

## **Hollow Lives: Women Left Behind in Rural China**

HUIFANG WU AND JINGZHONG YE

*This paper explores the situation of women left behind in villages when men out-migrate for work and what it implies for gender relations in rural China. It is based on questionnaire survey data that covers 400 left-behind women and extensive interviews in 10 rural communities. It reveals how the women take on multiple family responsibilities including mainly family care and agricultural production, and how they maintain their marital relationships in the context of a long separation. The discussion argues that even though the women's unpaid work becomes visible due to the absence of men in family life, there is a reaffirmation and reinforcement of gender traditions; women are more solidified in the unpaid and low-paid field of work in this new era of rural social transition in China. Moreover, separated married life has made women more vulnerable. In the end, it points to the fact that rural women are experiencing a new and deeper form of exploitation of their labour. Thus they are among those paying a heavy price for the development in China.*

*Keywords:* labour migration, left-behind women, gender, care, agricultural production

### INTRODUCTION

Labour migration is considered one of the most significant social changes that has occurred in China since the 1980s, driven by both the rising demand for labour and by the rapid industrial development of the urban sector in the eastern provinces. Even though growth in labour migration experienced a deceleration in the global depression after 2008, the migration of labour has been increasing each year. In 2011, the estimated number of rural labourers that were employed in non-agricultural sectors reached 252.78 million, among which migrant labourers totalled 158.63 million (National Bureau of Statistics of PRC 2012). The rural

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labourers that migrate into cities for employment purposes have been given an identity as *nongmingong*, which means farmer workers, or in other words, rural labourers working in cities. This identity also implies that, unlike the whole family migration process in the modernization of many other countries, migrant labourers in China have usually left their families in the villages because of institutional and policy restrictions. In the early twentieth century, there were three policy institutions that inhibited the mobility of Chinese farmers: first, the labour policy associated with the planned economy; second, the grain policy; and third, the *Hukou*, the official form of identity based primarily on place of birth (Lei 2001). However, through policy changes in recent years, the first two institutions have already been eliminated, while the *Hukou* system still remains in place, preventing migrant labourers from availing themselves of public services in cities, such as equal medical service, housing and education for their children. Therefore, when *nongmingong* move into cities for employment, they can hardly afford a living space for their complete families, or access to education for their children. This implies that, as labour migration increases, more family members are left behind in rural areas: the children, wives and elderly parents who compose the bulk of the left-behind population (*liushourenkou*).<sup>1</sup> Among the left-behind population in villages, the women bear the brunt of the out-migration process since they carry on the family agriculture, family care and all the other responsibilities in the village when their husbands out-migrate to cities.

There are no official statistics on the number of left-behind women in China, but a general picture can be seen from some relative data. Usually, women are active in migration before they reach the age of 25, while among this group unmarried women are more prominent (Roberts and Connelly 2004). It has been estimated that the number of left-behind women might have reached about 47 million in China (Zhang 2006). Among the labour migrants in 2011, females made up 34.1 per cent, with 58.2 per cent of them being married (National Bureau of Statistics of PRC 2012). At the time, there were some media<sup>2</sup> reports about their 'husband-absent' lives and a metaphor of 'the new three mountains' (Chen et al. 2005) was commonly applied<sup>3</sup> to characterize this group, which means that their lives are full of heavy workloads, strong mental stress and a low sense of safety, as alone they have to deal with farming, child raising and care for the elderly. Recently, the media<sup>4</sup> has focused more on the topic of marital relationships, especially marital crisis. Along with the media reports, the issue of left-behind women has also received academic attention in China.

Studies on the issue of left-behind women appear not to be so rich among Chinese scholars, if compared to the vast amount of research on migration in China. Earlier discussions focused more on women and agriculture. For example, Gao (1994) argued that the relatively

<sup>1</sup> In China, the left-behind population are the people that stay behind in the village when migration takes place, which implies that they are left behind when some people go out.

<sup>2</sup> Reports from: 'Nongcun liushoufunü xintou you sanzudashan' ('Three Mountains on Rural Left-Behind Women'), published in *Banyuetan (China Comment)*; 'A Survey on Left-Behind Women and Children', published in *Zhongguofuyun (Chinese Women's Movement)*; 'Tizhixing guafu' ('Institutional Widow'), published in *Nanfengchuan (South Reviews)*; *Zhongguojingjizhoukan (China Economic Weekly)* and some popular Chinese websites, including 'Renminwang' ('People', [www.people.com](http://www.people.com)); 'The Issues of *Liushoufunü* Shall Receive Some Attention', published at 'Zhongguofunüwang' ('Women of China', [www.women.org.cn](http://www.women.org.cn)) supported by the All-China Women's Federation, 'Xinlangwang' ([www.sina.com](http://www.sina.com)); and so on.

<sup>3</sup> The metaphor of 'Three Mountains' comes from Mao Zedong's famous argument in his paper "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society" that was published on 1 December 1925, about the oppression of the Chinese people, which referred to feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism. The 'new three mountains' statement cited is used to describe the life challenges of left-behind women.

<sup>4</sup> There are many reports from Chinese mainstream news websites, such as [www.sohu.com](http://www.sohu.com), newspapers, such as *China Youth Daily* and *Women's Daily*, and magazines such as *Women of China*.

low income generated from agriculture put left-behind women in a worse position within their families; while others (Meng 1993) concluded that women's increased engagement in agriculture improved their position. Later on, there were also debates about whether agricultural feminization would lead to degradation of agricultural production (Fan and Cheng 2005; Huang 2008; Zhao et al. 2009) or not (Wu and Rao 2009). After that, the focus moved to marital and gender relations. It is suggested that even though men have migrated, they still have an important hold, via phone conversations, on family decisions, especially those related to farm production investments (Luo and Chai 2004; Zhou 2006, 84). In this way, left-behind women are still considered to be secondary in family decision-making (Zheng and Xie 2004; Sun 2006) and are under the double burdens of production work and housework and the double dependencies on men for economic and emotional support (Jiang and Zhou 2007). What is clear is that male labour migration reshapes the traditional gender structure in rural China (Li and Li 2005). On marital relations, research has revealed many risks between husbands and wives, including their different living environments (Luo and Chai 2004; Li and Li 2005; Xiang 2006), with increased chances of extramarital relationships (Chen 2006), and strong mental stress and sexual repression (Wang 2007). However, there are also studies that have argued for the positive effects on marriage, such as strong longing between couples (Zheng and Xie 2004, 122) and improved incomes and career prospects (Zhou et al. 2002, 72). More recent studies have disclosed a new issue about mental problems among left-behind women. It is argued that generally women whose husbands migrate have poorer mental states than non-left-behind women in terms of stress, pressure, loneliness and fear, when psychological scales on both groups are applied (Xu 2009, 2010). Some sociological research through discourse and case analysis has also reached a similar conclusion (Wu and Ye 2010).

