family. They suggested a degree of autonomy, recognising they need money, but suggesting that they should have an identity card.

Some said that what was needed was a better family to take care of you, but this need not be a relative, 'you really just need a loving person to take care of you, it doesn't need to be parents'. They suggested setting up a centre for children (although they were currently staying in the Street Children Protection Centre, they envisaged something different). The centre would be their place to live in, permanently, or at least until they became adults. The centre would be a collective home with books, television, computers. The children said that they should be able to learn to cook and do domestic work. They would sleep and eat at the centre, but there should be protection by security guards to prevent adults disturbing and controlling them.

They would go to school from the centre, living and studying together. From the centre they would also keep in touch with, and visit their family, but they felt better off living apart from their family – challenging the idea that children the best place for children is to be with their family. Whether because of their experiences when separated from family, or their experiences of living with their family (or a combination of both) these children disputed adults belief they were out of place, and must be got home. Children recognised their family is not a good place to be, though not wanting to be entirely separated from them.

The children were aware of the expenses required for them to live together in a centre, with guards at the door, and attendance at school. They suggested that

when they grew up, they will pay back some of the cost of this centre and if unable to pay back, it should not be compulsory but a moral obligation or duty to do so if possible.

From the perspectives of children, the adult emphasis (held not only in China) that they should be returned home to family, is inappropriate. Children were suggesting a greater degree of autonomy, but living a 'normal' life, going to school, protected from adults, except they would not live with their family but keep in contact with them.

CONCLUSION

The existence of floating children in China raises a number of concerns for adults about a social integration that rests on ideal moral relationships. Although these relationships are seen as sited in the family, they are connected with place, and must also be learnt by children. Economic and social changes are providing opportunities for migration and work, in which children are also becoming involved either willingly, through coercion or through persuasion. The processes inherent in current perceptions of and responses to street children involve attempts to return to idealised relationship patterns, whereby children live with family and learn social morals. Although cast in a different form, these aims reflect much of the model of childhood underpinning the CRC. Given the size of the country, the proportion of children involved is not enormous, but has raised concerns about the need for services to develop to respond in a way that provides alternatives for some children who cannot or will not live with their family. At the same time, the exploitation of some children by adults is causing concern that the reform is providing opportunities that are not desirable and need to be policed. The existence of street children is providing a challenge to the economic and social changes involving the commodification of labour (thereby in some ways encouraging the phenomenon), and the reduction of state expenditure and staffing (which decreases ability to fund and provide responses).

The problem is complicated by the variety of circumstances in which floating children work and live. There are no simple categories. The 'real' street children sought by some might be those who live alone or with peers, homeless, making a living on the street – the floating and heroic connotations of *liu lang er tong*, and with some undertones of San Mao. But even with such a narrow focus it would still be difficult to separate out those children. Instead, perhaps the vagueness of the term 'street children' can be treated as an advantage, and force the development of services responding to the variety of children's circumstances and need – a more holistic model enabling children to shift across different types of provision according to its suitability for them. The problem of floating children is multi-faceted in terms of explanation and cause, and reflects tensions within social and economic change.

NOTES

1. The material is drawn from experience of work with government in China on street children issues.
2. Material from street children themselves is intended to form the subject of a separate paper.
3. Some of the problems of definition are discussed immediately below, and the difficulties of categorisation in China is one focus of this paper, although the term is used throughout since it has become so well known.
4. Known as Liberation in China, the 1949 proclamation by Mao Zedong is often referred to as 'revolution' in the West.
5. Some parents of disabled children do pay for them to be cared for in welfare homes.

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