



Left-behind women: gender exclusion and inequality in rural-urban migration in China

Jingzhong Ye , Huifang Wu, Jing Rao, Baoyin Ding & Keyun Zhang


To cite this article: Jingzhong Ye , Huifang Wu, Jing Rao, Baoyin Ding & Keyun Zhang (2016): Left-behind women: gender exclusion and inequality in rural-urban migration in China, The Journal of Peasant Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2016.1157584](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1157584)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1157584>



Published online: 07 Jun 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#) 



Article views: 38



[View related articles](#) 



[View Crossmark data](#) 

GRASSROOTS VOICES

Left-behind women: gender exclusion and inequality in rural-urban migration in China[†]

Jingzhong Ye, Guest Editor

Introduction: the issue of left-behind women in the context of China's modernization

Jingzhong Ye

Driven by the momentum of global capitalism and developmentalism, China has undergone rapid industrialization, urbanization and marketization since the 1980s in order to accelerate economic growth and integration into the global market. Taking agriculture as the starting point of reform, the government implemented the Household Responsibility System, abolished the collective economy and returned to a peasant economy, and then replaced the planned economy with a capital-led export-oriented economy (Pan, Lu, and Zhang 2012). With the loosening of the urban-rural dualist social structure, the youngest and most dynamic labourers have been allowed to migrate into cities. The large movement of labourers from rural China to cities started in the 1990s, along with the initiation of economic reform and the relaxation of the household registration (*hukou*) system.

With the bias towards social modernity and urban centralism, and the pressure of monetization of household subsistence and commodification of rural society, the way of life which sustained peasants for thousands of years is now seen as 'backward'. Peasants can't survive just on farming and have to change their life strategies. A so-called 'migration culture', which encourages young people to go to work in the cities, came into being and gradually spread throughout rural China, especially the poorer areas in midwest China. In this process, the younger generation is quickly stripped from the land and absorbed into the burgeoning global capital chain.

The employment of peasant workers in China continues to expand and reached 274 million in 2014, with 168 million migrant peasant workers and 106 million *in situ* peasant workers (National Bureau of Statistics 2015).¹ According to estimates from the National Population and Family Planning Commission, there will be 500 million people living in cities, 500 million in the countryside and 500 million floating between rural

[†]I wish to thank Dr. Shahra Razavi for her highly valuable comments on the original proposal, and the anonymous reviewers for their advice on this manuscript.

¹'Migrant peasant workers' refers to those who worked outside their towns/townships for more than six months in that year, while '*in situ* peasant workers' refers to those who worked in non-farm sectors within their towns/townships for more than six months in that year.

and urban areas in the next 30 years (Lv 2009). In 2011, China's urban population was more than 50 percent of the total for the first time, and only 39 percent of the rural population was fully engaged in agricultural production (Ru, Lu, and Li 2011), which shows a trend of de-agrarianization. Rural-urban migration has contributed substantially to the country's overall economic and social development, and to the urban sphere in particular (Yan and Li 2007). To a great extent, it is through the commodification of the 'unlimited supply' of rural labour that China has realized its remarkable achievement in gross domestic product (GDP) growth.

However, the de-agrarianization process in China is not like the peasant proletarianization process in other capitalist countries. It has been defined as an 'unfinished proletarianization' or 'semi-proletarianization' process (Meng 2011; Liu 2012). On the one hand, the state has retained the peasants' right to their farmland, while the land is far from sufficient to guarantee their basic livelihood needs. On the other hand, the weakening of the rural-urban dualist social structure and the loosening of the household registration system have facilitated the transition from peasants to urban workers, yet these migrant workers have never obtained the full institutional and social recognition of being urban citizen workers (Sun 2003; Chen 2005; Zhao 2007). Their 'peasant' identity has a profound implication for their social rights. These migrants have been assigned a special social category in between 'peasant' and 'citizen', labelled as 'peasant workers' (*nongmingong*) (Chen 2005). Under the current *hukou* system, government departments of labour, social security, and public education and urban administration have excluded rural migrants from the entitlements of 'citizen', making it difficult for them to get equal treatment with citizens in terms of social rights and security. The work and life of rural migrants can be characterized as marginal, transitory and precarious (Fu 2006; Ren and Pan 2007). Their marginalized status also leads to a form of 'split labour reproduction' (Shen 2006): as it is nearly impossible to migrate as a household unit, some family members – especially women, children and the elderly – have to stay behind in the countryside. A form of split family has come into being, as well as the phenomenon of rural populations being composed only of left-behind women, children and elderly people. In Chinese, this left-behind population is dubbed the '386199'.²

The marginalized status of rural migrants, together with the large number of split families and the rural left-behind population, are seen as huge social costs that China has paid for its economic growth-centered development. The economic benefits of rural-urban migration are not shared equally among the affected rural populations, and men and women, and different households are affected in various and differing ways by migration. Gender is a key factor, in terms of earning opportunities and family responsibilities (Razavi 2012). When a couple is unable to migrate together, the strategy most commonly adopted is for the husband to migrate to work in a city and the wife to stay behind in the countryside. Although the percentage of female migrants has been increasing in recent years, and the migration of young unmarried women is more common than among married women, migrant women are prone to return to their village, temporarily or permanently, due to marriage, child-bearing and their important roles in family care and children's education. According to a report by *China Economic Weekly* in 2006, China had 47 million left-behind women (Zhang and Zhang 2006). This kind of family strategy is affected by

²In this term, '38' refers to the 8th of March, for Women's Day, which applies to left-behind women; '61' refers to the 1st of June, Children's Day, which refers to the left-behind children; and '99' refers to the 9th of September in the Chinese lunar calendar, which applies to the left-behind elderly.

institutional restrictions, such as women's disadvantages in the labour market and underdeveloped social services and support networks, and by cultural values and social norms such as the culture of 'familism' (the subordination of individuals' needs to those of the family) and the traditional roles and obligations of mothers. Thus, left-behind women have become a marginalized group that has been constantly influenced and oppressed by various structural forces in Chinese society.

Rural left-behind women have to take responsibility for caring for their families, for child bearing and for agricultural production. While struggling to maintain family functions in the context of an absent husband and insufficient public services, left-behind women have to endure emotional hardship and even marriage crises due to long-term separation from their spouses. A metaphor of 'three big mountains' (*sanzuo dashan*)³ is frequently used to describe the worlds of left-behind women, the mountains being 'farming, elderly people and children' (Zhang and Zhang 2006), or 'heavy workloads, psychological stress and no safety' (Chen, Qin, and Zhu 2005).

The growing population of rural-urban migrants since the 1990s has attracted the attention of Chinese academia. Reasons for migration, the impact of migration, and the integration, social recognition and citizenship of migrant workers in urban areas have taken a central place in discussion and research. From 2005 onward, rural left-behind women began to enter the scope of media and academia. Left-behind women are popularly constructed as having a miserable experience, such as bearing a heavy burden of farming, family and household chores and experiencing psychological stress and sexual repression. They easily become victims of sexual aggression and infidelity as their migrant husbands have extra-marital affairs.

Academic research on left-behind women has mainly concentrated on the impacts of labour migration. The tone of these studies is limited to harrowing descriptions of the lifestyles of left-behind people or simplistic descriptions of how rural migration has affected them (Ye 2011a), and this literature is still little known outside China. Such research has mainly discussed the impacts – mostly negative – of internal migration on left-behind women in terms of the 'feminization' of agriculture, gender and marital relations, and psychology and health.

Regarding agricultural feminization, the increased burden of farm work on left-behind women is obvious, and the relatively low income generated from it puts women at a disadvantage in their families (Gao 1994). Agricultural feminization generally leads to the extensification of agricultural production, as the family is short of labour, and a left-behind woman's burden of care for children and elderly family members is increased (Zhao, Hu, and Yang 2009). However, there is also research showing a different result, that no such extensification is found, at least in the village studied in Jiangsu Province (Meng 2014).

As to gender relations, even when they have migrated men still control family decisions, via cell phone conversations, especially decisions related to investments in production (Zhou 2006). So left-behind women are still seen as secondary, and men have the role of 'managers' while women are 'producers'. In this case, wives who stay behind have the double burden of farm work and house work and are dependent on men for both emotional and economic support; these relations relegate women to a subordinate position to men in rural China (Jiang and Zhou 2007). As to marital relations, research has revealed many risks

³The 'three big mountains' metaphor comes from Mao Zedong's well-known argument about the oppression of Chinese people, which referred to feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism.

to husbands and wives living apart, including increased risk of divorce and strong mental stress and sexual repression (Xiang 2006; Wang 2007). As to psychological aspects, left-behind women have worse mental health than other women in terms of stress, pressure, loneliness and fear. In some regions, poor mental health has led some left-behind women to seek comfort in religious belief (Wu and Ye 2010; Xu 2010).

However, a few studies have found that migration can have positive impacts on rural left-behind women and assert that physical separation is not a crucial influential factor in their lives. For some women, their husbands' migration has left more room for them to control family resources, especially those from agricultural production and family income, and increased engagement in agriculture has eventually improved their position (Meng 1993). The longer the husband is away, and the farther away he is, the more decision-making space left-behind women can enjoy, and their abilities to make decisions have gradually increased. In addition, left-behind women are compelled to take on activities outside their families, such as village public affairs or community decision-making, which in turn gives them a larger public space in which to perform. Moreover, women's unpaid housework gradually becomes visible when their husbands migrate, and becomes an indispensable contribution to the family, which improves their status in the family and village. In sum, after husbands migrate, women's decision-making power and agency within the family have been enhanced through their involvement in household livelihood activities, especially farming, and children's education. Decision-making within the household has gradually shifted from being dominated by men to being negotiated by couples (Zhou, Yan, and Liu 2002; Zheng and Xie 2004; Ye, He, and Pan 2014).

International studies on migration and left-behind women have been largely concerned with transnational migration, showing that the impacts on left-behind women are highly varied, multi-level, multi-dimensional and location specific (Antman 2012). They also give more attention to the agency of women when they deal with male out-migration and the changes which occur in the process (Wu and Ye 2014). Only a few international studies have discussed China's international migration (Jacka 2012).

Since 2004, a team at the College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) at China Agricultural University has been researching the issues related to China's internal rural-urban migration and its associated left-behind population.⁴ Our work started from sociological analysis of the impacts of rural-urban labour migration, and has incorporated perspectives from politics, political economy and bio-politics. The team has been at the centre of cutting-edge research, public discussion and policy advocacy on these issues in China for a number of years. Our research has covered 13 provinces, and in-depth ethnographic studies have been conducted in 30 villages. Our publications include the trilogy *Different childhood: left-behind children in rural China*, *Dancing solo: left-behind women in rural China* and *Lonely sunset: left-behind elderly in rural China* (Ye and He

⁴The research team pioneered the first comprehensive research on left-behind children in China in 2004, and has expanded the research to left-behind women and left-behind elderly people since 2006. There are 26 members of the team, including faculty and postgraduate researchers. The team has also conducted interventions towards the target group of left-behind populations in several rural communities in China. The team's research is leading work on left-behind populations within Chinese academic communities. The team's work has generated in-depth media coverage, including in international media. Research projects on this theme have been financially supported by Bread for the World – Protestant Development Service, Plan International, World Bank, China Agricultural University '985' program, Program for New Century Excellent Talents in University (NCET-06-0118, China), and The National Social Science Fund of China (Project No. 13ASH007).

