

Article

A Study on the Collaborative Supply Mechanism of Picture Books for Rural Left-Behind Children: An Actor-Network Theory Perspective

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Abstract: The supply of picture books for rural left-behind children is a complex systemic project involving multiple actors, including government, publishing institutions, creators, social forces, and terminal service agencies. According to Actor-Network Theory (ANT), based on differences in their positions, roles, and functions in picture book supply, these multiple actors can be classified into three basic types: focal actors, main actors, and joint actors. The current supply network faces a structural dilemma characterized by a disconnect between the design end and the demand end. In addition to the absolute scarcity of resources, its root causes also include systemic ruptures in translation chains among heterogeneous actors. Drawing on the analytical framework of ANT, this paper traces the translation process of picture books from design to publication to reading promotion along four stages: problematization, interessement, enrolment and mobilization, and dissidence handling. The study finds that the current supply network suffers from breakpoints such as the absence of focal actors, imbalance in interessement, and the instrumentalization of non-human actors, which make it difficult for cognitive outcomes from the design end to be transmitted to the publishing end, and for reading feedback from the promotion end to flow back into content production decisions. Accordingly, a collaborative supply pathway is proposed, consisting of cultivating focal actors, institutionalizing interessement, expanding enrolment strategies, and establishing dissidence coordination mechanisms, so as to provide a theoretical reference for the precise allocation of reading resources for rural left-behind children in the context of nationwide reading.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory; rural left-behind children; picture book supply; collaborative mechanism; translation

Received: 23 August 2026

Revised: 02 October 2026

Accepted: 15 October 2026

Published: 19 October 2026



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1. Introduction

In December 2025, the State Council of China issued the Regulations on Promoting Nationwide Reading, which explicitly require "focusing on assisting nationwide reading in rural areas, old revolutionary base areas, ethnic minority areas, border areas, and underdeveloped areas," and "strengthening reading guarantees for minors, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and other groups" [1]. This institutional arrangement provides the highest-level policy basis for safeguarding the reading rights and interests of rural left-behind children. However, whether the top-level policy design can be translated into effective real-world supply still faces deep-seated obstacles.

The structural predicament of picture book reading among rural left-behind children has long been revealed by multiple studies. Survey data show that over 66.6% of rural primary school students have fewer than 10 extracurricular books at home, and their per capita reading volume of paper books is only 3.27, less than one-third of the national average for primary school students [2]. In the specific category of picture books, the problem is even more prominent: approximately 4,000 to 5,000 new picture book titles are published annually in China [3], yet picture books tailored to the emotional needs of rural

left-behind children are extremely scarce. Statistics on children's books sold on Dangdang.com show that only 31 picture books have been created specifically for rural left-behind children [4]. Meanwhile, about 68% of rural left-behind children are accustomed to reading independently, while only 3% of picture books for children under 12 contain Chinese character phonetic annotations [4]. There is a significant mismatch between the supply end and the demand end.

Existing research responses to the above predicament have mainly focused on two directions. The first is to propose, from a pedagogical perspective, the use of limited picture book resources to improve the quality of children's reading services, emphasizing reading promotion activities based on the living environment, psychological characteristics, and reading styles of rural left-behind children [5]. The second is to construct, from a collaborative governance perspective, a multi-actor collaborative model involving "government—creators—publishing institutions—social forces—terminal agencies" [6]. These two types of research have their respective contributions, but they share an implicit assumption: as long as each actor has a clear division of labor and fulfills its own responsibilities, collaboration can be achieved. They answer the questions of "who participates" and "what should be done," yet fail to explain a more fundamental question: in the field of picture book supply for left-behind children, why does collaboration fail even when the participating actors have already been clearly identified?

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) advocates a "sociology of associations" or "sociology of translation," incorporating heterogeneous stakeholders such as human actors and non-human actors into the actor-network, and can effectively interpret the relationships among heterogeneous entities and how they interact with one another [7]. Drawing on this analytical framework, this paper regards the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children as a dynamic network jointly constituted by heterogeneous actors, traces its translation process from design to publication to reading promotion, diagnoses its breakpoints, and proposes pathways for constructing a collaborative supply mechanism.

