



Insecurity, Loneliness and Their Impacts on Left Behind [*Liushou*] Women, Children and the Elderly in Chinese Villages -- A Commentary

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ABSTRACT

Change is occurring at a rapid rate in China. Policy reforms, regional development are going ahead at an unprecedented pace. Inevitably, some strata of society have been left behind. This paper focuses on the plight of the 'left behind' who comprise mainly children who are in the care of their grandparents, some of whom are elderly. New developments in agriculture (now more highly feminized) innovative land transfer policy, and land consolidation all have an impact on creation of 'hollow villages'. We assess the importance of current and past developments and conclude with some recommendations about future research priorities and suggestions to local government officials and decision makers.

Key words: agriculture, labor, migration, hukou, land, hollow villages, urbanization, New Era, policy, rural.

CONTEXT AND SETTING

There has been a shift in Chinese state discourse and the emergence of policy oriented toward achieving a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*), "people-centred" (*yi ren wei ben*) development and "construction of the new countryside" (*xin nongcun jianshe*). These initiatives have partly been a reaction to the growth in social unrest and protest generated as a response to huge and increasing rural-urban inequalities and rural disadvantage, but they are also driven by the belief that the next stage of capitalist growth will require a boost in domestic – especially rural – consumption. Many of the new policies were announced at the 19th session of the CPC in 2017 under the heading of the 'New Era'¹. Consequently, the state has begun focusing less on how to extract capital accumulation from agriculture and more on ways to "give back". At the same time national policy is to increase the level of urbanization in China. In 2014, China launched a major initiative, the National New-type Urbanization Plan (2014-2020). Urbanization is

¹ President Xi Jinping at the 19th Communist Party Congress in Beijing in October, 2017 when he laid out his vision in the document 'Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'. The New Era represents a change in direction in China's development away from a focus solely on GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth towards Green development and creation of an 'ecological civilization'

government policy in China and targets have been set. About 80 million are to have re-settled by 2030 and 200 million by 2050, not all of them to cities -- many will occupy peri-urban settlements. (Feng & Squires 2018).

When possibilities for waged labor outside the village opened up, they were taken up first and foremost by men and young, single women. Young men and women (primarily) are heading for the urban areas to get education and employment but many others, including married couples, are leaving their young children in the care of the grand-parents. This group who stay in rural villages are called “left behind”. The left-behind are often portrayed in academic and policy discourse as a “vulnerable group” of passive dependants, sidelined by modernisation and abandoned by their families. This literature is sympathetic to the left-behind and gravely concerned about their situation. Left-behind women, children and the elderly are depicted “vulnerable groups” (*ruoshi qunti*) who suffer insecurity, stress, loneliness, depression and ill-health as a result of their abandonment.



Figure 1 left behind children remain in the care of grandparents back in the village

Many factors – including social, political and economic – can contribute to a person’s or a group’s experience of vulnerability, poverty, poor nutritional standards, lack of opportunities, low standard of life, and these ‘group-based’ inequalities intersect. Jacka (2012, 2014) argues that while attention to the well-being of the left-behind is vital, there is an urgent need for a

shift in focus from their vulnerability to their agency². The core challenge at the center of the field of sociology is understanding the relationship between *structure*³ and *agency*.

Researchers have identified ‘hollowed out’ villages (Ye, 2008) where able-bodied people leave to seek work (or study/training) in the bigger towns and cities. Many Chinese village populations have decreased from 1,000 to 2,000 residents down to a few hundred. As a result of both new construction and loss of residents, these old, “hollow villages” had a lot of unused land. Residents were leaving their old and uncomfortable adobe or brick homes (Figure 2a) and building new homes (Figure 2b) on the village fringe.