2008; Ye and Pan 2008; Ye and Wu 2008).⁵ Rich research data have been collected during the last 10 years. We have been trying to demonstrate the research results to an international readership (Ye 2011b; Ye and Pan 2011), and this *Grassroots Voices* collection on left-behind women is partly to serve this purpose.

Bernstein (2015) indicates that the rural-urban interconnection has been one of the key themes of agrarian change in contemporary China. Rural left-behind women play a very important role in this interconnection, by both interacting with husbands in the urban environment and caring for family members and maintaining family livelihoods in the rural one. The contributions in this collection of *Grassroots Voices* aim to illustrate this rural-urban interconnection with a focus on rural left-behind women affected by various structural and socio-cultural forces in the process of rural-urban migration. This collection aims to reveal how the social costs of rural-urban migration affect women and men differently.

Women are affected in different ways by their husbands' migration depending on family, regional, cultural and other factors; the impacts are very complicated, even conflicting. We are therefore unable to conclude that all rural left-behind women have been negatively affected or positively empowered by the process. This collection tries to analyse what kinds of social costs labour migration has had for rural left-behind women, and how their agency and gender relations have been changed in the process. By doing so, we aim to display the salient gender differences in rural-urban migration in China.

This collection starts with a portrayal of a left-behind woman, Liu,⁶ in a province in mid-China which is a major sending area for rural labour migrants. Her story is representative of the lives of millions of women in rural China. After middle school, she went to work as a wage labourer in cities. After marriage and the birth of her first child, she left her daughter in the care of her parents-in-law and continued to work in cities. She later returned to the village because of family responsibilities, and eventually became a left-behind woman. This is the typical life trajectory of a left-behind woman. This case study argues that the choice of family livelihood strategy – the man as worker away from home, the woman as farmer in the home village (*nangong nvngeng*) – is an active decision jointly made by the wife and husband, responding to the increasingly commoditized rural society and the rural-urban divide. The decision is based in the culture of familism – 'everything for the future of children'. Traditional gender labour divisions contribute greatly to this livelihood strategy, and lead to the less visible and unpaid family care work, which is surely a kind of gender exclusion. In addition to family chores, Liu continues family farming; however, she has made considerable adjustments in terms of the objective, cropping intensity and labour inputs. If there is an opportunity in the future for the land to be transferred to a 'modern farm', she may make further changes. It can be observed that large-scale rural-urban labour migration has brought forward great changes in terms of China's agrarian structures. This contribution shows that providing food for the family and the ease of farming are the main priorities for left-behind women; this illustrates that subsistence is a priority in this commoditized world, but this simplification of farming may even reduce the contribution of individual household farming to overall food security in China.

⁵This trilogy won the First Class Award of *Humanities and Social Sciences Researches among Universities* issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2013.

⁶The names of the interviewees, villages, townships and counties in this collection have all been changed.

The second contribution is a case study of how a migrant husband perceives his left-behind wife's situation. Migrants are key actors in constructing the realities of left-behind women, so their perspectives are crucial for understanding the situation in full. This case study focuses on the most critical and sometimes controversial debates: decision-making, workload, agency, conjugal relations and familism. In the husband's view, the decision that he should work away, and his wife should farm in the home village, is made after careful calculation of the family's livelihood needs, which in fact leaves no other options for most rural households. Obviously, the wife left behind bears heavy workloads, together with worries about family financial pressures, and she may encounter high emotional stress. Although a husband's migration alters the division of labour in the family, which may enable the wife to shoulder many more responsibilities, enhancing her ability and agency, such change does not utterly transform the traditional gender relations of 'husband dominating while wife is subordinate' (*nanzhu nvcong*) and 'men in charge of external affairs and women in charge of internal affairs' (*nanzhuwai nvzhunei*) in rural China. In fact, the migrant husband is still at the core of the family power structure. Physical separation does lead to the occurrence of extramarital affairs and 'temporary couples' (*linshi fuqi*), which may endanger the marriage. As a social organization, familism has led Chinese rural families in the current developmentalism era to rationalize their top priority as earning money rather than social wellbeing.

The third contribution, on the perspective of community members, raises an interesting observation: the 'fortress besieged' psychology characterized by both sympathy and jealousy between left-behind women and non-left-behind ones. Villagers' responses to questions on this topic included highly contradictory statements, revealing the complexity in the countryside and amongst rural families, and the dilemma that villagers face. In general, non-left-behind women and other people in the village see left-behind women as having freedom over money and decision-making, while left-behind women see the non-left-behind women as having more free time. As a consequence, rural people don't think left-behind women need special support from society or the government. Different family members also commented differently about the left-behind women; however, they tend to agree that the situation where some family members migrate and others stay at home is the optimal one for the betterment of the family, and particularly for children's education. The trend of agricultural feminization, as well as issues of workload and family relations, is seen by villagers as closely linked to money. People tend to think if the migrant worker can bring a good remittance, all problems and negative consequences will be solved. While labour and everyday subsistence are increasingly commoditized in rural society, the costs paid by left-behind women in this pattern of division of labour are a long way from being recognized.

The final essay explores how local government officials perceive the issue of left-behind women and what kind of policy and social support mechanisms have been put in place to address the negative impacts of migration. To our great surprise, the views of local government officials, even those who are directly responsible for women's and children's affairs, are in huge contrast to those of other actors interviewed in the other contributions. Local government officials do not perceive left-behind women as a vulnerable group in the same way as left-behind children and elderly, so the issue has not been a focus for local governments. Local officials do not think left-behind women have problems or difficulties in farming, family care or other aspects of their lives; the only exception is their vulnerability to mental health problems caused by separation from their husbands. To some degree, left-behind women are even regarded as a fortunate group with much leisure time. Local government officials do not think left-behind women play important roles in

agricultural production or public affairs, but are only indispensable for family chores. As a key quasi-governmental organization responsible for women's issues, the local Women's Federation doesn't have a focus on left-behind-women's issues. Moreover, it has very limited financial and human resources, and so is incapable of providing special assistance to left-behind women. Local governments believe that the best way to address any social problems, including left-behind people's issues, is to further promote the development of local economies, such as through industrialization, agricultural modernization and coordinated urbanization.

This collection tries to discuss the issue of left-behind women from the perspectives of different actors, including the women themselves, their husbands, local community members and local government officials, by sharing and analyzing material collected by the research team since 2004. We do not intend to make definite and unified conclusions, as the issue is highly complex and varies by region, community and family. Different actors have contrasting views on the pros and cons of migration for rural women. Instead of drawing a conclusion, this collection serves as a live documentation of what is happening in rural China while the state and the world are all celebrating its economic growth and wealth. It should form a basis for further research and analysis.

It has been widely accepted that China's 30 years of continuous economic boom have been accompanied by a constant transfer of economic resources and people from rural to urban areas. This rapid urbanization and China's pursuit of modernization have been based on a huge amount of support from the countryside in terms of migrant labour and low commodity prices. The extraordinarily large scale of rural-urban migration has resulted in millions of separated families. However, we have to face the new realities: migration to cities has become a rite of passage for rural young people, and leaving home to work is now normal. Separation has become the normal status of China's rural families. As a result of this normalization, villagers tend to pay more attention to the beneficial effects of migration, and tolerate the adverse impacts.

Nevertheless, the narratives of the different actors presented in this collection do demonstrate the disadvantageous position of women in rural areas with regard to decisions and family arrangements in relation to migration. They show clearly a kind of gender exclusion and inequality. The state has been extremely aggressive in the pursuit of economic growth, but extremely conservative in addressing the social consequences of its urban-biased modernization process. Governments at all levels believe any social problems, including the ones resulting from economic development, can only be tackled by further promotion of economic progress.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Antman, F. 2012. The impact of migration on family left behind. In *Discussing Paper*. Bonn: The Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) 1–33.
- Bernstein, H. 2015. Some reflections on agrarian change in China. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15, no. 3: 454–77.
- Chen, Y.F. 2005. Rural migrant workers: Institutional arrangement and identity recognition. *Sociological Studies* 3: 119–32.
- Chen, C.Y., Y.Z. Qin, and G.L. Zhu. 2005. Three big mountains upon left-behind women. *Semimonthly* 11: 16–21.

- Fu, P. 2006. Adaptation to city life for young rural labor migrants: Discovery in practical sociological research. *Society* 2, no. 26: 136–58.
- Gao, X. 1994. Rural labor migration and trends of agricultural feminization in contemporary China. *Sociological Studies* 2: 83–90.
- Jacka, T. 2012. Migration, householding and the well-being of left-behind women in rural Ningxia. *The China Journal* 67: 1–21.
- Jiang, M. and Y. Zhou. 2007. Gender research on rural left-behind wives. *Social Work* 3: 48–9.
- Liu, J.Z. 2012. The process of proletarianization: Theoretical explanation, historical experience and revelations. *Society* 2, no. 32: 51–83.
- Lv, X.L. 2009. Chinese populations will be divided into three groups. http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2009-04/14/content_11184857.htm 15 April [Accessed 20 December 2014].
- Meng, X. 1993. Chinese women in rural labor migration. *Social Science Front* 4: 147–54.
- Meng, J.F. 2011. Semi-proletarianization, labor commercialization and migrant workers in China. *Haipai Economics* 1: 131–49.
- Meng, X.D. 2014. Feminization of agricultural production in rural China: a sociological analysis. PhD diss., Wageningen University.
- National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China. 2015. Statistical communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2013 National Economic and Social Development. http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201502/t20150226_685799.html (accessed April 5).
- Pan, Y., H.L. Lu, and H.P. Zhang. 2012. *The big construction site: The survival picture of migrant construction workers*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Razavi, S. 2012. Gender and agrarian change - making paid and unpaid work visible. COHD SEMINAR SERIES - Critical Issues in Agrarian and Development Studies (CIADS), 24 May. http://cohd.cau.edu.cn/art/2013/4/26/art_8968_71.html (Accessed August 15, 2015).
- Ren, Y. and Y. Pan. 2007. Absent state in the reproduction of labor for rural labor migrants. In: *Harmonious Society and Social Construction (paper collections of 17th Annual Academic Symposium of Sociology in China, Changsha)*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press 179–90.
- Ru, X., X.Y. Lu, and P.L. Li. 2011. *Blue book of China's society: Analysis and forecast of China's society (2012)*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Shen, Y. 2006. Social transition and the reformulation of the working class. *Sociological Studies* 2: 13–36.
- Sun, L.P. 2003. *Cleavage: The Chinese society since the 1990s*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Wang, F. 2007. Left-behind women: The new story of *Zhinu* in rural villages. *China Society Periodical* 4: 26–8.
- Wu, H.F., and J.Z. Ye. 2010. The psychological impact of male migration on left-behind women. *Journal of Zhejiang University (Social Science Edition)* 1: 11–20.
- Wu, H.F., and J.Z. Ye. 2014. Hollow lives: Women left behind in rural China. *Journal of Agrarian Change*. On line version 15 September. doi:10.1111/joac.12089.
- Xiang, L. 2006. Rural left-behind women: A disadvantaged group deserves attention. *Guangxi Social Sciences* 1: 176–80.
- Xu, C. 2010. The family pressure of rural left-behind women and its influential factors in west China. *Population and Economy* 1: 73–8.
- Yan, Y.L. and X.Y. Li. 2007. Quantitative measurements on migrant labour's contribution to GDP and their share of economic benefits. *Statistical Research* 24, no. 1: 122–26.
- Ye, J.Z. 2011a. Left-behind population and development encounter. *Journal of China Agricultural University* 1: 5–12.
- Ye, J.Z. 2011b. GRASSROOTS VOICES/Left-behind children: The social price of China's economic boom. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 3: 613–50.
- Ye, J.Z., and C.Z. He. 2008. *Lonely sunsets: Elderly left behind in rural China*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Ye, J.Z., C.Z., He, and L. Pan. 2014. *Double coercion: Gender exclusion and inequality in rural left-behind population*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Ye, J.Z. and L. Pan. 2008. *Differentiated childhoods: Children left behind in rural China*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Ye, J.Z. and L. Pan. 2011. Differentiated childhoods: Impacts of rural labour migration on left-behind children in China. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 2: 353–75.