The international body of research developed multidimensional and location specific findings on left-behind women at a much earlier time than Chinese scholars. Generally, male migration is considered a family strategy in which women are heavily involved, but it contributes to increased vulnerability of the women left behind in a broad range of ways (Gulati 1987; Rodenburg 2000, 245). For instance, in rural Lesotho, there is a heavy burden of domestic responsibility, with a variable degree of economic insecurity, on left-behind wives (Murray 1981, 153–5). In Nepal (Sherpa 2007) and India (Massey 2009), women's access to education, communications and health facilities still remains at a very low level; thus male out-migration has reinforced feminization of poverty, even food shortages, financial pressure and ill-health. In addition, men's migration has been found to facilitate the diffusion of venereal diseases and HIV/AIDS for women who stay behind (Kahn et al. 2003; Archana and Parveen 2005). Changes in marital relations are also noticeable in the literature. While some women have had better relationships with their husbands after short spells apart and a consequent lack of conflict, they still suffer from great strains on their marital relationships (Chant 1992, 63–5). An example is that of a case in Mexico, where male out-migration increased the propensity of men and women to commit infidelity, which led to marital instability and abandonment in some cases (McEvoy 2008).

Furthermore, gender relations and their changes due to separation are also a hotly debated issue, within which there are various arguments. Some scholars agree that the temporary absence of migrant men can sometimes facilitate greater autonomy for women (Heidi 2005; Massey 2009), but changes in women's socio-economic status are conditioned by many factors, including existing gender ideologies, the flexibility or rigidity of prescribed gender roles, family organization, the relevance of decisions, the distance and duration of men's migration and so on (Chant 1992, 63–5; Heidi 2005). Some others (Grawert 1998, 148; Ellis 2000, 155) hold the contrary view that women's real change in decision-making and gender

relations is diminished when men are absent for long periods of time. It cannot generally be assumed that women enjoy an increase in power within the household when husbands migrate, but that women have their own interests and actively try to realize them (Rodenburg 2000, 236–59). The significant improvement of women's position is considered primarily to be the result of general social and cultural change, although migration might have played an indirect, accelerating role in these processes (De Haas and Van Rooij 2010).

Chinese studies have depicted left-behind women in a more negative vulnerable position, in which they bear a heavy burden of agricultural production with strong mental pressure, and are living a life with multiple risks for their marriage as well. International studies pay more attention to the agency of women when they deal with male out-migration and the changes that occur within the process. This has provided some hints for further studies in China. Meanwhile, the social context of massive labour migration and rapid economic growth of China has not been combined well with the discussion of rural women and their situation when their husbands migrate; nor have the implications for rural social change been considered. This study explores these issues further.

Based on the first comprehensive research programme on left-behind populations in China, this study will attempt to broaden the scope of the ongoing discussion about left-behind women in the context of male out-migration from rural to urban areas. The analysis seeks to answer four questions. (1) Why do the men migrate and the women stay behind? (2) In what ways have women's roles in family care provision and agricultural production been changed? (3) How are marital relations changed during long separations? (4) What do all these features of left-behind women's lives imply for women and gender relations in rural China?

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this research comes from two sources. The first data set was collected in 2007. Five top labour-sending provinces in China were selected for questionnaire survey, including Anhui, Henan, Hunan, Jiangxi and Sichuan.<sup>5</sup> In each province, a county was selected with either a long history of labour migration or a large number of labour migrants. In each county, two townships, one comparatively richer and the other poorer, were chosen. Finally, one administrative village was chosen in each township. Altogether, ten administrative villages were designated for the research.

In the 2007 study, left-behind women were defined as those who have stayed in the village while their husbands have worked outside the rural community as migrant labourers for more than 6 months accumulatively per year. The upper age limit of a woman left behind was defined as 60.<sup>6</sup> It is understandable that random sampling is almost impossible in this situation, as there are no official statistics on this group of people. Furthermore, it is difficult for researchers as outsiders to judge who is left behind or not in the villages. Therefore, some local farmers were employed to provide identification of and introductions to left-behind

<sup>5</sup> According to a calculation based on the fifth population census of China, the five provinces chosen are the top five provinces with the highest numbers of left-behind women (Zhou 2006, 72–3).

<sup>6</sup> Six months is the cut-off for defining long-term labour migration. This is because there are some temporary male migrants in villages in the key farming seasons. When farmers are asked what 'long-term migration' means, half a year is usually reported to be the minimum. Therefore, women whose husbands migrate for 6 months and longer are included as the research subjects. As there are three groups of left-behind people in rural China (children, women and the elderly) and as those people above 60 years of age are widely accepted as elderly, here the age cap for left-behind women is defined at 60.

*Table 1.* The age distribution of sample of left-behind women

<i>Age cohort</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Frequency (%)</i>
≤25	26	6.5
26–30	26	6.5
31–35	90	22.5
36–40	139	34.8
41–45	80	20.0
≥46	39	9.7

women. In total, 400 left-behind women were included in the analysis. The age distribution of the sample can be seen in Table 1. In order to detect any changes over time, a comparative examination was applied to the situation of left-behind women before and after their husbands migrated for work. To make this possible, only those women whose husbands had migrated for less than 10 years after being married were selected, since there would be many factors that would influence their lives in longer-term migration. Therefore, the sample for comparison comprised 159 women in total. In addition, a modest comparison was made between left-behind and non-left-behind women, whose husbands stayed at home in the village for most of the year.