BOX 1 DYNAMIC BALANCE POLICY: WHAT IS IT AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Under the *Dynamic Balance policy*, any Chinese city wishing to build on existing farmland must compensate that loss with new farmland of equal or greater area. Since cities have little undeveloped land to convert to farms, municipal governments can pay rural villages in other parts of the same province to reclaim farmland. This enables villages to be paid to reclaim the land from now hollowed out villages, so a city can move ahead with expansion. This program is the largest investment in rural development since the founding of the Peoples Republic of China. This transfer of development rights from a village to a city generates the money needed to revitalize rural China and construct new, more consolidated villages. The farmers benefit in many ways from this exchange of development rights from new homes or apartments with public utilities, all the while retaining the restored farmland and the right to farm it. Financing of the new construction comes from selling the land development rights of several nearby hollow villages to a city. For example, residents from four hollow villages in Shandong Province restoring 125 hectares (309 acres) of land to agriculture. For this effort a large, east coast city government paid \$20 million to the new village. The money was used to build the new, more compact community and reclaim the unused land from the old villages back for agriculture. Many new villages that have benefitted from selling development rights. Not all have high-rise apartments. Some have adopted more traditional farmhouse and ethnic looks. Some have constructed traditional looking two-story homes with walled courtyards to hide the cars, allowing the community to retain its traditional appearance. The Dynamic Balance of Total Farmland Area program sets up the potential for win-win-win solutions. Cities win as they can buy development rights to allow for more industrial, business and housing construction. Rural villages win by selling development rights for their wasted land to gain the financial resources to build new housing and infrastructure while increasing their farmland area. Finally, the central government wins by controlling sprawl and stabilizing China’s farmland area. The approach serves as a model for other countries that want to set up a system that allows both urban and rural areas to benefit from economic development while still ensuring food security, funding rural development, discouraging sprawl and protecting farmland for the future. The impacts of this trend in preserving basic farmland and improving the life and livelihood of former villagers need more detailed study.

² Agency refers to the thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual power. Agency is the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories. Agency can take individual and collective forms.

³ Structure refers to the complex and interconnected set of social forces, relationships, institutions, and elements of social structure that work together to shape the thought, behavior, experiences, choices, and overall life courses of people



Figure 2a: Abandoned brick houses in Hollowed Out village and b New village on outskirts (see Box 1 for more)

MIGRANT LABOR, REMITTANCES AND THE 'LEFT BEHINDS'

China has experienced perhaps the most rapid urbanization in the history of the world. Rural-urban labor migrants (both seasonal and non-seasonal) number over 120 million. The enormous impact of this demographic transformation on China's socio-economic development has yet to be fully appreciated.

One of the most conspicuous effects of rural-urban labor migration is the huge flow of remittances⁴ from urban to rural areas, and from the coastal to the central and western regions (Ping and Zhan, 2005; 2005a,b). Remittances help to slow down the widening of the rural-urban income gap and regional disparity. Remittances occur largely because migration forms part of a strategy for 'rural livelihood diversification'. This means that rural households spread their earning activities over a range of on-farm and off-farm activities in order to minimize their risks and raise their returns to available labour.

In the poorest regions remittances help to pay for everyday items such as soap, matches, batteries and clothes. In middling and richer regions remittances have sustained rural consumption of manufactured durables. Demand for goods such as television sets, air conditioning units, washing machines and motorcycles have been particularly strong, and the rural demand for these items. Remittances help to stimulate the consumption of such durables by generating higher incomes. Moreover, unlike payment for work in farming which comes only after the harvest, cash from urban wages is more immediate and regular. Moreover, unlike payment for work in farming which comes only after the harvest, cash from remittances, generated by urban wages is more immediate and regular.

Rural to urban labour migration is often described in the migration studies literature and in policy documents as a strategy for household livelihood diversification and the outcome of family decision-making. Implicit in references to household migration strategies and community poverty alleviation is the notion that everyone gets a share of the rewards. We know relatively little about how the money is distributed. With regard to the distribution of remittances, there are at least three overlapping dimensions of inequality: the inequality between the migrant and the left behind, intergenerational inequalities, particularly discrimination against the aged, and inequalities along gender lines. Inequality between the

⁴ The term 'remittances' refers to the money that migrant workers send back to their communities of origin. Remittances are an integral feature of the migration system in China.

migrant and left behinds has been usefully examined by Carling (2005). Migrants may wish to keep a larger share of the remittance money for their own use or for use by themselves and a spouse rather than giving a larger share of the money to elderly parents or other 'left behind' family members.