- Ye, J.Z. and H.F. Wu. 2008. *Dancing solo: Women left behind in rural China*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Zhang, J.C. and Q. Zhang. 2006. Survey on the abnormal life of around 50 million rural left-behind women. *China Economic Weekly* 10: 14–9.
- Zhao, H.Y., Z.Q. Hu, and M. Yang. 2009. Feminization of agriculture, innovation and practices of agricultural technology extension. *Journal of China Women's University* 2: 56–8.
- Zhao, Y.Q. 2007. Rural migrant workers: Identity formation and spatial configuration in daily life. *Society* 27, no. 6: 175–209.
- Zheng, Z., and Z. Xie. 2004. *Migration and rural women's development*. Beijing: Social Sciences Press.
- Zhou, F.L. 2006. *Research on left-behind families in rural China*. Beijing: China Agricultural Press.
- Zhou, W., X. Yan, and Z. Liu. 2002. *Living at the margin: Migrant families*. Shijiazhuang: People's Press of Hebei Province.

Jingzhong Ye is a professor of development studies and Dean at the College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University. His research interests include development intervention and rural transformation, rural society and agrarian change, rural-urban migration and the left-behind population, agrarian sociology and land politics, rural education and social problems. Email: yejz@cau.edu.cn

A portrayal of left-behind women in rural China

Huifang Wu

In recent decades, family life in rural China has undergone dramatic changes, with the process of rural-urban labour migration being seen as one of the most outstanding aspects of China's modernization. 'Men plough in the fields, women weave in the house' (*nangeng nvzhi*) was the typical labour division for rural Chinese families for thousands of years. This has faded away since large-scale labour migration, especially by men, started in the 1990s. While men migrate into cities, women stay behind in villages to take up the multiple family responsibilities, including farming and caring for children and elderly family members.

Since the first wave of labour migration, three age groups of left-behind women can be observed in rural China. The first is those aged around 45. Few of these women have themselves experienced migration. The second group is those aged around 35. A lot of these have migrated, usually before they were married, and returned home in order to provide better care and education for their children. The third generation is those who are in their 20s or early 30s. Nearly all of this group have worked in cities for years, and aspired to migrate and became factory workers when they were in school. They had little experience of or emotional attachment to rural life and farming, and had to come back to their villages because they were the only possible care providers for the family. They would seldom engage in farm work at home.

In this essay, I tell Liu's story to show how a woman became 'left behind', what her life is like and how she thinks about it. Her narrative is like a portrait of millions of women in rural China. The interview took place in Liu's home in spring 2014.

Liu is in the second age group, but also has some characteristics of the first and the third. She lives in Hutun, a village in Hunan Province, where there are 359 households, and 1308 inhabitants. The average landholding per capita is 0.7 *mu*.⁷ The latest land redistribution in

⁷One *mu* equals 1/15 ha.

the village took place at the end of 1998. When the Law of the People's Republic of China on Land Contract in Rural Areas was enforced in 2003, each rural household was given a 30-year contract giving them the right to use their land. Rice, maize and oilseed rape are the common crops in the village. Backyard vegetable, pig and chicken raising have a long history in the area. Machines are commonly used in farming; however, not all families own machines and often rent them. The rent is usually 130 *yuan*⁸ for ploughing and 120 *yuan* for harvesting on one *mu* of land. According to the village cadres, 'more and more people migrate out every year, and young men are rarely in the village'. In total, there are about 400 people from the village working as migrants in cities. The majority of migrants are aged between 20 and 50; around 70 percent are men and 30 percent women. There are about 135 left-behind women in the village. Most of them are aged between 30 and 55.

Liu was born in 1977, in a village 3 km from Hutun Village. She has been married for 15 years. Her husband works in a factory about 400 km away. She has two children: a 13-year-old daughter who is at a boarding school, and an eight-year-old son who is at primary school, both in the neighboring village. Liu lives with her parents-in-law and the family of her brother-in-law in a two-storey house. According to rural tradition, the family shares one house but lives in three separate units. Liu's sister-in-law is a left-behind woman, too, living with her daughter; her husband works in Guangdong Province and comes back once or twice a year.

In summer 1993, Liu graduated from junior high school and took the entrance examination for vocational school. While waiting for the results, she worked as an apprentice in an electronics manufacturing factory in Huizhou Municipality, Guangdong Province, a job she got with the help of her elder sister who had worked there for four years, since she was 14. Liu says that job was 'very low paid but very hard'. After two months, she returned home as she had been given a place at a vocational law school. However, her parents realized that the tuition fee was too high; even with the remittance from her sister, the family could not afford to support Liu and two of her younger brothers' schooling. In such circumstances, gender inequality usually comes into play, and Liu was persuaded to give up the opportunity of further education. She did as her parents decided, and followed her sister 'to work and earn money' (*dagong zhuanqian*).

In autumn 1993, introduced by a relative, Liu got a job as a saleswoman in a hardware store in Yunnan Province. She was there for one year and didn't go home for the Spring Festival, because the travel cost was too high; her salary was only 200 *yuan* per month. Meanwhile, she felt sad and angry about missing out on the opportunity of further education. In summer 1994, she moved to the electronics factory in Huizhou Municipality where her sister was working. She was paid on a piecework basis, with a basic salary of five *yuan* per day. To get a better salary, she had to work very hard; working 12 or 13 hours a day was common. Sometimes, she could earn a good salary of 800 *yuan* a month. Two years later, her sister got married and moved back home, so Liu moved to another factory in Shenzhen Municipality with her cousin, and later to Foshan Municipality, both in Guangdong Province. In 1997, she worked in Taizhou Municipality of Jiangsu Province. Liu thought that was the happiest time in her life, as she could earn money, live a lifestyle of her own choice, and support her parents and brothers. This part of the story is typical for migrant girls from southern China since the late 1980s or early 1990s. The strong patriarchal system in rural society pushed young girls to migrate, to make money

⁸*Yuan* is the Chinese currency; 1 *yuan* is equal to approximately 0.16 USD.

for their family or escape from the family, or both. In the process, they enjoyed some self-determination and found independence through working, earning money and making decisions by themselves. There was not then such a strong awareness about the negative impacts of global capitalism that some research had described (Tong 2003; Pun 2005). The hard physical work was compensated for by the feeling of freedom and being themselves.

At the end of 1997, Liu was 20 years old, and was of the age to find a husband. She was introduced to a man five years older than herself. He was working in a factory in Yueyang Municipality in Hunan province. He earned a good salary as he was a skilled worker. Liu was pleased as this would mean a good and secure income for their future family. They got engaged and continued working separately. In the following two years, they met twice, during the Spring Festival. When they finally got married in 2000, Liu left her job and joined her husband in Yueyang Municipality, but she didn't get a job there. Three months later, she got pregnant and returned to her husband's home village to wait for the birth of her baby. Liu says, 'That was almost the end of working as a migrant, which I never expected to happen that way'.

Her daughter was born during the Spring Festival of 2001. One year later, when she had stopped breastfeeding, Liu decided to continue working as a migrant, like many other young women in the region. She left her daughter with her parents-in-law. With the help of a friend, she soon got a job in a lamp factory in Jiangsu Province. However, when she came home for Spring Festival after working for nearly a year, she found her daughter undernourished and badly looked after. 'She was wearing very dirty clothes, thin, not the same girl at all as when I left her. My heart hurt.' Her husband suggested she should stay home and look after their daughter. Liu didn't accept at first. She felt she was young, capable and wanted to work, to earn money and to improve their poor lifestyle. Showing the self-determination and independence that she had enjoyed while working in factories, she wanted to continue working as migrant factory worker.

Liu talked with her parents-in-law and hoped they could look after her daughter better. After the Festival, the young couple once again left to work in different places. However, Liu could not stop worrying about her daughter. She returned home six months later, and finally accepted that the grandparents were just too old to provide good care for the little girl. So she stopped working away from her home. She did not want her daughter to live a miserable life while she worked so hard in a far-away place, supposedly for the betterment of her daughter. At that point, her parents-in-law also needed care, and so she shared the responsibility for this with her sister-in-law, another left-behind woman. In 2006, her son was born.

The birth of a child is an important stage in a woman's life, and for Chinese women, it can also be a cut-off point for their life as migrant workers. They usually stop migration in order to be good mothers and care-providers for their children. In other cases, it is elderly family members who need care or physical support. The patriarchal culture again requires women to take responsibility their families. However, for the much younger generation of women, this is not always the case anymore. When we conducted research in 2013 in Henan Province, which has a long history of migration, we found that young mothers would leave their babies in the villages after breastfeeding for only about three months. The reason was that they only got three months' maternity leave from their employers, and would lose their jobs if they didn't return. There, fewer women were left behind, and babies were brought up by their grandmothers and fed with powdered milk. The first generation of left-behind women are now becoming grandmothers and caring for their own grandchildren to allow the younger generation, especially women, to migrate.

Since 2002, Liu has been a left-behind woman. Her husband's workplace is not far from their village, but the transport system is not good in that mountainous area. He earns around 3000 *yuan* a month, but spends around 1000 *yuan* for everyday life, insurance and so on. Money is not available for frequent visits home. So normally he only comes back once a year, for the Spring Festival, for about half a month. Liu seldom visits him, because 'visiting is expensive; life is expensive there, too'. Even though they had been married for 14 years when I interviewed her, the total time that they had lived together was no more than one year. The couple think the most important thing they can do is to save money to bring up their children and give them a good education. They don't speak on the phone often, either. 'Life goes on every day in the same way, what is there to tell him? If there is something important, we call each other'. Liu said. 'Something important' refers to things that need money, such as schooling, farming inputs or attending weddings, funerals and other important events in the village. Liu commented:

Now everything needs money, needs to be paid for. We pay our daughter's boarding fee, and give money to our relatives at all kinds of ceremonies. It is indispensable for maintaining our kinship in the village. My husband is not around; the only thing he can do to help is to send money home. I am at home to deal with all such things.