2. The Actor-Network of Collaborative Supply of Picture Books for Rural Left-Behind Children

2.1. Actors and Their Functions

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) proposes the core concept of the actor, which refers not only to human actors such as agents, but also to non-human actors such as ideas, technologies, thoughts, and biological entities that change the state of affairs by making differences. According to the "principle of generalised symmetry," human and non-human actors are equal and decentralised in status, and any element that changes the state of affairs by making differences in the network can be called an actor [8]. The participation of actors is the foundation, and identifying the types of relevant actors is key to analysing the composition of the collaborative supply network for rural left-behind children's picture books. Based on ANT and differences in the positions, roles, and functions of multiple actors in picture book supply, they can be classified into focal actors, main actors, and joint actors.

2.1.1. Focal Actors

Focal actors refer to actors that occupy a core node in the actor-network structure and play an important role in the formation and development of the actor-network. They possess a certain degree of discursive power and influence, dominate the "translation" activities of the actor-network, and maintain its sound operation [8]. In the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children, publishing institutions are the pivotal node connecting the design end and the promotion end. Publishing institutions not only determine topic planning, author selection, and content boundaries, but also control distribution channels and promotion resources. They are the key translation subjects that transform creators' cognitive outcomes into accessible products and policy objectives into market behaviour. However, currently publishing institutions are constrained by market

logic, and their translation capacity has weakened, resulting in the actual absence of focal actors.

2.1.2. Main Actors

Main actors refer to actors that participate in the operation and maintenance of the actor-network. They directly or indirectly participate in various stages of actor-network construction, play a subjective role, and realise their own interests through interaction with other actors [8]. In the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children, creators and left-behind children are the most important participants. Creators (text authors and illustrators) are the direct bearers of content production, and whether they possess rural local experience determines whether picture books can truly represent the living conditions of left-behind children. Left-behind children are both the end readers of picture books and the source of demand information; if their voices cannot enter creation and publishing decisions, the "speaking-for" nature of picture books may lead to a mismatch between content and real needs.

2.1.3. Joint Actors

Joint actors refer to entities or forces that affect the existence of the entire actor-network and also play a non-negligible role in network construction [8]. The supply of picture books for rural left-behind children is not merely a matter of content production, but a complex comprehensive social issue that requires the participation of joint actors such as government, universities, public welfare organisations, terminal service agencies, digital platforms, policy texts, and reading spaces. As a state administrative organ, the government provides support in policy, institutions, and funding, and carries out top-down arrangements relying on the discursive power of administrative authority. As producers, disseminators, and innovators of knowledge, universities play an intellectual support role in picture book creation research, talent cultivation, and reading promotion. Public welfare organisations and reading promotion institutions, with flexible mechanisms and rapid responses, can play a supplementary role in marginal areas where government and market coverage is insufficient. Terminal service agencies such as rural reading rooms and school libraries are the places where the value of picture books is ultimately realised. Their responsibilities include not only the collection and lending of books, but also the organisation of reading activities, the collection of usage data, and the transmission of user feedback. Technology, knowledge, curricula, and culture are material elements and important carriers of picture book supply.

2.2. Network Relations among Actors

ANT discusses the interaction and cooperation of multiple actors, focuses on how new social networks are established from scratch, and provides a theoretical framework for analysing the dynamic process of multiple actors moving from independent dispersion to integrated collaboration. Its important value lies in integrating the dualistic framework of endogenous and exogenous factors. Actors in the network connect internal and external development elements through practice, emphasising that all elements should receive equal attention [8].

As for the actor-network relations of collaborative supply of picture books for rural left-behind children, it is an endogenous network system with publishing institutions as focal actors. Publishing institutions rely on exogenous forces such as government, universities, public welfare organisations, and terminal service agencies to reconstruct the picture book supply ecosystem. It is the superposition of endogenous and exogenous networks under the interaction of internal and external forces. At the same time, network interaction reshapes the social relations among focal actors, main actors, and joint actors. Therefore, it creates a stable network relationship characterised by internal-external interaction, mutual cooperation, mutual coordination, and dynamic development.