In the research communities, labourers mainly out-migrate to the industrial cities in south-eastern China (see Figure 1) and are engaged in various employment sectors, mainly manufacturing, construction, services and small businesses. Every year, most migrants return at least once. Sixty-eight per cent of men migrate for 10–12 months per year, which means that they return home once, usually during the Spring Festival, and stay at home for differing lengths of time, from 2 weeks to 2 months. The frequency of men's return depends to some extent on the distance from the places of migration to their village. It is evident that those who migrate within their home municipality make more frequent returns than those who migrate out of their home municipality, especially those who migrate out of their home province. Normally, migrants within the home municipality return every one or two months and migrants in the home province return during busy farming seasons, while those who migrate out of their home province will return only for the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year.

Another source of data is the qualitative materials that were collected through semi-structured interviews in the same villages in 2007 and 2008. The interviewees were mainly left-behind women, but also included some other important relative actors in the women's lives, such as their children and parents-in-law, non-left-behind women and some women directors<sup>7</sup> in villages.

The comparison of results concerning the physical health and psychological feelings of women, including the comparison between left-behind and non-left-behind women and the temporal comparison between 'before' and 'after' husbands migrate, is shown in Tables 2 and 3. The former comparison does not show much difference. Based on our observations and discussions with local village cadres, those married men who stay in the village with their wives usually have either a bad health condition that impedes their migration, or they have an off-farm business or employment in the local area. Among the 200 families of

<sup>7</sup> The women director is the member of the village committee who is mainly responsible for works relative to women and children in the village.

Figure 1 Labour migration from the research provinces

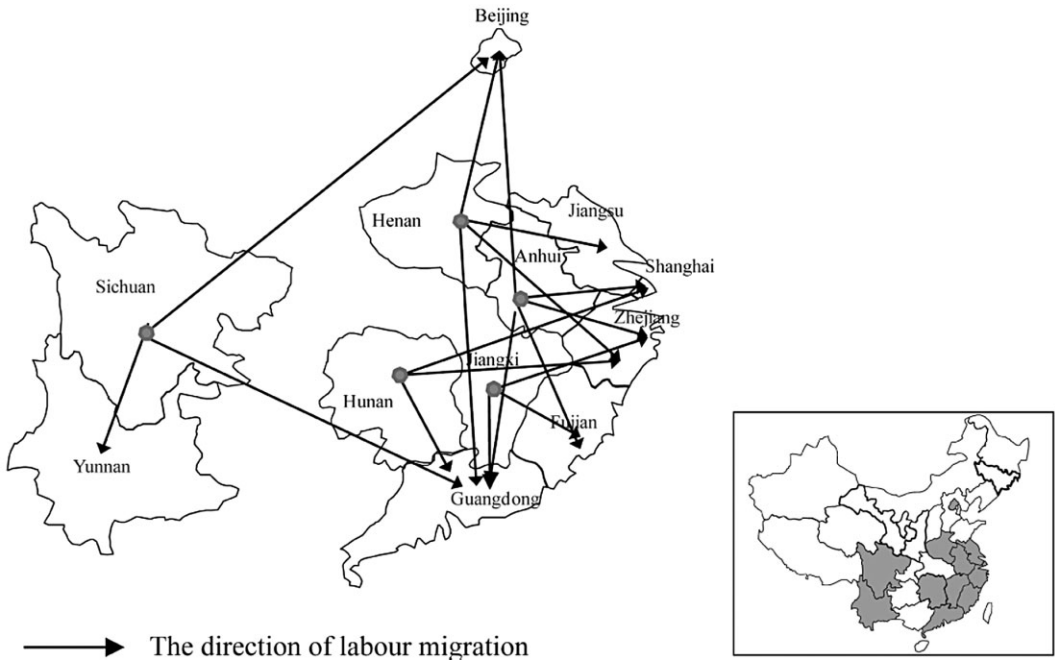


Table 2. A comparison of the self-reported health conditions by left-behind and non-left-behind women (%)

	Very good	Good	Not bad	Bad	Very bad
Left-behind women	16.5	29.3	23.0	29.5	1.8
Non-left-behind women	14.0	27.5	26.5	29.5	2.5

Table 3. A comparison of the self-reported negative emotions of women (%)

Women's emotions	Gudan (loneliness)	Fanzao (dysphoria)	Jiaolü (worries)	Yayi (depression)	Haipa (being afraid)
Before husbands migrate	3.9	14.8	21.9	8.4	3.9
After husbands migrate <sup>a</sup>	66.9	54.1	52.2	38.2	29.9
Left-behind women	63.2	54.2	50.6	39.0	23.7
Non-left-behind women	18.5	60.5	40.5	40.0	6.5

<sup>a</sup> The sample for comparison between before and after husbands' migration is 159. In order to give a full picture, another comparison is made between the total of 400 left-behind women and 200 non-left-behind women.



non-left-behind women, four groups appeared: 55 couples engaged in pure farm work; three husbands who had lost their work capacity due to illnesses, while their wives were farmers; eight couples engaged in pure off-farm work; and the remaining couples with multiple jobs that included both on- and off-farm work, such as small business owners, drivers or construction workers and so on. The family income of the last two groups was usually higher than the first two groups. There were also a few exceptional cases. For example, in the second group, there were three low-income families in which there were sick husbands who could no longer work.

The yearly income that migrant husbands brought home also ranged from less than 1,000 Yuan<sup>8</sup> to more than 10,000 Yuan. The reasons why women felt worried or depressed included husbands' security, young children's schooling, adult children's marriage and the effects on family financial pressures, heavy workloads and so on. This shows that the migrant and non-migrant families are in very different socio-economic situations. Therefore, a comparative study between them may reflect such differences, instead of the actual impacts of migration. The temporal comparison before and after migration, even though it shows sharp changes when husbands migrate, must also be treated carefully, since the influential factors on the living conditions of left-behind women may involve far more than just migration, especially when the time span is long. For instance, the number and age of children and the health condition of their parents (in-law) determine the care burden on left-behind women, while the area of land to be farmed and the income level of their migrant husbands will affect their feelings of financial anxiety and domestic worries.