MENTAL HEALTH AND DISTRIBUTION OF REMITTANCES

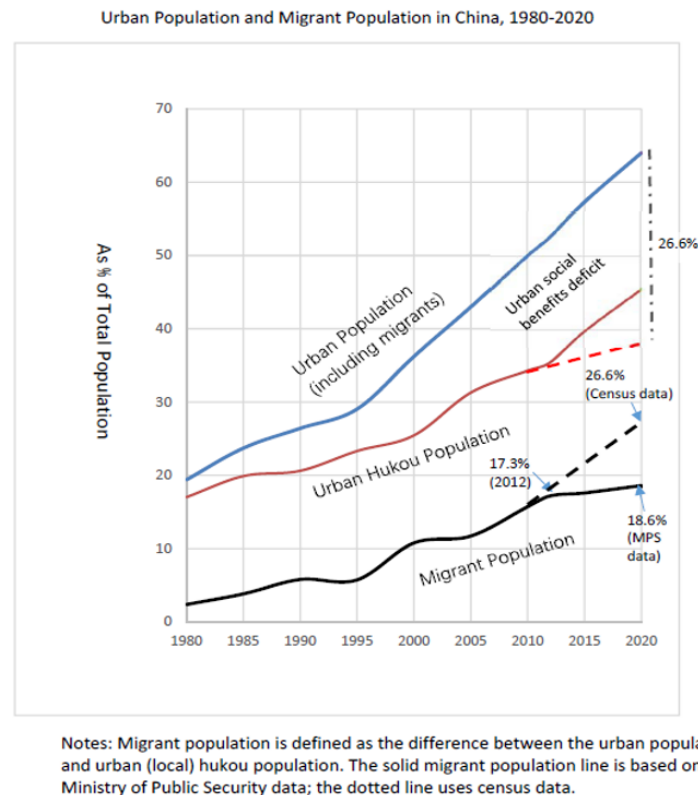
Many elderly parents are reluctant to make a claim on the earnings of migrant workers. Unless they are totally incapacitated, elders elect to 'work till they drop'. They use their labour to ensure that their sons can build a nice house, marry and establish themselves economically. At the individual level, many elderly people have lower levels of education than the general rural population and their labour in domestic work and farming tends not to generate immediate cash income. They tend to overlook the value of their own labour contributions to their families, and to see themselves as burdens and of little value. They therefore feel reluctant to demand a greater allocation of resources in compensation for their increased workloads. Elderly people who have lost a spouse, especially elderly women without sons, are often the most likely to face destitution on account of migration. At the individual level, many elderly people have lower levels of education than the general rural population and their labour in domestic work and farming tends not to generate immediate cash income. They tend to overlook the value of their own labour contributions to their families, and to see themselves as burdens and of little value. They therefore feel reluctant to demand a greater allocation of resources in compensation for their increased workloads.

As yet little research has been conducted on the household allocation of resources and power in circumstances where the wife remits and the husband is left behind. Some men may turn to drinking and gambling to escape loneliness and assert their masculinity. This is an important topic that requires future research.

In recent years in China there have been some television commercials that urge adult children to remember their parents. The duty of providing care for elderly parents falls mainly to the sons. The focus of policymakers and scholars on the role of remittances in rural livelihoods overlooks inter-generational and gender inequalities within families. There is therefore scope for policymakers and NGOs to pay more attention to the needs of those people whose work burdens increase on account of migration but whose claim on a share of the urban earnings is limited, in particular the elderly left behinds.