The process of collaborative supply of picture books for rural left-behind children is a process of establishing and renewing complex heterogeneous actor-network relations. As a complex action involving multiple actors, behind it there often persists a complex

network continuously constructed and interacted by different heterogeneous actors, and the mechanism generating its dynamics involves each heterogeneous actor. Heterogeneous actors are broad and inclusive, covering all elements that play a role in the picture book supply process, including human actors such as government, creators, publishing institutions, public welfare organisations, and terminal service agencies, as well as non-human actors such as picture book texts, digital platforms, reading spaces, and policy texts. It should be particularly noted that in this actor-network, although publishing institutions as focal actors occupy a dominant position in action, they, together with main actors and joint actors, are all nodes in the network structure, in a relationship of co-presence, equality, and reciprocity. In other words, the "principle of generalised symmetry" must be followed. In this way, the roles of long-neglected latent actors, such as left-behind children, digital platforms, and the material forms of picture books, can be valued and brought into play.

3. The Mechanism of Collaborative Supply of Picture Books for Rural Left-Behind Children

Mechanism is "used to represent the internal rationale, internal connections, and laws of motion of things or systems" [8]. It involves the coupling relationships among internal factors of things or systems, as well as the functions and forms of interaction of each factor, and is a prerequisite for achieving efficiency. The first priority for the collaborative supply of picture books for rural left-behind children is to establish a sound mechanism to ensure the formation of a stable and balanced actor-network and to avoid falling into the collective action dilemma described by Mancur Olson. Based on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and in light of the field and specific characteristics of picture book supply for rural left-behind children, its mechanism is divided into four parts: problematization, intersement, enrolment and mobilization, and dissidence handling.

3.1. Problematization

Problematization is the primary stage in the creation of an actor-network. A problem refers to the contradiction or gap between reality (what is) and the ideal (what should be), which requires certain actions or measures to remedy. In the actor-network of collaborative supply of picture books for rural left-behind children, each actor faces its own problems or obstacles.

At present, the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children faces a structural mismatch at the content level and a mechanistic deficiency in production and dissemination. For the government, there is a gap between the goal of equalising public cultural services and the insufficient matching of rural reading resources. For publishing institutions, the market returns on picture books for left-behind children are limited, while the social value of such topics requires policy incentives or public welfare funds to "compensate"; when policy incentives are insufficient, willingness to participate declines. For creators, the funding and time investment required for fieldwork lack institutional support. Even if they are willing to create works on the theme of left-behind children, the lack of fieldwork leaves them without an understanding of the real world, emotional logic, and discourse system of left-behind children, resulting in "suspended" creation. For left-behind children, their "sense of deficiency"—stemming from parental absence, affectional attachment, and perception of poverty—constitutes a core variable affecting reading demand, while the normal depiction of "parents present" in ordinary picture books may instead aggravate the psychological gap. For terminal service agencies, although rural reading rooms have achieved wide coverage, the proportion of picture books in their catalogues has long been low, with slow updating; 83.3% of surveyed left-behind children reported that they "have no picture books at home" [4].

The supply of picture books for rural left-behind children is a systemic project involving content production, publishing dissemination, reading services, and other aspects, but ultimately it depends on the key factor of "people," that is, whether various actors can form a stable collaborative network. In light of this characteristic and the

interests of various heterogeneous actors, publishing institutions, as focal actors, should propose the core issue of "enhancing the rural appropriateness and accessibility of picture books" as the "obligatory passage point" (OPP), so as to break the dual predicament of content mismatch and mechanistic deficiency in the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children, and to objectify the issues of concern to each actor. Once this obligatory passage point is breached, the entire interest linkage will form an interdependent and relatively stable network alliance.

3.2. Interessement

At the stage of interessement, focal actors need to present relevant interests so that main actors and joint actors clearly understand that the obstacles to entering the collaborative network can be eliminated through coordination, and that by joining the network and passing through the obligatory passage point, they can obtain expected benefits. This facilitates the decomposition and achievement of problems and objectives and maintains the sound operation of the network. The actors participating in the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children face different obstacles and interest demands, and how to coordinate their different interest orientations is an urgent issue that must be resolved.