However, this is not to say that left-behind women are living happy and easy lives. All the jobs previously shared between men and women are transferred on to the women's shoulders when the men out-migrate. In the following discussion, we will discuss, through a gender perspective, the following features of women's lives after the men have departed: how left-behind women have taken on the family care responsibilities and agricultural production work, and how their marital relationships are maintained in the context of spatial separation from each other.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### *Narratives: Why Do the Men Migrate and the Women Stay Behind?*

When women were asked 'why do men decide to out-migrate?' almost all of their answers contained a reference narrative about 'money': 'everything needs money, children's schooling, housing, medical services, dowries, fertilizer and so on – he must go out to make money', or 'for making money; there is no other way out'. It is a self-evident answer that men out-migrate to make money, or to make more money. This has been seen as a process of 'commodification of life' (Ye 2011), where the imperative to earn money to buy the things that modern life requires becomes dominant. Rural society was never a purely agricultural society before the 1930s. Agriculture and non-agricultural businesses or employment coexisted to make a family livelihood possible for Chinese farmers with a small plot of land (Gan 1994). During wartime and later during the time of the communes, this kind of livelihood structure was destroyed. In the 1980s, the innovation and opening up policy provided a good platform for the development of rural industries (*xiangzhen qiye*), and also disclosed the

<sup>8</sup> The Yuan is the Chinese currency: 1 Yuan equals about US\$0.16.

chapter of labour migration: one stream of labour moves to local industries, while the other migrates to cities. However, since the late 1990s, rural industries have almost all collapsed and, increasingly, rural labour has had to migrate out of the area to find an alternative source of income (Ying et al. 2006). In other words, when there are such strong needs for a cash income, and when rural society cannot provide sufficient employment opportunities, people have to out-migrate to earn money.

However, when people migrate, their families cannot. As explained earlier, the *Hukou* system is the sole source of rights for all Chinese people. In recent years, although the Chinese government has issued some innovations in the *Hukou* system<sup>9</sup> to allow labour migrants to enjoy some public services in cities, these seemingly helpful policies have not initiated *de facto* changes regarding migration and left-behind populations.<sup>10</sup> In addition, migrants usually cannot afford the high living cost in cities for a whole family. This also implies that the labour reproduction process is divided between rural and urban areas (Shen 2006). The wages of migrants only cover the reproduction of their own labour in cities, while their children's education and care of the elderly, house renovations and so on are achieved in rural areas. In this context, many women stay in the villages to take on the care and management of such jobs.

According to the narratives, the women stay behind when the men migrate, or they stop their own migration activities and return to their home villages, more for child care than for the care of the elderly. Care is highly culturally embedded, and cultural norms determine who needs care, who should fulfil the needs for care and how (Himmelweit 2005). The explanation of why women but not men stay is embedded in the culture of gender relations and the patrilocal marriage pattern that is still widely practiced in rural China. This is shown in the women's narratives. They almost always state that the principal reason for their staying behind is 'for our children'. In the traditional familism culture, children are the core of family interests. Therefore, caring for children is always the top priority for all rural couples (Li and Chen 1993). Culturally, women's roles are more as mothers and daughters, whose main responsibility is care provision, while men's roles are as both fathers and producers. When a woman is married into her husband's family, she will achieve her position by playing good roles as wife, mother and daughter-in-law in her new family. Therefore, when the family needs more cash income, it is assumed that the men will out-migrate to earn money, while the women are the ones who should stay behind. It has become an invisible agreement between men and women. This is a fundamental change from the traditional gender division of labour, in which the men become pure wage earners and the women become family care providers and farm labourers.

<sup>9</sup> Two *Yihaowenjian* (No. 1 Documents) were issued by the Chinese Central Authority in the years 2009 (there is a part about facilitating labour migration) and 2013 (there is a part about migrants' *Hukou* registration in small-to-medium cities and towns, and about addressing the issue of left-behind children, women and elderly people).

<sup>10</sup> The *Hukou* registration for migrants is open only in small cities and towns such as county towns, with the precondition that they have stable employment and stable housing, and all the necessary insurances. According to the survey by the National Bureau of Statistics of PRC in 2011, 73.8 per cent of the migrant labours in the construction industry did not have contracts with their employers, 83.3 per cent of them did not have unemployment insurance and 92 per cent did not have medical insurance. Only 0.7 per cent of migrants have bought apartments in their working cities; the remaining 99.3 per cent either stay in group dormitories or working sheds, or rent tiny rooms for 'housing'. In this chronic situation, we can hardly expect dynamic changes in migration and left-behind populations due to small innovations in the *Hukou* system.



*Aggravation of Care Responsibilities for Women*

Care is a critical but neglected area in the studies of labour migration and left-behind populations in China. Current research on migration mainly focuses on the migration system and on the impacts of migration on cities and villages (Cai 1996; Li 1996; Bai and He 2002; Sheng 2007; Ma and Wang 2011), while the studies on left-behind populations usually focus more on the negative impacts of the situation. Some studies claim that the increased volume of non-parental childcare has negative effects on child health status (Liu and Dong 2010), and that there is a tension between the demands of paid work and childcare for mothers during China's rural economic transformation (Cook and Dong 2011), but the care-giving tasks required of left-behind women are seldom addressed. In rural China, care is considered a family responsibility, especially as the state is absent in the reproduction of migrant labour. This has exacerbated the weight of domestic responsibilities in providing care in rural society. The traditional Chinese gender ideology dictates that women be the principal providers of childcare and eldercare, as implied by their roles as sisters, daughters (in-law), mothers and grandmothers. In this section, we focus on two aspects regarding left-behind women – care responsibilities and variations – and the pressure and tensions derived from care-giving.

*Care responsibilities.* Among all the 400 left-behind women, 43.5 per cent of them take care of one child, 35.5 per cent take care of two children, and 4.3 per cent take care of three children or more. Some women have experienced several rounds of migration–return–migration in tune with the different stages of childcare and eldercare. About half (48.6 per cent) of the left-behind women have migrated at least once, but when they become pregnant, they return home for delivery and baby care. Yue's story is typical in this case. She became a left-behind woman because of her gendered disadvantages in the labour market – her family would not get enough support if she stayed in the city of Chengdu while her husband returned.

Yue is a 34-year-old woman in Huba Village, Sichuan Province. She started her migration when she was 16 years old. At the age of 20, she married another migrant from Huba Village. After marriage, they migrated together to Chengdu City. When she became pregnant, she returned to the village. She took care of her son for 2 years and out-migrated again, leaving her son with his maternal grandmother. When the boy was in his third year of primary school, she found that he was not performing well in his studies. She had a discussion with her husband about a solution. The husband said, 'We cannot go home together. We are making money for our son's future. If he grows up with nothing, everything would be in vain. Either you sacrifice, or I.' In the end, Yue returned home. However, due to her long-duration migration experience, she planned to migrate again when her son finished high school. Then, she and her husband would make money together for his university study.