There has long been a dependence on migrant labor and many 'left behinds' in rural areas rely on the remittance sent by migrant workers. The agents of development continue to be perceived primarily as young men and women heading for urban areas. Migrant laborers have always been disadvantaged in that they were, until recently, denied access to health care, education for their children and freedom of movement. Despite being a part of China's huge industrial labor force, without a local (urban) *hukou*, migrant workers in the cities are unable to use most basic public services such as public education for their children, forcing migrant parents to leave their kids in the village and producing tens of millions of "split families" and

“left-behind children.” Reforms to the *hukou*⁵, a system implemented from the 1980s was designed to prevent mass migration from the rural areas to the urban ones have made rural-urban migration easier. But China’s *hukou* reform remains a major challenge to domestic migrants in China’s cities (World Bank, 2021.) Issues around the *hukou* pose many problems as China strives to build an integrated society of “common prosperity.” Urban social benefits were much more generous and predominantly progressive, while rural social benefits were minimal and consistently regressive. As Figure 3, shows “urban social benefits deficit”, based on the census figure is 26.6% in 2020 -- higher than the 18.5% derived from using data from the Ministry of Public Security.



Pull-push factors are important and contribute to increasing mobility of labor. Economic opportunity in urban areas is the main ‘pull factor’ to the rural population and improve their incomes, buying power, living standards and quality of life but government policies also provide a ‘push factor’.

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Many factors – including social, political and economic – can contribute to a person’s or a group’s experience of vulnerability, poverty, poor nutritional standards, lack of opportunities, low standard of life, and these ‘group-based’ inequalities intersect. A key challenge for achieving ‘leave no one behind’ is learning how to recognize and respond to the relationships between

⁵ China’s hukou system was introduced in 1958 as a modern means of population registration. In its current version, the *hukou* fulfills three main functions: the control of internal migration, the management of social protection, and the preservation of social stability. Recent reforms allow conversion of rural residence permits to urban locales.

these different factors and how they combine. A challenge is to find ways to address issues that can contribute to tackle inequality, discrimination and marginalization (Müller, 2013). Reform is complex, it requires coordination among various layers of government, calling for strong central government leadership, local revenue structure adjustments and reform of the agricultural land transfer system (Feng and Squires 2021). There has been a feminisation as well as an ageing of the population working in less profitable enterprises like agriculture (de Brauw, 2013, de Brauw et al., 2008; Peng, Wen, 2016). Once considered predominantly masculine, productive “outside” work, agriculture, including both crop farming and the raising of domestic livestock, came to be seen as “inside” work, associated and done in close conjunction with women’s other “inside”, “unproductive” work, like cooking, food preservation and storage.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Over the past two decades, China has seen a sharp reduction of poverty, but also a substantial increase of inequality. As the result of more than two decades of rapid economic growth in China, millions have been lifted out of poverty, resulting in an impressive decline in the poverty headcount ratio. However, economic growth has not benefited all segments of the population equally or at the same pace, causing income disparities to grow, resulting in a large increase in income inequality (Gao, 2010).

As Li [2015] says:

Since the late 1970s, China has experienced rapid economic growth and urbanization. For more than 20 years, the idea that economic growth can bring prosperity for all was deeply planted in most people’s mind. Various social problems were diagnosed as temporary and to be healed automatically once people had more money. However, many social issues became ever more obvious in the last several years: growing urban unemployment, mounting tension over the treatment of rural-urban migrant workers, poverty and inequality. There are signs showing that the basis of sustained economic growth – rich labor supply and stable social conditions will unavoidably suffer from the lagging social reforms targeting the inequality and vulnerability of migrant workers and the ‘left behinds’.

A challenge to researchers, to policy formulators and decision-makers is to find ways to address issues that can contribute to tackle inequality, discrimination and marginalization. Reform is complex (Zhan, 2005). It requires coordination among various layers of government, calling for strong central government leadership, local revenue structure adjustments and reform of the agricultural land transfer system. The new *Dynamic balance policy* on protection of cropland can lay the foundation for improving lives and livelihoods of villagers, including the ‘left behinds’. Policymakers and NGOs need however, to also look to interventions that go beyond invoking notions of family responsibility. China’s policymakers need to recognize the heavy workloads and economic self-reliance of the rural elderly by providing practical support for them in the form of credit, education and information. Such measures are both timely and urgent.

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