In many families, men and women carry out their responsibilities in two different places, so the traditional norm of married couples living together has ended in rural China. Economic development and labour migration have brought about a re-configuration of marriage and family in rural society.

Liu has also taken on farming work since she stopped working in factories. Her family has three *mu* of paddy field and one *mu* of dry land. Even though she had helped her parents with farming, her knowledge about farming was inadequate. Her father-in-law gave her lots of assistance in the beginning, but now he is too old to farm. Ploughing and harvesting are the two most challenging tasks for her. However, changes to cropping systems in their region have made farming easier than it used to be. As more and more young people migrate out, the previous practice of double rice cropping has been changed to single rice cropping, and the paddy fields are empty for half a year.

Liu's county is one of the 800 'Top Counties for Grain Production' (*liangshi daxian*) in China, and the local government provides an extra subsidy of 200 *yuan* per *mu* to encourage double-rice cropping. Even so, more and more farmers are transferring to single cropping. 'The income that we get from the field is all from hard work (*xinkuqian*)', she said. For one *mu* of double-cropping rice, the income is about 1750 *yuan*; for single-cropping rice, the income is about 1250 *yuan*. Normally a farmer is able to farm 10 *mu* of double-cropping rice farm, which could make 17,500 *yuan* a year, about half of a migrant labourer's income, but this would involve a lot of hard work. Farming is no longer an important source of cash income for Chinese farmers.

When making decisions on farming, Liu always considers two factors: food for the family and how easy the work is. Therefore, she plants rice, vegetables, peanuts and beans for the family's own consumption and maize for chicken. She also raises chicken and ducks in her backyard for eggs and meat. As the region has a mild climate, vegetables grow all year round. The family is highly self-sufficient in terms of food. Liu concluded, 'I farm the land just to feed our family better'. Seeds, fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides are all bought from the market. She does not apply manure to the fields as her parents' generation did: it is too heavy for her to carry and she thinks it is too dirty. Since single-cropping rice cultivation can already satisfy the family's food needs, she does not have any interest in

planting double-cropping rice. In busy seasons, usually when transplanting and harvesting rice, Liu sometimes exchanges labour with other families. But in more cases, she has to employ labour and machine work. Recently in her region, more and more wage-labour is organized for rice transplanting. Compared to the self-sufficient family farming system, farming inputs are highly externalized to market supply, including part of the labour input. This is to make women's farming work easier.

Another option to make farm work easier is to rent out some land. But Liu doesn't do this. She explained that 10 years ago, land rent was about 450 kg of raw rice per *mu*; later, rent decreased as agricultural tax was high; currently, rent is free, but the landowner would get subsidies from the state. In Hutun Village, a few people would like to contract more from families who all migrate to work in city. The younger generation does not like farming at all. 'It is too hard', Liu said; 'even if I had enough time and energy for farming 10 *mu* of land, I would rather migrate to earn money. That would be much easier'. If it were not for the need to take care of her two children, Liu would not have stayed in the village to farm. In the fields, only women and elderly farmers can be seen working in the land. They are the left-behind women and elderly. Liu has heard that in many other regions of the province, there are 'bosses'⁹ who have contracted large areas of land, thousands of *mu*, to establish 'modern farms', and left-behind women and elderly people work as wage labourers on their own land. She hopes that one day 'bosses' might come to her village, and she would contract out all her land and work for the boss as a wage labourer. Her husband doesn't pay much attention to her farming, but is more concerned about whether she is taking good care of their children. He has even suggested Liu stop farming, but she doesn't agree to this. 'Feeding the family with what I produce is a way to earn money', she said.

In Hutun Village, there are around 150 left-behind women, and more left-behind elderly people and children. In 2013, there was an election for a new village committee. A large part of the electorate was not in the village, so their family members or relatives voted on their behalf. Women don't participate in village political affairs when there are male family members at home, even if they are very old. Liu let her father-in-law vote on behalf of her and her husband. She was aware of her right to vote, but didn't care who was elected to the village committee because she thought it would not make any difference to her life. 'For so many years, the village committee has done nothing but collecting taxes and levies, monitoring family planning and collecting penalties', she said. She attributes all the changes in the village to labour migration. A new committee would not improve her income – and as there are no collectively owned factories, forests or mines in the village, there is nothing for the committee to manage.

Life continues for Liu in the way that has been described above. 'There is no other way of life', she said. She and her husband have done all they can to ensure their children receive a good education and have a good future. Looking to the future, she thinks there is 'no way' for her husband to come back to the village within 10 or even 15 years, as their children might have not completed their studies by then.

Many rural women in this region have a similar way life. In most parts of rural China, while men are working away from home, women have the same life cycle: graduation or dropping out of middle schools; migration to work in cities; marriage, having children and staying behind in their villages. This is not to suggest that women are submissive or repressed by the patriarchal and patrilocal society. Their early experiences of migration

⁹'Boss' is the way Chinese farmers address the land contractors.

have given them self-determination and independence. They have struggled to find a balance between migration and care for children and elderly people. However, the social welfare system does not meet the need. So, while the rural-urban divide and patriarchal system prevail, women choose to stay in villages and care for their families. Rural families and young couples are divided. Women take care of almost everything that is unpaid, while men become the distant cash earners for their families. Many researchers on rural women say this is a factor that makes left-behind women vulnerable to a broad range of threats, from increased workload and responsibility to difficulties in household maintenance and basic survival, and emotional loss and stress (Gulati 1987; Rodenburg 2000).

In this family strategy, women change from being migrant labourers to the main farm labourers. Reciprocal labour exchange is becoming less and less common in rural areas, and instead a market for agricultural labour has emerged. As well as labour, almost all agricultural inputs have been commoditized or externalized to markets. This has made farming increasingly expensive. As a result, rural families rely more and more on cash income from migration.

There are also debates upon whether agricultural feminization will lead to the degradation of agricultural production (Fan and Cheng 2005; Huang 2008; Zhao, Hu, and Yang 2009). In recent years, as the price of agricultural inputs, including diesel, fertilizer and pesticides, has increased considerably, farming income has stagnated, although farmers have been exempted from paying tax (Xiao 2007). It has been argued that the price of agricultural products is far lower than its true value, but no matter what incentives the government may provide, farmers are unwilling to invest in agriculture (Song 2012). When left-behind women are the main source of labour, the situation becomes even worse as they bear multiple responsibilities for family care and welfare. In these circumstances, providing food for their families and the ease of tasks are the main priorities, and neither inputs nor outputs has much influence over their decisions. In other words, the function of agriculture is being simplified into producing food for left-behind women's families, and is no longer for commodity production or for the market. Thus, after great progress in agricultural production in China in the 1980s, thanks to the positive effects of the Household Responsibility System, labour migration has caused a dangerous trend of transforming individual household agriculture into a kind of subsistence farming.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Fan, L.J., and Y. Cheng. 2005. Women left in rural areas: A new group in modern countryside. *Journal of Hefei University (social science edition)* 5: 9–13.
- Gulati, L. 1987. Coping with male migration. *Economic and Political Weekly* 22, no. 44: 41–6.
- Huang, W. 2008. The roles of women's human capital development in modern agriculture. *Forum on Science and Technology in China* 5: 132–5.
- Pun, N. 2005. *Made in China: Women factory workers in a global workplace*. Durham and London, Hong Kong: Duke University Press and Hong Kong University Press.
- Rodenburg, J. 2000. Staying behind: Conflict and compromise in Toba Batak migration. In *Women and households in Indonesia: Cultural notions and social practices*, eds. J. Koning and N. Marleen, 235–61. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Song, Y.P. 2012. Opinions on current agricultural situation. *Jiangnan Tribune* 2: 5–13.
- Tong, X. 2003. The coincidence of social structure and historical events: the historical fates of Chinese women workers. *Sociological Research* 5: 52–7.

- Xiao, J.C. 2007. Reflection on farmers' income increase in the post agricultural taxation Era. *Gansu Social Sciences* 1: 90–2.
- Zhao, H.Y., Z.Q. Hu, and M. Yang. 2009. Feminization of agriculture, innovation and practices of agricultural technology extension. *Journal of China Women's University* 2: 56–8.

Huifang Wu is a professor in the Department of Sociology at the College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University. She holds a PhD in development studies, and bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology. Her research mainly covers gender studies, sociology of agriculture, rural left-behind women, and sociological analysis of rural development interventions. Email: wuhf@cau.edu.cn

The migrant husbands' perspectives on left-behind wives

Jing Rao

It is hard not to agree that continuous migration from rural to urban areas has dramatically changed Chinese contemporary society. While many women in rural China have followed the migration tide and found jobs in cities since the 1990s, marriage usually ends rural women's migrant work and cuts off their opportunities to engage in off-farm waged work (Fan 2004). Children also play an important role in their decision-making about migration. Return timing is strongly linked to the age of the child (Connelly, Roberts, and Zheng 2012). Many rural families in contemporary rural China exist in the form of husbands working away from home while wives are left behind. Many researchers argue that the migration of husbands improves household income and has negative impacts on the well-being of left-behind wives, who suffer excessive workload, ill-health and depression (Xiang 2006; Wu and Ye 2010; Xu 2010). Most of the analyses are made from the perspective of left-behind women. However, the migrant husband is also a key player in the decision-making process. How does the husband perceive the physical separation from his wife and family? How do the husband and wife interact with each other? How does the husband think of his role as a husband and a father?

In 2012, I interviewed migrant workers at a construction site in Beijing. An extended case study is presented here in order to show the migrant husband's perspective on the issue of left-behind women.

Mr. Ma was born in 1975 in a village in Hebei Province. He came to Beijing and got his first job in 1996. Since then, he has been working in Beijing alone while his wife stays in his home village. Currently, he earns a salary of about 3000 *yuan* per month and lives in a temporary shed on the construction site. Mr. Ma and his wife have two children, twelve and eight years old. Mr. Ma's father and mother live with his wife and children in the village. His family has two *mu* of arable land.

'There is no choice': the cause of decision-making

- JR: How did you and your wife make the decision that you come out and your wife stays behind?
- MA: I can earn a higher salary by working in Beijing than farming in village. The cost of living and kids' education in the village are lower than in city. My father and

mother are too old to farm. They can't even take care of themselves. So they need my wife to stay behind.

JR: Do you hope to bring your family together to the city?