There are also differentiations of care responsibilities among left-behind women. Except for caring for their own children, it is common that women aged from 40 to 55 may also have to provide care for their parents or parents-in-law. A new phenomenon occurring in rural China is that more and more young mothers are leaving their babies with their mothers-in-law, as they prefer to stay in the migrant labour market longer, especially when the mothers-in-law are 'young' enough. Age is an important qualification that influences young mothers' decisions on whether to leave their children and continue migration. As the new generation of migrants intends to migrate for a longer time, more and more young women continue

migration when they stop breastfeeding, which lasts for a shorter and shorter time. Rural women normally marry at the age of 20 and will have their first child within 2 years, so it is understandable that a woman has grandchildren when she is around 45 years old. In this situation, a young mother would leave her child(ren) with the grandmother. Therefore, some left-behind women carry the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren. This is an intergenerational care transfer in families. The grandmothers not only provide care, but also financial support from the income of their migrant husbands. It also implies that when a woman completes the responsibility of care for her own children while her husband migrates, she has to carry on a new care responsibility for her grandchildren while her own children migrate.

*Pressure and tension from care work.* Caring is not an easy job; it is the cause of both mental pressure and labour fatigue for left-behind women. Since the fathers are absent, the women have to be responsible for everything that happens regarding those in receipt of care. Some of their narratives expressed anxiety about whether the children would behave well enough in the family and at school: 'I am very afraid that if my son does not get a good score in his exams, my husband will complain and even blame me. It is the reason that I am home to take good care of him and to educate him well. How can I face my husband if I didn't do it well enough?' The absence of the fathers has made it more difficult for women to educate boys. The greatest pressure on the women is when a child gets seriously sick. On the one hand, they don't tell their husbands what has happened; on the other hand, they have to take the children to hospital and arrange all the other family matters carefully. Especially during the busy farming season, the tension between farm work and care-giving becomes much more serious for the women. If they are under intense work pressure, even though someone else may help, they may ignore their children or vent their anger on them. Zou's story presents a picture of the kind of pressure and worries that are endured by left-behind women.

Zou is a 42-year-old woman in Changping Village, Hunan Province. Her husband started his labour migration when their second child was born, 13 years ago. From then on, she took care of the family all by herself in the village. She is kept busy all of the time. She takes care of the two children, and farms 2 *mu* of rice paddy, 0.5 *mu* of dry land and 0.2 *mu* of mountain slope with pine trees. When the two children were very little, and when she went to the fields, she often locked them in at home or took them with her. Once, when he was 2 years old, the younger child fell into a paddy field full of water. Zou was very scared by that accident, but never told her husband. Her husband does not earn a good income, so she never hires farm labourers for help. Moreover, she also raises pigs and chickens to relieve the financial burdens on her family. Zou looks very thin and weak. She often feels dizzy, has a fast heartbeat, and suffers from swollen eyes and backaches, but she seldom goes to see a doctor.

*Reaffirmation of feminization of care responsibilities.* The male rural-urban migration has transferred all the care responsibilities in the household on to the women who stay behind, which reaffirms the ideal of 'feminization of responsibility and obligation' (Chant 2006) in the field of care. This has robbed the left-behind women of opportunities in the labour market and with regard to personal satisfaction and choices, and has engaged them in many time-consuming unpaid jobs in their households. The women themselves also accept and internalize the fact that care is inevitably their responsibility, due to their unequal position with men in the migrant labour market, and they consider that it is the only way to live up to the

customary norms of 'mothers' to bring up their children and to fulfil the filial piety responsibilities to their parents-in-law. As a result, due to the mounting responsibilities and intensifying onerous labour tasks, women are paying a high price in terms of their personal health and well-being. The absence of their husbands also deprives them of the most important source of psychological comfort. On many occasions, when they need emotional support from their husbands, a care deficit also occurs. In the social context of male migration, as the state is absent in providing any care resources in rural areas, and as employers of migrants do not pay for labour reproduction costs, women who stay behind are taking on the entire consequences and the full onus of care. This presents a picture of left-behind rural women paying an unequal cost for the urban and industrial development of China.

#### *Agricultural Production: The New Gender Division of Labour*

It is evident that when men migrate, the labour division in rural families changes dramatically, as women shift from assistants to main functionaries in agricultural production. Before migration, the men normally undertook the main work in farming, and their jobs involved the technology of farming and all the heavy work. The women were considered assistants in agriculture even though they did not carry out fewer tasks than men, and nor did they have less agricultural knowledge than men. Traditionally, they undertook home yard production such as poultry and pig raising, and weaving. This particular gender division of peasant labour is described in China as 'men farming, women weaving' (*nangengnüzhí*). When the men left for migrant jobs, the women took on all the production work, especially the agricultural work, which implies a major change in the division of labour. This is described by another epithet: 'men workers, women farmers' (*nangongnǚgēng*). The survey shows that 83.3 per cent of left-behind women undertake agricultural work, and 7.3 per cent of them also have off-farm jobs. Even though their farm size ranges from 2 to 7 *mu*<sup>11</sup> (orchards not included), the local crop rotation system and multiple cropping makes women's workloads very heavy and often beyond their physical capacity, especially during busy farming seasons.

Labour shortages have been the most frequent problem that left-behind women have to face. The survey results indicate that 63 per cent of left-behind women experience this problem regularly. Labour shortages have three implications for left-behind women. The first, as many women reported, is that their lives are typified by 'endless labour work', so that they always have a sense of being pressured by a combination of housework and farming work. The second is that some types of farming jobs are just too heavy for women, especially carrying heavy loads such as fertilizer, manure or pesticide-spraying equipment. Even though the production material suppliers usually deliver the fertilizer to the main road alongside the fields, the women have to move it on to their lands. Many of them carry packages that weigh 25–50 kilograms each. The third implication is concerned with their disadvantage in labour exchange in busy seasons. Labour exchange is common in rural China, but male labour usually does not want to exchange with female labour, nor are women willing to ask a man for help, in order to avoid any gossip in the villages. After the men's migration, 24.1 per cent of the left-behind women's time spent on farming increased *greatly* (*dada zengjia*), while another 30.9 per cent reported that their time on farming had increased *generally* (*zengjia*). In addition, 50 per cent said that on top of the increased burden of farm work, their time spent on housework had increased as well. Table 4 shows the busy daily life of a left-behind woman in Huba Village, Sichuan Province, in April 2007, when it was not yet the busy season. Her

<sup>11</sup> The *mu* is the Chinese measurement of land area: 15 *mu* = 1 hectare.