Under the core issue of "enhancing the rural appropriateness and accessibility of picture books," for the government, it helps promote the equalisation of public cultural services, narrow the reading gap between urban and rural children, and achieve the strategic goal of nationwide reading, while also enhancing its credibility and authority. For publishing institutions, it enables a better understanding of the reading needs of rural left-behind children, expands market segments, and enhances the social reputation of the brand. For creators, through special funding for fieldwork and award guidance, they can obtain resource support to enter rural sites, enhancing the artistic authenticity and social influence of their works. For left-behind children, through reading feedback, their reading needs can be genuinely expressed and transformed into a basis for content decisions, gaining emotional resonance and cultural identity. For public welfare organisations, they can leverage their advantages of flexible mechanisms and rapid responses to achieve public welfare goals in marginal areas where government and market coverage is insufficient. For terminal service agencies, through the collection and transmission of feedback data, they can obtain continuous resource renewal and service capacity improvement. Local culture can be promoted, inherited, and continued, constantly expanding new development space. Information and technology can be efficiently utilised through optimal integration, becoming the adhesive that drives picture book supply. In the field of promoting the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children, as long as each actor can enter the network according to the design of publishing institutions and strengthen connections and cooperation among them, the interest demands of all parties can be satisfied.

3.3. Enrolment and Mobilization

Enrolment and mobilization refer to focal actors efficiently organising all actors in the network around the key point of the "obligatory passage point," mobilising to a greater extent the enthusiasm and agency of each actor to participate, enabling them to divide labour and collaborate according to the established plan, fulfil the interest objectives of all parties, and form a relatively stable alliance of interests.

In the process of supplying picture books for rural left-behind children, publishing institutions need to obtain support from the government in terms of funding, policy, procurement quotas, and other aspects; deepen cooperation with creators by establishing special funding for fieldwork to overcome the obstacle of "suspended" creation; coordinate relations with universities and research institutes so that they actively participate in picture book creation research and talent cultivation; make the content and form of picture books meet the needs of rural left-behind children and attract more terminal agencies to participate in promotion; strengthen the configuration of agency for non-human actors such as digital platforms and reading spaces to enhance the

accessibility of picture books; and, in response to the fact that "rural humanities have lost their due attention in the value sequence of modernisation and have become the backward Other" [9], strengthen the excavation and inheritance of local culture.

However, the current process of enrolment exhibits obvious exclusion. Left-behind children themselves are the most passive actors in the enrolment process; their role is set as "target readers"—objects to be served and cared for—rather than actors capable of contributing knowledge, expressing needs, and participating in decision-making. The enrolment status of digital platforms as non-human actors also deserves scrutiny: e-commerce platforms, short video channels, and audio picture book apps are mainly used as "promotion tools," and their shaping power as agentic actors has not been fully recognised and utilised. Platform recommendation algorithms determine which picture books are "visible," their classification systems shape the discoverability of "picture books for left-behind children," and their user behaviour data contain potential knowledge about reading preferences—yet these agencies are hardly enrolled in supply decisions.

At this stage, each actor should become a member of the supply mechanism for rural left-behind children's picture books and follow the action path indicated by publishing institutions. But the reality is that the exclusion in enrolment prevents the network from forming a stable alliance of interests.

3.4. Dissidence Handling

Heterogeneity is prevalent in network alliances, and the handling of dissidence is both an indispensable stage and an important guarantee for coordinating the interests of all parties and maintaining the sound operation of the network. The supply mechanism for rural left-behind children's picture books is a dynamically developing system. The numerous and complex actors have their own heterogeneous resources and different interest demands, and problems and conflicts often arise during operation. This stage is called the dissidence stage.

Specifically, the dissidence that needs to be handled includes: the incomplete matching between picture book supply and the needs of rural left-behind children; unclear responsibilities, duplicated use of resources, and low efficiency among multiple actors such as publishing institutions, creators, public welfare organisations, and terminal service agencies; and the lack of connection between topic planning, content production, and reading needs, resulting in low synergy. The above problems are both the driving force for the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children and may also damage the interests of heterogeneous actors, affecting the stability of the actor-network. Eliminating dissidence requires relevant heterogeneous actors to continuously form consensus and collaborate to maintain the network's survival.