MA: I really hope so. However, my kids, my parents and my land in my village all need my wife. I couldn't afford for them all to move to the city. We never dare to plan for all settling down in city. As soon as my kids can earn money by themselves then I will go back home and live with my wife in the village. I have to keep working in the city by myself now to support my family, there is no choice. I wish my wife could visit me and do some sightseeing in the city but we can hardly afford the transport and accommodation here.

It is conceivable that the family made the decision to live separately under the stress of survival. China's dualistic rural-urban system has contributed greatly to its industrialization and modernization. However, farmers have received relatively limited benefits from this process (Wang 2006). The provision of social security, public services including essential health care and compulsory education for rural migrants (and their families) largely lags behind. Although a few cities have made reluctant concessions to migrant workers, most migrant workers cannot afford the high living expenses of bringing the entire family to the city. On the other hand, current policies and regulations on land management prohibit farmers from selling land, which may mean they lack the initial financial capital needed to settle in cities. The decision-making is based on factors including the following: income from urban work is higher than from farming; the costs of living in cities are too high; education and living costs in rural areas are affordable. This leaves families no choice other than the migrant route: to carry out labour work in cities and leave other family members behind in rural communities.

'She works hard': migrant husbands know their wives are suffering from hard work

JR: In your opinion, what is the hardest thing for your wife? What are you most worried about for her? What does your wife worry most about you?

MA: The hardest thing for my wife is the excessive workload. Though she is in poor health, she still works hard. She works on household chores and farming from early morning till late at night, and has no time to relax. She suffers from chronic stomach problems; that is the thing I am most worried about. The only thing I can do is to earn more money. My wife always asks me to take good care of myself. She worries about many things to do with me, such as my job, getting paid on time, food and living in the city. She is mostly worried about my safety.

JR: How do you and your wife think about your salary? How do you and your wife manage your income?

MA: My salary is not high although I work very hard, but it is higher than farming at home. We have to pay for our children's education, house building and medical treatment and so on. We manage our income together. I send my salary back through the bank or take it back myself when I go home. You can say that I am responsible for earning money and my wife for spending it.

Money is in fact one of the most important things to keep a good relationship between couples. If I couldn't earn money, my wife would be very worried or even annoyed. Sometimes my wife is very anxious about our bank balance, I can feel her anxiety, which depresses me very much. I have been working very hard but making money is not easy.

Xiang (2007) argued that left-behind people were not much worse off than those living with their family members, and Jacka (2014) also challenged the discourse that left-behind

women were a ‘vulnerable group’ of passive dependents, sidelined by modernization and abandoned by their families. However, the interview with Mr. Ma demonstrated that left-behind women suffer from ‘three big mountains’, i.e., heavy workloads, psychological stress and no safety (Chen, Qin, and Zhu 2005). In Ma’s case, his wife suffers from heavy workloads, money worries and emotional stress.

Heavy workloads are the largest challenge for left-behind women, especially for those whose children are very young and parents are old so they both need care and support. Mu and van de Walle (2011) believe the women left behind are doing more farm work than would have otherwise been the case, and this may be a persistent effect and not just a temporary readjustment.

This case study also shows that the emotional stress left-behind wives experience is due not only to heavy workloads but also to financial worries, which previous researchers usually overlooked. On the one hand, rural families’ livelihoods have improved greatly due to remittances from migration; on the other hand, both the migrants and the left-behind family members are working harder and harder as they are very anxious about falling into poverty again. This has had huge effects on left-behind women’s lives and physical and mental health.

‘She can do it’: left-behind women’s agency and changes in gender relations

JR: Is your wife able to do all the jobs at home? What do you think of it?

MA: After I came out, she has improved a lot in many ways. She has learned how to plant corn, potato and vegetables since I left. She complained that she had to learn farming during the first two years, but now she rarely complains, she can do it. She can manage these stressful and time-consuming tasks, and she also gets help from relatives and neighbours. Now farming is getting easier as she only plants maize instead of wheat, which needed more work and inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides. My wife also has to participate in some village public activities including village elections, village meetings and claiming farming subsidies, etc. For important things, we discuss and decide together, but for some trivial things, I let her decide herself.

Mr. Ma trusts that his wife has largely improved her ability to manage farming, housework, financial matters and village public affairs, which shows the autonomy left-behind women have gained. This displays to some extent the enhanced agency of left-behind women. Jacka (2014) suggested that emphasizing and enhancing the agency of ‘vulnerable groups’ is crucial both to their own well-being and to broader development toward a just social order. It is important to articulate left-behind women’s agency while recognizing their difficulties and sufferings.

Men’s migration has altered the division of labour in families, which further enhanced women’s ability and agency. This has not only contributed to more egalitarian gender relations but also improved women’s awareness of gender inequality. In this way, migration has played a positive role (Zhang and Gao 2014). However, this change has not completely transformed the traditional gender relation of ‘husband dominating while wife is subordinate’ and ‘men in charge of external affairs and women in charge of internal affairs’. Crucial decisions are mainly made by the husband and carried out by the left-behind wife in consultation with him. Thus, the migrant husband is still at the core of the family power structure. Despite women’s empowerment and the gain in agency, patriarchal power relations within rural households remain intact (Zhang 2013).

‘I don’t worry about this’: physical separation of marriage life

JR: How do you interact with each other? Will physical separation affect your relationship? What is your comment on extramarital relationships?

MA: Although it only takes me three hours to go home by train, I don’t go back often because I don’t have holidays and I also want to earn more money. We keep in touch via cell phone. I call her once a week and we send text messages to each other at times. We tell each other everyday stories about things that have happened, and have a very peaceful relationship. If we were both together every day at home, we would surely quarrel about minor things. I suppose this is the good side of living apart – a stable relationship.

I consider extramarital relationships a bad thing. I know many of my co-workers and friends develop this kind of relationship; it is getting more and more common now. They are not bad guys but they do bad things like this. I suppose it happens because of the long separation from their wives. My wife and I do care for each other and get together once every two or three months, I trust my wife. My parents live with her and my relatives live around our house so I don’t worry about this kind of thing.

Mr. Ma doesn’t think living apart from his wife has a negative impact on his marriage. Instead, he tends to think temporary separation may help avoid quarrels. He admits that some or even many of the migrant workers around him are prone to extramarital affairs. Some migrants form so-called ‘temporary couples’ to meet physical and psychological needs. Many temporary couples in fact don’t expect a stable or permanent relationship, but prefer to maintain their marriages with their left-behind or absent wives or husbands.

On the other hand, husbands of left-behind wives often overlook women’s personal safety as they believe their wives live in a relatively stable and familiar environment. In fact, there are increasing cases of left-behind women being sexually assaulted or raped. Long-term sexual repression and lack of protection make left-behind women more vulnerable to sexual temptation, assault and rape than before.

‘Earning money is important’: the role of father, husband and son

JR: How do you think of your role as a husband, a father and a son?

MA: This is a difficult question. As a husband, I work hard and am responsible for earning money. I don’t waste money, don’t gamble, and I am loyal to my wife. I think I am a responsible husband. But my wife still lives in constant fear of poverty. I can’t help but feel very bad. As a father of two kids, I can’t live with them as I have to earn money for their education so that they can get away from the village in the future. Luckily, they still have their mother with them at home. As a son, I want my father and mother to have good health and be happy. I want life to be easy for them in their old age. At this moment, they are seemingly healthy, but I have to save money for their future possible medical expenses. All in all, earning money is important.

Mr. Ma thinks earning money and supporting his family financially are his main responsibility, rather than being present in the family as a father, a husband and son. Wages are seen as the lifeblood of the family back home and the reward for hard work in the harsh urban environment. Thus, many people choose to pay the price of physical separation from spouse and family. In many parts and sectors in China, one can find this rationale that earning money is more important than social welfare, which has a lot to do with the macro-societal transformation.

China has been undergoing tremendously fast economic growth. The society and the people are compelled by a discourse of developmentalism, which promises economic growth will bring a better life for everybody. Earning money to make a living and to provide family members with a better life is a central pursuit of individual families. Kulp (1925) defined familism in China as a form of social organization in which all values are determined by reference to the maintenance, continuity and functions of the family. In this developmentalist era, Chinese families operate as a social unit by all members making sacrifices to maintain the family and improve its prospects. Thus, a migrant like Mr. Ma thinks he is a responsible father, husband and son, even though he cannot be with his family.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Chen, C.Y., Y.Z. Qin, and G.L. Zhu. 2005. Three big mountains upon left-behind women. *Semimonthly* 11: 16–21.
- Connelly, R., K. Roberts, and Z.Z. Zheng. 2012. The role of children in the migration decisions of rural Chinese women. *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 1: 93–111.
- Fan, C.C. 2004. Out to the city and back to the village: the experiences and contributions of rural women migrating from Sichuan and Anhui. In *On the move, women and rural-to-urban migration in contemporary China*, ed. A.M. Gaetano and T. Jacka, 177–207. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jacka, T. 2014. Left-behind and vulnerable? conceptualising development and older women's agency in rural China. *Asian Studies Review* 38, no. 2: 186–204.
- Kulp II, D.H. 1925. *Country life in South China: The sociology of familism, volume I, phoenix village, Kwangtung, China*. New York City: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Mu, R., and D. van de Walle. 2011. Left behind to farm? Women's labour re-allocation in rural China. *Labour Economics* 18, no. 1: S83–S97.
- Wang, C.G. 2006. A study of floating rural people's 'semi-urbanization'. *Sociological Studies* 125, no. 5: 107–22.
- Wu, H.F., and J.Z. Ye. 2010. The psychological impact of male migration on left-behind women. *Journal of Zhejiang University (Social Science Edition)* 1: 11–20.
- Xiang, B. 2007. How far are the left-behind left behind? a preliminary study in rural China. *Population, Space Place* 13, no. 3: 179–91.
- Xiang, L.P. 2006. Rural left-behind women: A disadvantaged group deserves attention. *Guangxi Social Sciences* 1: 176–80.
- Xu, C.X. 2010. The family pressure of rural left-behind women and its influential factors in west China. *Population and Economy* 1: 73–8.
- Zhang, N.N. 2013. Rural women migrant returnees in contemporary China. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, no. 1: 171–88.
- Zhang, C.H. and Q.J. Gao. 2014. The impact of rural-urban migration on gender relations of rural-urban migrant households in China. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4, no. 2: 183–205.

Jing Rao is an associate professor at the College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University. She has a PhD in development studies. Her research focuses on rural politics and sociology studies, covering mainly rural governance and public management, rural environment, rural education and social impact assessment for rural development projects. Email: raojing@cau.edu.cn

Community members' perspectives on left-behind women

Baoyin Ding

Left-behind women need to interact with other community members in their everyday lives, including members of their families, such as their children and parents-in-law, and also people from other families. Previous studies tend to emphasize the negative impacts for women of being left behind (Xiang 2006; Zhou 2007). The mass media are also more likely to choose extreme cases to give the impression that all left-behind women live miserable lives. Although difficulties and pressures are part of most left-behind women's lives, one cannot conclude that their lives are totally different from those of other women. In fact, many families choose for some members to migrate in order to improve their livelihoods. To a certain degree, migration and the resulting left-behind population in rural China have become rites of passage, replacing the ideal scenario of family life which assumes all family members stay together.