Table 4. A day in the life of a left-behind woman in Huba Village, Sichuan Province

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
5:30	Get up	14:00	Cook and eat lunch with mother-in-law
6:00	Feed the fish and oxygenate the fish ponds	15:00	Feed the fish
9:00	Feed the sows	15:30	Weed and apply pesticides in orange orchards
9:30	Clean the floor and do tidying up work	19:00	Return home, cook and feed the sows
10:00	Breakfast (mother-in-law cooks)	19:30	Dinner, and do tidying up work
10:30	Mow grasses for sows and fish	21:00	Go to bed
12:00	Return home and rest		

Table 5. A comparison of workloads between left-behind and non-left-behind women

	<i>Number in sample</i>	<i>Working hours on farm per day in busy season (mean ± standard deviation)</i>	<i>Working hours on farm per day in slack season (mean ± standard deviation)</i>
Non-left-behind women	200	8.94 ± 2.67	1.45 ± 0.69
Left-behind women (total)	400	11.18 ± 1.56	2.74 ± 1.11
Left-behind women whose husbands were away for 10 to 12 months	177	11.34 ± 1.21	2.95 ± 1.24

husband was working as a construction worker in Yunnan Province, while her 11-year-old daughter was studying in a boarding school in the town.

A comparison of farm working time between left-behind and non-left-behind women also adds clarity to the workload difference. As can be seen in Table 5, the mean time that left-behind wives spend on farm work is 2.24 hours per day longer during the busy season than that of non-left-behind women, which is a major difference. For a subgroup of left-behind women whose husbands did not return in the busy farm seasons,<sup>12</sup> their work time is even longer. It is also evident that the standard deviation in each group is also large. This can be explained by the heterogeneity of each group. Among the left-behind women, 16.7 per cent do not farm, and 17 baby-feeding women (5.1 per cent of the total farming women) participate in farming as assistants for their parents-in-law. Among the non-left-behind women, 10 per cent of them do not farm at all, while a few of them farm far larger areas of land than others. For example, in Henan Province, a couple has been farming 40 *mu* of land for 10 years. Previous research on Chinese left-behind women concluded that there was only a small difference in the working hours between the left-behind and non-left-behind women (Jacka 2012). However, that study was based in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, which is located in north-west China and has a dry, cold climate, which determines that there is

<sup>12</sup> They migrate for more than 10 months every year, and return only when it is Spring Festival time, or when there is no job in their usual place of work. For example, construction workers usually return when the weather is too cold for construction work.

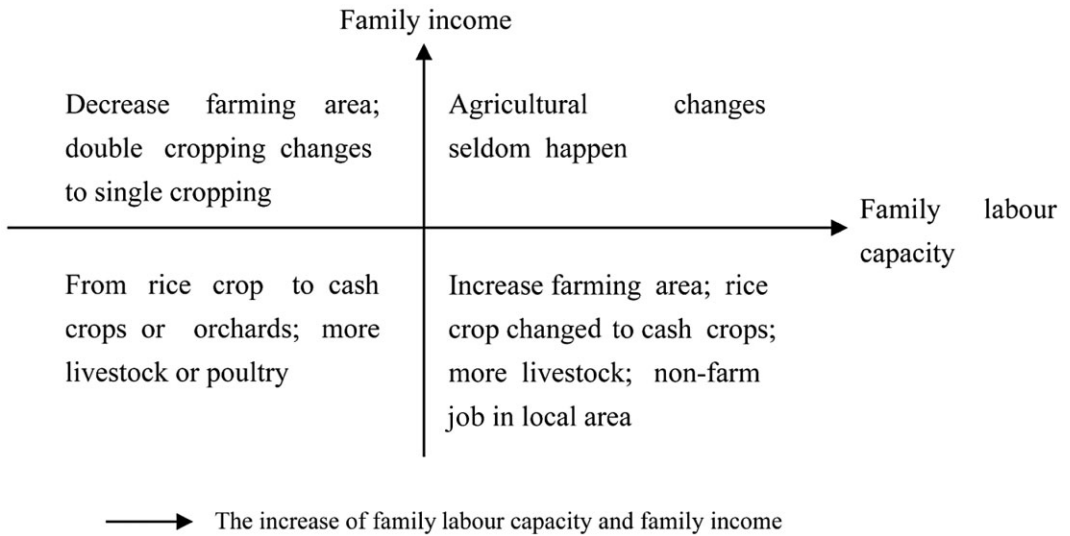
only one farming season for potatoes and wheat or maize. Even though the statistics for working hours in this study do not include the unpaid housework, they are still comparable with the previous research if we combine them with the increase in housework for 50 per cent of the left-behind women. The five provinces where this research was conducted are all located in the south of China (as can be seen in Figure 1), with warm and humid climates allowing for more than one season for crops such as rice and vegetables, together with orchard fruit production that is far more labour-intensive than potatoes or maize. So, the system and seasonality of farming are the most important determining factors in the change in the left-behind women's workload.

In this situation, the women have to get somebody to help them or else develop some other strategies to relieve their unbearable workloads. Traditionally, children and the older generations are helpers. In the research region, 11.6 per cent of the left-behind children often help with farm work after school or during holidays (Ye and Pan 2011),<sup>13</sup> and 26.8 per cent of the parents (in-laws) will help with farming. However, due to the massive out-migration of labour, it gets more and more difficult to obtain help from the network of neighbours and relatives. In this situation, the labour work becomes subject to marketization. In the research area, 33.5 per cent of the left-behind women obtain farm help by hiring labour and machine work, especially for ploughing, transplanting seedlings and harvesting. In Henan Province, even rice transplanting has become marketized into well-organized teams. This is a signal of the loosening of kinship ties and other social networks due to labour migration. Above all, it presents a dramatic change in farming operations, in which labourers are being marketed and farming is being mechanized, while the informal mutual help system is disappearing, all in the context of the long-term out-migration of village labour.