Among these, the failure of mobilization is concentrated in the rupture of the feedback loop. Ideally, the reading behaviour data generated after left-behind children read picture books—borrowing frequency, reading duration, comprehension difficulties, emotional responses—should flow back to the design end and publishing end through some mechanism, becoming the basis for the next round of topic selection and content optimisation. However, in the current supply network, this feedback loop hardly exists. Borrowing data from rural reading rooms remain at the statistical level and are rarely used for content evaluation; teachers' classroom observations and children's reading responses lack institutionalised collection and transmission channels; and e-commerce platform sales data reflect purchasing behaviour rather than reading effects. The consequence of mobilization failure is that a persistent "blind zone" cycle forms between the supply end and the demand end—publishing institutions dare not invest because demand is uncertain; insufficient investment leads to scarce supply; scarce supply leads to sparse usage data; and sparse data makes demand even more uncertain.

At this stage, all actors should, through equal consultation and mutual communication, effectively resolve the problems and conflicts arising in the process of picture book supply and ensure the consistency of collective action.

4. Pathways for Collaborative Supply of Picture Books for Rural Left-Behind Children

4.1. Cultivating Focal Actors and Enhancing Translation Capacity

The systemic rupture of translation chains stems from the absence of focal actors. A viable pathway for cultivating focal actors is not to "designate" an existing subject as the core, but to construct a cross-domain translation platform. The function of this platform is not management or coordination, but the execution of "translation" in the ANT sense. In terms of organisational form, this platform can be built within the framework of a "joint conference system for safeguarding the reading rights and interests of rural left-behind children's picture books," translating the real reading needs of left-behind children into topic directions understandable to publishing institutions, translating policy objectives into feasible market signals, translating creators' artistic judgments into operable content standards, and translating feedback from the promotion end into decision-making bases for the design end.

4.2. Institutionalizing Interesement and Making Social Value "Calculable"

The key to interesement lies not in requiring actors to "sacrifice" their own interests, but in designing an institutional arrangement that enables actors to objectively promote the stabilisation of the supply network while pursuing their own interests. At the publishing end, it is necessary to transform the "social benefits" of picture books for left-behind children into operable market signals. The design of government procurement quotas should shift from "one-off projects" to "stable demand commitments." For example, picture books for left-behind children should be included in the recommended catalogues of rural primary and secondary school libraries (reading rooms) or the annual procurement catalogues of rural reading rooms, and annual bidding should be replaced by a three-year rolling procurement plan, so that publishing institutions can make topic investments based on predictable demand. At the creation end, guiding clauses on "rural settings and left-behind children themes" should be established in the evaluation criteria of major original picture book awards, accompanied by special funding for fieldwork. At the terminal service end, evaluation and incentive indicators centred on "usage effects" rather than "borrowing numbers" should be established, incorporating "the collection and transmission of reading effect feedback" into the responsibilities and assessments of terminal agencies.

4.3. Expanding Enrolment Strategies: From "Supplying for Left-Behind Children" to "Co-Creating with Left-Behind Children"

The role transformation of left-behind children from "target readers" to "co-creative actors" is an important condition for the stabilisation of the supply network. At the operational level, methods of participatory design and child ethnography can be drawn upon to introduce the participation of left-behind children in the stages of topic planning and content review of picture books. Specific forms include: children's drawing workshops, allowing left-behind children to express the stories they wish to see through visual language; picture book shared reading observation, recording children's attention distribution, emotional responses, and comprehension difficulties in real reading scenarios; and simple feedback tools, embedding low-threshold feedback entry points in picture books (such as sticker-style evaluations and QR codes for voice messages), so that children's reading experiences can be systematically collected. The enrolment of digital platforms likewise needs to shift from "tool use" to "activation of agency": platforms should be incorporated into the analytical and design vision of the supply network; their recommendation algorithms can be guided as channels for precisely pushing age-appropriate picture books to rural areas; their user behaviour data can be used to identify reading preference patterns of left-behind children; and their interactive functions can be designed as support tools for remote parent-child shared reading.