The village I studied is in Henan province. Rice, wheat and rapeseed are the main crops. There are 760 households and 3340 people in the village, and nearly 1400 men and women work outside, mainly in Guangdong Province. The per capita arable land is 1.4 *mu*. In the early years of reform and opening up in the 1980s, some villagers started migrating to work in a city, making this one of the earliest labour-sending villages. About two thirds of the village labour force are now working outside, mainly in Guangdong Province.

I interviewed people from non-left-behind families, including women and men, and also collected information from left-behind children and elderly people in the left-behind women's families. The villagers see migration as a natural and normal phenomenon for people who don't have special skills to make money in the village: they see working in cities as the only way to 'survive'. When family members cannot all migrate to work together, the husband usually migrates alone, leaving the wife behind. As one villager explained, 'If we don't migrate, we may be able to have rice to eat, but we can't make money. Now we need money for everything, like building a house, paying for children's education and keeping up social relationships'. Wang, a 51-year-old woman, summarized the situation of families without migrant workers:

Those couples who don't migrate can be divided into three categories. First, some families can rent a substantial amount of land to cultivate, and make enough money from the land to meet their needs. Second, they may do some business in the village or nearby. Third, they may need to look after family members, such as infants, elderly or sick people, or they themselves may be too old or sick or disabled to migrate.

An important reason for women staying behind is the increasing emphasis on children's education, which needs more attention from the parents. Wang said:

If the grandparents are too old to take care of their grandchildren, one of the couple must stay at home. Usually the women take responsibility for caring for children. Even if the children could go to the city and study there with their parents, most of them choose to come back before joining junior high school as different regions in China have different text books and different entrance exams for high schools or universities. Some rich families will send their children to the schools in the county town that are considered better quality education and the women will accompany their children to the county. If not, the children will enter local schools and be looked after by their mothers in the village. And women left behind can learn about new

rural policies and new agricultural technologies while their husbands are working outside. The families can make better decisions because they have access to information from both the urban and rural environments.

Fortress besieged psychology¹⁰: sympathy and jealousy from non-left-behind women

Yang is a 50-year-old woman, whose husband used to work away from home but returned after getting injured in the city. She has experiences of being left behind and non-left behind.

- BD: What is the difference between left-behind women and non-left-behind women?
 YANG: Generally speaking, left-behind women are better off economically than non-left-behind ones. But if their husbands can't earn money in cities, the women will become very anxious about their livelihoods. We need money for everything: food, clothes, children's education, building a house, etc. If the men can earn money to raise the family's standard of living, life is better. I would rather lead a rich but separated life.
- BD: So what are the negative impacts on left-behind women?
 YANG: There are many aspects. First, women have to bear more burdens. You used to work together with your husband before he migrated, but now you have to work all by yourself. Women have to do all kinds of work. Especially during the busy season, women have to shoulder very heavy labour burdens. If elderly family members or children get ill and they can't get help from others, the women will suffer the psychological stress of being helpless.

Migration can have both positive and negative impacts for left-behind families. According to villagers, the main advantage of migration is being financially better off, but at the same time women have more stress from housework, care work and farm work. Although in most cases a migrant worker husband boosts the family income, some men spend most of the money in cities, taking little back to the family. Some women don't receive any money at all. Some non-left-behind women hold a contradictory attitude towards left-behind women. On one hand, they express sympathy for the women's heavy burdens and pressures. On the other hand, they are jealous of the left-behind women who have relatively better economic conditions. And the left-behind women hold a similar attitude towards non-left-behind women. This 'fortress besieged psychology' (*weicheng xinli*) is revealed in a series of contradictory answers to some of my questions. When I asked if left-behind women have more freedom than non-left-behind women do, two women in the village gave different answers.

Left-behind women have more freedom because they are in charge of the money at home. Usually they have more spending money than non-left-behind women. And they can decide many things on their own. For example, a left-behind woman can eat what she wants to eat and buy what she needs. They also deal with a lot of public affairs, which are usually managed by men. (Bai, 49 years old)

They have less freedom because they have to do all kinds of work and have no time to go outside. If a non-left-behind woman wants to go to the township, her husband could take her there on his motorbike. But the left-behind women can't go there so easily. Maybe they have more power over managing the money, but more power means more pressures and

¹⁰The term 'fortress besieged' psychology comes from a French proverb: 'Marriage is like a fortress besieged: those who are outside want to get in, and those who are inside want to get out'.

responsibilities. When they spend money, they have to consider all the family members and not just themselves. (Sun, 45 years old)

From these contradictory statements we could see that the left-behind women have more freedom over money and decision-making, but less free time due to heavy workloads. Some villagers believe that this freedom can be exchanged for money. A 31-year-old woman said:

Actually left-behind women's workloads are not as heavy as you think. They have money, so they can use money to reduce the burdens on their shoulders. For example, if I want to eat pies, I have to make them by myself. But they could just buy some from the market. When the busy season comes, they could hire somebody and rent machines to do the farm work. They can choose to have easier lives.

The attitudes towards left-behind women influence the amount of assistance they get. Although they can get help from other villagers – for instance, neighbours could take care of their children after school, and their relatives could help them in the field – they get this help in their roles as neighbours, friends or relatives, not as left-behind women. The villagers won't help them spontaneously. A 42-year-old man said:

We know some of the left-behind women's lives are not easy, but we won't help them unless they ask us to. First, there are too many left-behind women in the village. We can't help everyone. So who shall we help? Second, as men, if we always help them, other people will start gossiping about us. And what's more, everyone is busy and everyone wants to have a rest after work, so nobody wants to do more work. However, if people from two families are good friends, and the left-behind woman needs help, we will help her. Usually, the left-behind woman asks my wife for help. In that situation I'll go to help her. Or the left-behind women could hire someone to work for them. If they employ us, nobody will gossip about that.

A 48-year-old non-left-behind woman said:

There are few differences between left-behind women and us. The only difference is that they have money and we don't. Their living standards are better than ours. Why should we help them? Being left-behind doesn't mean they need help. Maybe some non-left-behind families have more difficulties. We should help poor people because you can do nothing without money. The government should help the disabled or childless elderly people, not left-behind women.

Separate for a better life: the perspective of family members

Children in left-behind families are aware of the pressures on their mothers. Chen, a 13-year-old girl, said, 'My mom always works hard. There is too much housework and farm work. Her back always hurts after doing farm work and her fingers are often cut in winter. This summer, she got poisoned when she was spraying pesticide'. Li, a 13-year-old boy, said,

When the flood came, my dad was not at home. My mom didn't know how to drain the land, so all the crops were destroyed. My mom wanted to ask for help, but other people could only help us after they had drained their own land. I saw my mom weeping at night.

Ambition for their children encourages parents to migrate to work, which often leaves the dual responsibilities of looking after children and farming to their grandparents (Wu 2011). However, grandparents may be unable to meet the high expectations of modern society and education. So, some women choose to stay with their children while their husbands work in

the cities. Zeng, a 70-year-old woman who lives with her daughter-in-law, shared her opinion.

Everybody knows that children want to live with their parents, not only their father or mother. However, somebody has to leave to make money to pay for their education. This kind of arrangement is at least better than both parents migrating. Some parents leave their children with their grandparents, if they think the grandparents are not too old to look after their grandchildren. But grandchildren can be easily spoiled by their grandparents. The mother won't spoil her children, but mothers are too busy to take care of them. Some women find it difficult to help their children because of their limited education. It is also difficult for women to discipline naughty children, who tend to be more afraid of their strict fathers.

Children also have conflicting feelings about their fathers' absence. Liu, a 13-year-old boy, said:

In my opinion, I am a mouse while my dad is a cat. My dad never beats me, but I am afraid of him. My mom often scolds me, even beats me, but I am not afraid of her. I don't want my dad to go away to work because he could help mom at home and he always gives me pocket money. But sometimes I want him to go away so that I won't feel afraid when I don't do well in exams, and because when he comes back he always brings books and gifts for me.

The relationships between left-behind women and their parents-in-law change after husbands migrate. Some parents-in-law are young and able to help left-behind women in their daily lives. The fathers-in-law help with farm work and the mothers-in-law with housework. Even when the parents-in-law are too old to farm, they try their best to reduce the burdens of left-behind women. Zeng said:

My son works away from home to make money and my daughter-in-law works at home to look after the child. We are too old to raise our grandson. Only my daughter-in-law can educate him well. When the boy is naughty, she can frighten him and beat him. We couldn't beat him because his mother would be unhappy. When the busy season comes, my husband helps her in the field so she doesn't have to hire other people. She is very glad at that time because we save her money. I can't do heavy work so I do some housework such as washing clothes and feeding livestock to help her.

When parents-in-law are not able to work, the husbands' absence means more burdens to the left-behind women. They have to look after family members and do farm work at the same time. The parents-in-law may receive less care during busy seasons. Sang, a 60-year-old woman, said, 'After my son migrated out, my daughter-in-law is too busy. We are not able to help her, so we try to not trouble her'.

The absence of their husbands creates more opportunities for left-behind women and their parents-in-law to interact with each other. The remittance from men also links the whole families. Sang commented on the relationships in left-behind families:

Money plays important roles in family relations. If my son didn't go away to work, after doing farm work, he would quarrel with my daughter-in-law about money. The relationship between them wouldn't be good until my son earns money by working outside. My daughter-in-law will be glad when she gets money from her husband. Then, she will be happy to take good care of us.

The left-behind women always feel lonely at home. They have to deal with everything without their husbands. Although they can use the telephone to discuss some issues, it's different and doesn't always help. Some women have divorced, especially young women of 20 or 30. But I don't want to attribute these divorces to migration or separation. These problems existed before

migration. Divorces are always do with personalities. If there are problems in a relationship, it won't improve even if the husband stays in the village.

Now most young couples migrate together, so they won't face this separation problem. Middle-aged couples are less affected by separation than young ones. Frankly speaking, most marital relationships won't be affected by long-term separation. Once working in the cities, the husbands give all their attention to making money. They send money back regularly and have no time or money for philandering. Both the husband and wife understand that they separate in order to have a better life in future. So it doesn't matter that they can't live together.

This separation, instead of harming the relationship between husband and wife, sometimes improves it. They don't have the opportunities to quarrel over little things. We always say absence makes the heart grow fonder (*xiaobie sheng xinhun*). They feel happier when they are reunited after separation. The husbands earn money in cities and the wives take care of the families at home. Neither can be replaced by each other.

The dilemma in agriculture: employing someone or exploiting themselves

Migration leads to the phenomenon of agricultural feminization, or women doing an increasing proportion of farm work. The women undertake dual responsibilities, taking care of family members and doing farm work. Yang commented on the impact on agriculture:

BD: How is agricultural production affected by husbands' migration?

YANG: Many women don't know how to use pesticides because the men always do this kind of work. They have to learn how to spray pesticide. Women are also not able to do some of the heavy work on their own, such as transporting rice seedlings and draining land. As they also have heavy housework and care work, lots of left-behind women decide to cultivate less land. Some pieces of land, especially those further from the village, have been abandoned for several years.