Left-behind women have also tried to change the style of farming to resolve their labour problems. Family income, especially the husbands' migration income, and family labour capacity are the two influential factors for this strategy (as shown in Figure 2). If the income from remittances is enough for family maintenance and the women feel that they have enough household labour capacity, changes will seldom happen in the farming arrangements. Due to differing circumstances in these two factors, however, women have employed a variety of strategies. Some women (12.4 per cent) have ceased raising chickens and livestock, or sericulture and fish culture, which implies that the self-provision of meat/proteins is almost totally shifted to the market. Some women have changed their farming activities in order to reduce their workload. Forty-seven women have loaned out their farmland at a very low rent, while 16 women are farming more land in order to gain more income. Moreover, a more common practice is to reduce the two-crop seasons to one – such as changing rice–wheat rotation to a rice crop only in Henan Province, or changing from double rice seasons to just one season in Hunan Province. Less labour-intensive tree plantations have also been established in some villages to replace labour-intensive crop production. The feminization of agricultural labour in China does not necessarily result in the 'deskilling of agricultural populations' (Croll and Huang, 1997), but great changes are forced on to the style of Chinese agriculture production by the extensive out-migration of labour.

<sup>13</sup> The research by Ye and Pan was conducted in the same villages. Children are not always available for help. Due to the school-mapping policy in rural China, schools at the village level have been closed and merged with centralized schools, which are usually located in the township seat. Therefore, children leave their villages in the early morning and come back at dusk. Some children, especially middle school students, stay in boarding schools and only come home at weekends.

Figure 2 How income and labour capacity influence family farming changes by left-behind women



*Marital Relationships: Long Separations*

Marital relations depend on living together, intimate communication and interaction for their maintenance and survival. However, left-behind women and their husbands have none or little of these factors in their lives. They live separately in contrasting environments (cities and villages), communicate via telephone calls and worry about each other. About half of the husbands (44.3 per cent) return once a year, at the time of the Chinese Spring Festival, and one quarter of them return twice a year. Fifty per cent of the left-behind women have been living a separated married life for more than 5 years. It is interesting to question how marital relationships are maintained under such difficult conditions.

*Telephone contact.* The telephone is the main tool of communication among left-behind women and their husbands, mainly facilitated by the widely available cheap phone services in China. Almost all (98 per cent) of the women keep in contact with their husbands by phone. About half (48.3 per cent) of them talk by phone once a week, and 14.3 per cent of them talk once every 2–4 weeks. An outstanding feature is that 7 per cent of the left-behind women talk with their husbands only once a month or even less frequently. Furthermore, most (78 per cent) of the women talk with their husbands for less than 10 minutes in each call, which is a very short duration for personal and emotional contact. On the phone, the three most frequent topics of conversation are their children (54.5 per cent), agricultural production matters (20.1 per cent) and mutual health concerns (16.6 per cent). They talk much more about their children than anything else that happens in their lives, since the husbands have migrated in order to provide financial support for their children, and the women have stayed behind to provide care for the children. The children are the focus of their concern and their education is the rationale for all their effort and struggles. Their mutual health concerns are usually expressed in a short sentence such as ‘Please take care of yourself.’ In rural China, most couples do not need language to communicate with each other in everyday life, the normal process being described as ‘tacit understandings’ (Fei 1998, 41–2).



As one woman said, 'we rural people are not used to talking about our emotions to others, even to our husbands'. However, the husbands' migration breaks off the physical space for 'tacit understanding', and they have to verbalize everything. Some women even feel lost for words with their husbands on the phone.

*Sexual repression and harassment.* Another important aspect of marriage is the sexual relationship. In rural China, it is still taboo to talk about sex, but the left-behind women expressed their feelings indirectly during the interviews. The women used metaphors such as 'warming up the bed' or 'warming up feet' to express their sexual repression. They also feel upset when talking about their marriage, as one interviewee said: 'Love is something for urban people, rural people's life is only about *guorizi* [living a life]. We do all that we can to bring up our children.' The left-behind women pay careful attention to their interactions with all men in the village in order to avoid any gossip. They will lock their house gates when it is dark. They will not ask for a man's help, except for their close relatives. Even then, sexual harassment happens here and there. For example, drunk widowers sometimes knock on their gate late at night, and male villagers visit them and talk about sex or even urinate in front of them. Cases of sexual assaults on left-behind women were also reported in the interviews. However, the culture of '*jiachou buke waiyang*' ('wash your dirty linen at home') in rural China prevents women from telling anyone when such things happen; nor do they approach any government authorities for protection, as they think that no organization or authority would help them.

*The strong sense of loneliness and worry.* It is evident that there is a sharp rise in the feeling of loneliness by women due to the migration of their husbands (see Table 3). During interviews, many women described their lives with narratives such as 'cold', 'hollow' and 'lonely'. They expressed in many ways that the biggest effects of men's migration on their lives was 'the creation of a lonely life' for both of them. A village cadre in Sichuan Province, where the level of labour migration is high said, 'women in our village do not enjoy warmth from husbands in their life'. Compared to the benefits of the family as a whole, men and women consider their individual needs as the least important.

The left-behind women are not sure, but are constantly worried about whether their husbands have behaved well with regard to sexual or extramarital affairs and relationships in cities. The only thing that affords them relief is that the husbands bring money home regularly. According to a news report,<sup>14</sup> some migrants have organized their lives as '*linshi fuqi*' ('casual couples') in their workplaces, but return home regularly and support their own families respectively. The casual partnership provides both physiological and psychological comfort for the migrants, but both parties in the relationship feel guilty with regard to their own spouses. Moreover, some studies also show that male migrants have become a big group of sexual services consumers (Li 2011) and the largest group in China that has been infected by sexually transmitted diseases (Xue 2007). These transgressions threaten the marriages and health of left-behind women.