4.4. Improving Safeguard Institutions and Establishing a Dissidence Coordination Mechanism

Due to the heterogeneity of actors and their differing goals, translation difficulties arise and the actor-network exhibits severe instability, necessitating certain safeguard

institutions. Institutions are the rules of the game or normative systems of certain social activities and social relations, performing functions such as guidance, incentives, coordination, and reducing transaction costs. To effectively realise the collaborative supply of picture books for rural left-behind children, safeguard institutions need to be improved in the following two aspects.

On the one hand, the government should coordinate various resources, increase policy support for the creation and publication of picture books for rural left-behind children, provide institutional safeguards for the design of policy tools such as special funds, procurement quotas, and tax reductions, and form a regionally covering picture book supply network. On the other hand, a diversified supply pattern should be improved, clarifying the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of actors such as publishing institutions, creators, public welfare organisations, and terminal service agencies in picture book supply, and stipulating the distribution of benefits among all parties, so as to attract and guide more actors to participate in the collective action of promoting picture book supply through preferential policies.

At the same time, a dissidence coordination mechanism needs to be established. The establishment of a feedback loop is the hallmark of the collaborative supply mechanism moving from "rupture" to "stability." The core logic of the loop is: to return terminal usage data and reading effect feedback to the design end and publishing end through institutionalised channels, so that supply decisions no longer rely on inference and assumption, but on continuous information flow. The design of the loop needs to address three technical issues: the standardisation of feedback collection, the institutionalisation of feedback transmission, and the visibility of feedback use. When the design and publishing ends make content adjustments based on feedback, this adjustment should be fed back to the terminal, forming a confirmation signal that "feedback has been used," so as to maintain the motivation of terminal agencies to continuously collect feedback.

5. Conclusion

Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as its analytical framework, this paper traces the translation process of picture books for rural left-behind children from design to publication to reading promotion, diagnoses the structural ruptures in the supply network, and proposes pathways for constructing a collaborative supply mechanism. The core finding of the study is that the predicament in the supply of picture books for rural left-behind children cannot be simply attributed to "insufficient resources" or "absence of actors." The number of actors in the supply network is sufficient—policy actors, publishing institutions, creators, public welfare organisations, and terminal agencies are all present—yet the translation chains among actors are ruptured. The deflection of problematization prevents the formation of a common agenda; the imbalance of interessement prevents social value from being transformed into feasible action incentives; the exclusion in enrolment marginalises left-behind children and non-human actors; and the absence of dissidence handling prevents the establishment of a feedback loop.

The theoretical significance of this diagnosis lies in the fact that it reveals the mechanistic obstacles obscured by functionalist collaboration research. Collaborative governance theory focuses on "who does it" and "how to do it," whereas ANT asks "why it cannot be done." When we shift our analytical focus from institutional design to relational translation, the cause of collaboration failure shifts from "imperfect design" to "ruptured translation chains," and the remedial strategy shifts from "improving the division of labour" to "rebuilding translation."

At the practical level, the core orientation of the collaborative supply pathway proposed in this paper is: to establish a cross-domain platform with translation capacity, so that the real reading needs of left-behind children can be translated into signals to which publishing institutions can respond; so that social value can be made "calculable" through institutionalised arrangements; and so that terminal usage feedback can continuously flow back as decision-making input for the upstream. Within the policy window of the continuous advancement of the nationwide reading strategy, the

establishment of this mechanism is not merely a professional issue in the publishing field, but also an institutional foundation for safeguarding the reading rights and interests of rural left-behind children and narrowing the knowledge gap between urban and rural children.

Funding: Supported by Humanities and Social Sciences Self-funded Project of Ministry of Education in 2021 "A Study of the Collaborative Design and Long-term Support Mechanism of Picture Books for Left-behind Children in Rural Areas Based on the Differences between Urban and Rural Areas" (under grant number 21YJE760001).

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