BD: Apart from cultivating less land, are there any other measures to reduce the burdens of left-behind women?

YANG: If their parents-in-law are able to work, they can help with both housework and farm work. It's hard to find other people to help during busy seasons, except people in your own extended family, because everyone is busy at that time. Frankly speaking, the biggest problem for left-behind women is lack of money. If they have enough money, they can just leave the land, or lease it to others. They can also hire someone to do the farm work. As long as their husbands earn money, the left-behind women's lives will not be so hard. Now, people can rent machines to plough and harvest, and you can hire people to transplant rice seedlings. If their husbands don't earn enough money, or the left-behind women are unwilling to spend money to rent machines and hire people, they will suffer more from the farm work. Moreover, threshing and ploughing are too difficult for women; sometimes they have to hire people. As a result, the costs of production increase. It's really a dilemma for left-behind women.

The employment of hired workers in agricultural production is the result of the marketization and commercialization of rural China (Ren and Ye 2011). Traditionally, villagers usually exchanged labour with others in the busy seasons. Now, more people choose to employ people instead of exchanging labour. Yang said:

Everyone has a lot of work to do in busy seasons. They can't help you until they've finished their own work. In this situation, you have to hire some workers. If we exchange labour in the traditional way, someone helps you today and you have to help them another day. Left-behind

women are usually too busy to help others. So they prefer to employ people. You work for me today and get the money today. No one owes anyone anything.

BD: If left-behind women cannot manage all of their land, should they transfer their land to others?

YANG: When a left-behind woman can't manage all her land, and can't find someone to help her, the land will be abandoned or transferred to someone else. Transferring it to someone else is better than it being abandoned. Some people transfer their land to their relatives when they migrate out; when they return from working in cities, they can get the land back and farm on it. Some people lease their land to specialized farm enterprises. They can get rent from the enterprise and keep the seed subsidies and comprehensive agricultural subsidies from the government. Every year they can get 500 yuan per *mu* for land rent and about 100 yuan per *mu* from the government. But the villagers won't give up farming permanently, because you can't migrate to work forever. All the villagers sign short-term contracts in case they return from the cities. When you are getting old and can't work away from home, you have to come back to farm again.

BD: What happens when land is transferred to others?

YANG: Usually each family keeps a small piece of land to produce food for its own consumption. You have less farm work but fewer crops to sell. Sometimes you have to buy some rice. Fewer people raise poultry and livestock as there is less feed for them. So you have to buy pork and chicken, especially during Spring Festival. In the past people slaughtered the pigs they reared before the Chinese New Year and sold the surplus meat for money. Now, they have to buy pork, chicken and even rice.

These interviews with villagers illustrate that the arrangement whereby husbands go away to work and wives stay behind is accepted by everyone. It has become the norm for Chinese rural families. As a result of this normalization, the villagers tend to pay more attention to the beneficial effects of migration and are used to the adverse impacts. Non-left-behind women are ambivalent about the lives of left-behind women: they envy their relative affluence but are not willing to separate from their husbands and carry all the responsibility on their own, or their husbands are not able to migrate out due to certain health problems. This contradictory psychology of non-left-behind women and the 'fortress besieged' psychology between left-behind and non-left-behind women demonstrate the conflict between a comfortable, easy life and an opportunity to get money. The dual structure of the society forces the peasants to choose between staying and migrating. Once you've made your choice, you won't get the benefit of the other.

Although left-behind women get little support from villagers or the government, their families understand the difficulties and pressures they face. From these interviews we can see that most of the time, family relations are improved after men's migration. However, we should note that the remittance plays an important role in these relations. The left-behind women are separated from their husbands physically, but they are closely linked economically. The living conditions of left-behind women largely depend on the money from their husbands. With the money, they can work less hard and rest more. Children are also excited by gifts from their fathers. Relationships with in-laws are also improved.

Some writers believe that this pattern of division of labour may improve women's status in the family (Ye and Wu 2009). However, we did not see this. Women's increased involvement in labour makes no difference to their involvement in decision-making processes. The marketization and commercialization of agricultural production processes emphasize the importance of the remittance from migrant husbands – so agricultural production still

depends on the men's input, but in terms of money rather than labour. Women's unpaid care work and housework are still ignored, especially when these works could be done by using money. For instance, women could buy bread instead of making it, or send the children to boarding school instead of day school. So women's contribution is still a long way from being recognized in the new pattern of division of labour.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Ren, S.Y., and J.Z. Ye. 2011. An analysis of the phenomenon of labour exchange and employment in Li village in context of marketization and comparison with Lu village as well. *Chinese Rural Economy* 6: 72–81.
- Wu, H.F. 2011. Children's diaries: how life has changed since parents migrated?. In GRASSROOTS VOICES/Left-behind children: the social price of China's economic boom, ed. J.Z. Ye. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38(3), 613–50.
- Xiang, L.P. 2006. Rural left-behind women: a vulnerable group of concern. *Guangxi Social Sciences* 1: 176–80.
- Ye, J.Z., and H.F. Wu. 2009. The impact of husbands going out to work on the marriage relations of women at home. *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou* 3: 130–34.
- Zhou, F.L. 2007. Study on left-behind wives in China. *Northwest Population* 1: 63–6.

Baoyin Ding is a lecturer at the College of Humanities, Jilin Agricultural University. His research interests include development intervention and social change, and left-behind populations. Email: dby95@163.com

Local government's perspectives on left-behind women

Keyun Zhang

The issues of left-behind women have attracted many researchers and have captured the media's interest, resulting in multiple papers and reports on this subject being published in the last decade. Heavy workload, emotional stress and lack of security are three problems encountered by left-behind women which have been highlighted in the media and of which there is wide awareness (Chen, Qin, and Zhu 2005). Left-behind women's marriages, mental health and family stress, and social action to support left-behind women have been explored by scholars (Xu 2009; Ye and Wu 2009; Zhou 2010; Du 2012). Scholars have concluded that rural left-behind women have to care for their families at the expense of their personal development, and they are marginalized because they are unable to catch up with the country's rapid development. As part of 'sannong'¹¹ issues, left-behind women have also

¹¹The three aspects – 'agriculture' (*nongye*), 'countryside' (*nongcun*) and 'peasantry' (*nongmin*) – are called 'sannong' in Chinese, *san* meaning 'three', and *nong* meaning 'agro'. All three words in Chinese begin with *nong*.

attracted the attention of the central government, which recently began to address this issue. In 2011, the All China Women's Federation¹² (henceforth, Women's Federation, or WF) launched *Care Action for Women and Children Left Behind in Rural Areas*. This initiative aims to take targeted measures and provide effective assistance and services for women and children left behind in rural areas, to reduce the burden of agriculture, help guide children's study and ensure women's personal security. The Women's Federation, together with the national Working Committee on Children and Women (WCCW)¹³ at county and township levels, has a substantive role in improving women's situations. However, little is known about how the county- and township-level governments perceive the issues related to left-behind women, and how they will adjust their policies.

In order to understand the local government perspective on left-behind women, I visited Sandan County, one of the largest counties in Hunan province in population terms and with the largest number of migrated rural people. I interviewed officials from WCCW and WF from the county and township levels, and also went to Hutun village and interviewed village leaders. Two officials and two village leaders gave interviews. They were: Mrs Feng, Vice Director of Sandan County WCCW; Mrs Chen, Libu Township WF Chairwoman; Mr. Wang, Hutun Village Director; and Mrs Yuan, Village Women's Director, who is also a left-behind woman.

Agriculture is the main industry in Sandan County, and rice is the main crop. Since the 1990s, young labourers in Sandan County have migrated to the city to seek waged jobs. The rural population is now composed mainly of elderly people, women and children. An estimated 800,000 farmers from the county work in factories in south China, and most return home only once a year.

Through these interviews, I wanted to determine how the government perceives the issues of left-behind women and these women's role in their families and communities when their husbands are absent. I also wanted to determine how the government reacts to these women's sacrifices for their families in this transition period for China and how it will address these. This information will assist in gaining insight into how local government identifies left-behind women as a social issue and its strategies to cope with these issues in the context of economic development.

Local government does not perceive left-behind women as a vulnerable group, except in the context of mental health

Although left-behind women's issues have become one of the focuses of development problems in both the academic field and public opinion, they have not been a focus for local government. One of the leaders of county-level WF explained:

We think there is no big issue for left-behind women, unlike for children and elderly people, who are not able to take care of themselves. We haven't heard of any bad things happening to women left behind. We don't know the exact number of left-behind women, but we do record the left-behind elderly and left-behind children and have taken some actions to care for them.

It is not surprising that the township or county government doesn't know the number of left-behind women: obviously, left-behind women have not been a focus for the WF. Left-

¹² The Women's Federation is a 'mass organization' affiliated with the government and answerable to the Chinese Communist Party. It has line agencies from province to township.

¹³ WCCW is the state agency responsible for coordinating and promoting the government departments to implement laws and regulations, policies and measures for women and children. WCCW has line agency co-ordinates with WF from province to county.

behind women are only regarded in terms of serving left-behind children and elderly people. This is consistent with the point of view of Chairwoman Chen of WF in Libu Township. Mrs Chen has worked for the WF for five years, since graduating from university. She is a young mother who has a two-year-old son. Mrs Chen is the only staff member in the office, and said she is busy every day. Mrs Chen does not think left-behind women have any problems.

I even envy left-behind women's lives, most of them just stay home to take care of their children, they aren't busy, and they have plenty of leisure time. They go to play *Mah-Jongg* after sending their children to school, not like me, busy in my work all day with no time to take care of my little son.

This view also was shared by some villagers, who didn't think that left-behind women are a vulnerable group who need government concern. Yuan, the Village Women's Director of Hutun village, is responsible for women's affairs in the village, such as family planning and health services. She is a young woman with two children. Yuan worked in a factory in South China for many years. Four years ago, since her husband found a waged job abroad, she started to stay at home to take care of the children and her parents-in-law.

I am a left-behind woman and stay home to take care of my children and family. Working in the city before I got married taught me become a strong woman. It was a tough time in my life, you can imagine – a young girl from the countryside who works in the city has to deal with many difficulties by herself. You have to become strong, otherwise you won't last. I think those left-behind women who have worked before have the same point of view as me. We are not vulnerable people. We can manage our lives and we do not need help from the government.

Although a Village Women's Director is always a capable woman or from a powerful and well-off family, Yuan is an exceptional case. However, she helps us to understand that young left-behind women who have previously worked in a city can be stronger and more self-confident than other women.

Yuan's words were beyond our expectations. Consistent with the media and researchers, we expected that government or village leaders would mention many problems and difficulties that left-behind women encounter. However, the people I interviewed from the county and township levels did not think left-behind women have difficulties in agriculture, family care or other aspects of their lives. The only exception was mental health problems caused by the long separation from their husbands.