Among the 400 interviewed left-behind women, 33 of them reported that their migrant husbands had had an extramarital relationship, and in two cases abandonment had occurred. All of the women hate it if their husbands have affairs with other women, and they try their best to keep their marriages in good order. The case of Luo represents one strategy employed

<sup>14</sup> The report '*Linshi fuqi xianzhuang diaocha*' ('Survey on Temporary Couples') was published in *Xiandaijinbao* (*Modern Jin Newspaper*) on 13 May 2013.

by left-behind women to maintain their marriages. In this situation, the network of migrants from the same village or family plays the role of information provider. However, there are also some women who tolerate infidelity as they are afraid of divorce. In China, when a woman gets married, she cannot take the land user right with her, especially when she is not married in her home village. This means that she does not have land in her husband's family. When this is combined with the widely applied patrilocal system in rural China, a woman will become homeless if she divorces, and she might have to bring up two or more children. Therefore, even though the left-behind women are worried about the extramarital affairs of their husbands, they never think of divorce and most have to tolerate the situation.

Luo is a 44-year-old left-behind woman in Henan Province. Her husband has 20 years of migration history. In 2006, her husband was working in Beijing as a construction worker. In June, Luo heard from her sister-in-law, who was also working in Beijing, that her husband had had an affair with a woman migrant from Anhui Province. She was mad at this news. She went to see her husband immediately and quarrelled with him. She cried a lot. Later on, with pressure from her sister-in-law and other relatives, her husband admitted his fault and promised to behave well in the future. Luo does not worry about anything to do with her husband, except for the extramarital affairs, but she never thinks of asking for a divorce. She said, 'How can I live my life if I am divorced?'

In contrast, it is important to note that 24.2 per cent of the left-behind women felt that their marital relationship had got better after their separation due to migration. As discussed above, the emotional function and physiological satisfaction of the left-behind women in marriages are all weakened. So why do a quarter of them think that their marriages are even better? What maintains the stability of marriage? One survey shows that 34.9 per cent of the migrant husbands think that their wives are contributing more to the family than themselves and, 44.3 per cent of them think that they contribute equally (Ye and Wu 2008, 284–97). Between the left-behind women and their husbands, there is an exchange of responsibility involving two kinds of resources: cash income from the husbands and household responsibilities undertaken by the wives. The two kinds of resources are not only irreplaceable, but are also vital for family livelihood and welfare. More importantly, because the men are away from home, they become more aware of the hardship that their wives experience and also of the value of their contribution to their families. That is, women's unpaid work becomes visible to men. This is a significant shift from the usual argument that women's roles are focused on the house and their housework, and that this work is invisible to men and to society as a whole (Benston 1969).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

'The men migrate and the women stay behind' implies a new gender division of labour in rural China. It is intended to maximize family welfare and to sustain family livelihoods in rural areas in the macro-context of rapid economic development and social transition in China. Following the traditional ideology of differentiated gender roles, the women stay behind in the village as household care-givers and agricultural labourers. However, this not only places the women under the burden of heavy physical work, but also under intense pressure with regard to appropriate care provision and agricultural production. Due to massive continuing out-migration, the traditional forms of mutual labour exchange in the village are disappearing, while commoditized labour and mechanization are developing as replacements

in farming. This has made it more difficult for the left-behind women to obtain help, and it has increased their financial needs for hiring labourers. The spatial separation, in which husbands and wives cannot live together, has also created among the left-behind women a strong sense of loneliness, together with sexual repression and the risk of being sexually harassed. All these present a picture of the deteriorating personal well-being of the left-behind women.

This family strategy can also be understood as a 'livelihood in a stretched space', which means that men and women are spatially stretched out, and family livelihoods are adapted through the swapping of gender roles to accommodate men's out-migration. All the family responsibilities and obligations, except for income earning, are transferred on to the women's shoulders, and some of the women even strive to gain a little income by agricultural production, making handicrafts and local off-farm jobs. The women themselves also utilize common values at the discourse level to express the meaning of their staying behind and their husbands' migration, so as to conceal inner conflicts. They express their lives as a choice between a 'hollow life' and a 'poor life' through the determining factor 'for the future of our children'. Such narratives present a spirit of quiet and self-sacrificing acquiescence in that the women evaluate their lives in terms of the development of their children and the fulfilling of care obligations for the elderly. All these aspects have reaffirmed and reinforced the traditional gender ideology, solidifying the women's position in the unpaid and low-paid work (agriculture) sector.

Marital relationships are also experiencing acute changes due to the spatial split between husbands and wives. This can be summarized in three ways. First, migration has made the unpaid work done by women visible. The roles of income earning by men and care provision by women are played out together to maintain the family's livelihood and welfare, while the distance makes these roles, especially women's unpaid work, much more visible. Second, for contemporary rural couples, there are many livelihood pressures and hard struggles for a better life, mostly in the form of sacrifice for the next generation. Their lives are far from any 'romantic revolution' (Yan 2006, 75, 96, 106–9), in which there would be increasing sexual love and affection in rural marriages. When we look at the marriages of left-behind women, it is plain to see that there is no romantic revolution at all, but most often a reversal away from it. If we shift to the cultural perspective, it shows that the key characteristics of Chinese culture, such as family orientation or familism, are still in operation, which provides a safeguard for rural marital relationships. Third, the dependency of the left-behind women and their families on male migrants makes them more vulnerable in their lives. They depend not only on their husbands' income, but also on their sense of responsibility for their families. The patrilocal practice has made things even worse, in that women are afraid to divorce even when their husbands have extramarital relationships or have abandoned them. This is another harsh burden on left-behind women created by male migration.

By taking on the full onus of responsibilities in villages, left-behind women are paying the price of development in China, in a new and deeper form of female exploitation. The social worth of their efforts in upholding more than 'half the sky'<sup>15</sup> still goes unacknowledged, since the current studies show more about how they are affected by male migration, rather than what they do for their family livelihoods and family welfare. In the double squeeze of the persistent tradition and the new social transition in China, women are considered to be

<sup>15</sup> In 1968, Mao Zedong made a famous speech on women's participation in social production work. In that speech, he said 'women hold up half the sky', which is usually cited in China to describe the equal role of women compared to men.

workers who can be infinitely exploited. This kind of condition is widening the gap between men's and women's capacity to negotiate with regard to their obligations and entitlements, both in the household and in society. China's rapid economic development is exacting an enormous social cost – one that is being disproportionately paid by rural women. Being better off in China comes at the cost of millions of 'hollow lives' of left-alone rural women.

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