WF officials at the county and township levels perceived left-behind women as vulnerable to mental health problems. They think long separation from their husbands results in a low quality of married life for these women. Loneliness can damage women's mental health, as supported by one WF staff member:

We didn't record left-behind women or take action for them, which does not mean we do not need to show our concern for them. Left-behind women are marginalized people. They are separated from their husbands for most of the year; their life is not easy. As we know, it is hard to maintain a good marriage if the couple lives apart most of the year. When a husband is absent from home, what can fill the emotional gap for these women? We should pay attention to their mental health. But those women who are left behind at home can manage by themselves; otherwise they would not decide to stay home. The husband would stay home or the wife would go to the city with their husband.

At the township WF office, when we asked if the divorce rate among left-behind women is higher than non-left-behind women. Mrs Chen said:

As you know, WF is an organization to help women to solve marriage problems. If women in the villages needed help they would come to me, but few left-behind women come to ask for help with problems in their marriage. We don't have more cases of divorce among left-behind women than other women. I believe there are two reasons for this: one is the cost – a new marriage is very expensive – the other is that rural women are very conservative. They care about fellow villagers' gossip, so they are not likely to end their marriage, even when the relationship is broken and they have a low-quality married life.

I observed in Hutun village that the public infrastructure is poor. There is no public entertainment place where farmers can watch a movie or go to fitness classes, and there are no entertainment activities organized for women. However, one can find *Mah-Jongg* gambling everywhere in the village. *Mah-Jongg* is an important way for left-behind women to release their stress.

The points above reflect the views on left-behind women from the county and township levels of government. The government does not think that left-behind women have many difficulties needing attention, and believe that the main issues facing them are marital and mental health problems. Government staff think being left behind is just a way of life, and these women do not comprise a vulnerable group equivalent to left-behind children and elderly people, who need government action to assist them. To some degree, left-behind women are even regarded as a fortunate group with much leisure time.

Local government officials do not think left-behind women play important roles in agricultural production and public affairs

The local government staff I interviewed all think left-behind women play a very important role in caring for their families, but not in agriculture or in their communities.

In Chinese tradition and culture, people place great emphasis on the education of their children. Therefore, left-behind women regard caring for their school-aged children as an extremely important activity. From the interview with Mrs Feng, I learned that left-behind women tend to fall into two groups. One group stays home to take care of their young children because their grandparents are too old to do this; the other group consists of those who previously worked in the city and returned while their babies were breastfeeding, or to take special care of their children in their last year of junior high school or high school, supporting them as they prepare for the entrance exam to high school or university. Left-behind women play a very important role in caring for their families, and it makes little difference whether their husbands are absent or not.

The township leader I interviewed pointed out that caring for children in primary and junior high schools is not easy, because since 2001 many village schools have been merged with schools in towns or cities. As a result, there is only one primary school for five villages and there are only four junior high schools in the entire county, so many students have to travel a long distance to the township school. Left-behind women must then rent a house near the township school to take care of their children, which means they can't farm in the village or care for their elderly relatives. This is also one of the reasons why left-behind women don't play an important role in agriculture.

Local government staff members and village leaders don't think farming is a heavy burden for left-behind women. In recent years in most areas of the county, farmers now plant single-cropping rice instead of double-cropping rice. As the village leader, Mr. Wang, said:

The main labour of farming is done by aged people in most of the families – grandparents do the main work and women help. Here it is hilly area. As a draught animal, cattle can be used to

plough, but women are not capable to do [this]. Some of the villagers just contract their land to others and women just take care of children and don't need to do any farming. On the other hand, more and more villagers don't want to do farming anymore because they get less profit for harder work. They prefer to find a waged job and buy food rather than farming their land. More and more people have started to go to the city at a very early age and never had farming experience. When they come back to the village, they don't know how to farm.

At present, because of the patterns of migration and the context of agricultural development in the county, women are less involved in agriculture. Although the central government has several policies to support grain production, agriculture is now less profitable and less valued by villagers. In addition, as village schools have merged into township schools, women have to accompany children to the town or city, which also reduces the availability of women's labour in the village.

The local officials at different levels of government all think women's involvement in community management and public affairs is not much different than it was before men migrated to the cities. They think that women are less educated than men and likely to keep their traditional role, and it is hard to change that just because men are now working away from home. Mrs Feng said that the number of female village leaders hasn't increased in recent years, and there is no evidence of any increase in women participating in public affairs and community management.

Local government officials see economic development as the priority and the solution to all social problems, including left-behind women's issues

The WCCW/WF officials and staff members I interviewed think the best way to address left-behind people's issues is to promote local economies, which would result in rural labourers finding waged jobs in the county and not having to go far from their homes to work. One official said that in recent years, the county government has taken many measures to promote the local economy in order to attract more rural labourers to return home and work in the local factories. Mrs Feng said:

Sandan County has built an industrial zone and initiated a project to attract investment in the county since 2005. Local government has made huge investments in improving infrastructure and attracting big companies to launch their factories in the town. Now, there are 48 companies in the area; most of them are branches of big corporations. In order to persuade more people to work locally, the government also initiated a campaign in 2010 and delivered a letter with information about jobs to every farmer in all the villages. We hoped migrant workers would return to work in the local factories, but the campaign has not been successful. Although some migrant workers started to come back and find jobs locally, the number is small. The main reason is that people can get more money in the cities than if they work locally. Many people still think earning more money is more important than being with their family. So it could take more time to change their awareness on that.

According to an order from provincial WCCW/WF, Sandan WCCW/WF also launched policies to encourage rural women to develop businesses locally, such as a tax incentive and credit. Since 2009, Sandan WCCW/WF began to coordinate with the financial department to assist rural women in obtaining small subsidized loans to develop agriculture. Some of the left-behind women use these loans to develop their businesses, but only a very small percentage of these women do so. This is because the loans are very small, usually less than 2000 *yuan* per person, and the total amount of the project is also very small, usually less than 100,000 *yuan* each year. Because of a lack of human resource

input, the project is not sufficiently large for loan services for women to become a formal government project.

County WFs don't have left-behind women's issues as a focus of their daily work. When I asked how the county WCCW/WF addresses the issues of the left-behind, Mrs Feng said:

Our organization's task is to provide services and support for all the women in the city and the rural areas in order to promote their status. Our main work is legal advocacy, skills training, and organizing women's public activities, supporting poor women to develop their own business, etc. As you know, we have small loans targeted to support women entrepreneurs and self-employment. In rural areas, we don't treat left-behind women specially; our target is poorer women and we give them subsidies to help them to develop their farms. The main measure to promote women's status is to establish a Home for Women (*junv zhijia*) in every village, to provide services to women and children and their families. The activities have two components. One is education and guidance for women and children left behind, such as advocacy on relevant laws and regulations about women and children, training on agriculture technology, teaching about maternal and child health, and sharing experiences of family education. The other component is to help safeguard the rights of women and children, provide services for women and children on security, education, psychological counseling, and marriage and family relations and so on. But at the township and village level, it is difficult to carry out all this work because of the lack of human and material resources.

It appears that the lack of resources is another constraint that prevents local government from providing more support for left-behind women. The Sandan WF, together with WCCW, has a staff of four people and receives 40,000 or 50,000 *yuan* for office expenses from the county government each year, of which only 10,000 *yuan* is a fixed allocation. WF's influence is small compared to other government agencies. WF aims to help all women, but given their limited resources, they are not capable of providing special assistance to left-behind women.

In addition to the limited finances, the WCCW/WF system also has limited staff members. In each township, WF has only one staff member working on women's affairs. Libu township WF chairman Mrs Chen said:

Being an official working in the township government, you can't only do your own job. The township governor needs to do all the work designated from the up-line agency in different sectors. So I have to be involved in every aspect of the work as well as carrying out my own responsibilities. In the township, the big focus is economic development; the money used for promoting women's status is very limited. We do provide training to the female villagers two to three times every year, but only a small number of women can get the training, due to limited funds. There should be a township leader responsible for collaborating with different sectors together to help women, but we don't have this at present.

We can determine from the interviews that county WFs do not provide effective help to left-behind women, although the officials want to do more to help them. The main reason is that the organization does not have sufficient resources, and local government has not established a good mechanism to coordinate the work of relevant government departments. In fact, most of the time WF staff members have to work on economic development projects or other work, leaving them insufficient time for their own jobs. To some extent, local government also uses economic development as an excuse to ignore left-behind women's issues.

The interviews demonstrate that local government officials do not think left-behind women's issues are serious social problems as the media and scholars do. The officials at county and township levels think the main issues facing left-behind women are their

low quality of married life and mental health problems. They think left-behind women play very important and traditional roles in caring for their children and families, but not in agriculture or community public affairs. These responses are different from the views of scholars, as previously stated. The differences might reflect that left-behind women's lives are diverse in the context of different rural areas. But one can also conclude that addressing left-behind women's issues hasn't become a focus for local government; therefore, the officials are not able to discuss the issue in any depth.

Local government regards left-behind women's issues as individual issues or developmental problems within families. The WCCW/WF agencies at county and township levels are organizations that assist women and children with emergencies, but they lack the power and resources to initiate actions dealing with the difficulties left-behind women face daily. So it is easy to understand that the support for left-behind women and children initiated from the upper level of government, as mentioned in the beginning of this contribution, is hard to carry out at the local level.

Local government believes economic development can resolve left-behind people's issues. They hope that future industrialization, agricultural modernization and coordinated urbanization will resolve these problems. Developing the local economy to attract more labour to work locally is the main measure they are using. But, to some extent, this approach can also be an excuse for ignoring other left-behind women's problems.

The 2014 Central No. 1 Document issued by the CPC central committee and the State Council (2014) emphasizes that government departments should strengthen care and services for rural left-behind children, women, and elderly people. With the central government's policy support, one can hope that local governments will make some progress in caring for left-behind women.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Chen, C.Y., Y.Z. Qin, and G.L. Zhu. 2005. Three big mountains upon left-behind women. *Semimonthly* 11: 16–21.
- Du, J. 2012. A search for an effective social management mode of caring the women left in rural areas: a theoretical analysis of 'twin-track strategy'. *Collection of Women's Studies* 113, no. 5: 23–30.
- The CPC central committee, the State Council. 2014. Several opinions on deepening rural reform and accelerating agricultural modernization. http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2014-01/19/content_2570454.htm, 19 January [Accessed 20 December 2014].
- Xu, C.X. 2009. Study of physical and mental health of the women left in rural areas away from their husband: Reports from the rural areas in Sichuan. *South China Population* 94, no. 24: 49–56.
- Ye, J.Z., and H.F. Wu. 2009. Impacts of husband migration to left-behind women's marriage. *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou* 3: 130–34.
- Zhou, F.L. 2010. A study on family stress of women left in rural areas and its influence factors. *Population and Economics* 1: 63–6.

Keyun Zhang is a professor of sociology at the College of Humanities and Development Studies, China Agricultural University. Her research mainly focuses on migration and children's development, and on poverty and rural education policies. Email: zhangky@cau.edu.cn