



# Left-behind elderly: shouldering a disproportionate share of production and reproduction in supporting China's industrial development

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## GRASSROOTS VOICES

### **Left-behind elderly: shouldering a disproportionate share of production and reproduction in supporting China's industrial development**

Jingzhong Ye, Guest Editor

#### **Introduction: the issue of left-behind elderly people in the context of China's modernization**

Jingzhong Ye

Since the 1980s, China has undergone rapid industrialization, urbanization and marketization to accelerate economic growth and integration into the global market. Reform in rural areas dismantled the collective economy, endorsed a Household Responsibility System and restored family farming. Rural economic reform and the relaxation of the household registration system (*hukou*) have allowed the youngest and most dynamic laborers in rural areas to migrate into cities. They work in cities with the primary objective of earning cash income to support their families in the increasingly commoditized countryside, as well as to experience modern life in China's increasingly globalized cities. The large-scale movement of laborers from rural to urban areas started in the 1990s, and continues to this day (Pan, Lu, and Zhang 2012; He and Ye 2014). The employment of peasant workers in China continues to expand and reached 274 million in 2014, with 168 million migrant peasant workers and 106 *in situ* peasant workers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015).<sup>1</sup> According to estimates from the National Population and Family Planning Commission in 2009, there will be 500 million inhabitants in cities, 500 million in the countryside and 500 million floating between rural and urban areas in 30 years' time (Lv 2009).

The millions of peasant workers living in cities retain the right to their farm land at home, although the plots are generally far too small to meet their basic livelihood needs. However these migrant workers have never obtained the full institutional and social recognition of urban citizen workers (Sun 2003; Chen 2005; Zhao 2007) and have been assigned a special social category in between 'peasant' and 'citizen', labeled 'peasant workers' (*non-gmingong*) (Chen 2005). For most of them, urban areas are merely workplaces, not homes, largely because rural and urban areas have long been segregated, with separate economic and social structures. Individuals are registered as either rural or urban residents, and have access to different social security systems. The work and life of migrants can be characterized as marginal, transitory and precarious (Fu 2006; Ren and Pan 2007). Their

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<sup>1</sup>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.

marginalized status in the city also leads to a form of ‘split labour reproduction’ (Shen 2006) in which it is nearly impossible to migrate as a household unit, and some family members – especially children, elderly people and women – have to stay behind in the countryside. Therefore, a form of split family has come into being, as well as the phenomenon of rural populations being composed only of left-behind children, elderly and women. In Chinese, this left-behind population is dubbed the ‘386199’.<sup>2</sup> The socio-economic context of China’s internal migration has been described extensively in previous works (Ye and Pan 2011; He and Ye 2014; Wu and Ye 2014). While estimates differ, it is widely recognized that the number of left-behind people in rural China is large. Reports indicate that there were at least 47 million left-behind women (Zhang and Zhang 2006), 45 million left-behind elderly and 61 million left-behind children (ACWF 2013), meaning there is a left-behind population of at least 150 million people in rural China.

China’s policy on old age is strongly based on ‘familism’ (the subordination of individuals’ needs to those of the family), with a sharp rural–urban division. Three quarters of the elderly in rural areas are entirely supported by their families. The responsibility of the younger generation for their parents’ well-being is not only socially recognized, but also part of the national legal stipulation (Zeng 1991). This family support system is premised on the assumption that older adults will have living children, that at least some will co-reside or live nearby and that they will behave in a filial manner (Smith 1998). However, with the massive outflow of rural laborers, the long spatial and temporal separation between the caregivers and their vulnerable parents has increasingly become an obstacle preventing elderly people from accessing care through the traditional route, changing the basic traditional family support system. As the outflow of the rural younger generation will continue in the long term, together with the impact of the one-child family planning policy of over 40 years, this will surely pose a huge future challenge to the family provision of care for the rural elderly in China.

The international literature documents the impacts of rural labor migration, especially international migration, on elderly people in developing countries. Studies on transnational and internal migrants and their families show that migration is one of the key factors affecting the social support system for older people in developing countries (Martin 1989; Mason 1992). Many scholars in the field of ageing and the care of the elderly tend to be pessimistic and believe that labor migration intensifies the ageing problem and erodes the family care function, shaking the traditional pattern of care provision for the elderly, resulting in a decline of their welfare (Sen 1994). They argue that the outmigration of young people often has negative consequences for ageing rural parents, including loneliness, isolation, depression and even the loss of basic physical and economic support, and that geographic distance reduces the incidence of all types of help flowing between generations (Rossi and Rossi 1990). International migration particularly deprives older people of care (Vullnetari and King 2008) and some scholars are very concerned that modernization contributes to the abandonment of older people by their families (Aboderin 2004).

In contrast, some scholars who examine the perspectives of migrants and receiving cities suggest that young people’s migration does not necessarily threaten support for or cause emotional depression among their ageing parents. Instead, children’s migration has positive impacts on the rural elderly (Knodel and Saengtienchai 2007; Abas et al. 2009).

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<sup>2</sup>38 refers to 8 of March, Women’s Day, which applies to left-behind women; 61 refers to 1 June, Children’s Day, which refers to the left-behind children; 99 refers to 9 September in the Chinese lunar calendar, which refers to the left-behind elderly.

They argue that rural elderly people receive more remittances as well as new information from their children in cities (Stark and Lucas 1988; Van Wey 2004). Even when the adult children migrate great distances from home, filial loyalty and intergenerational transfers continue to be the main basis of systems for supporting the elderly (Ofstedal, Knodel, and Chayovan 1999; Velkoff 2001). Moreover, the possible negative impacts of migration on social support are mitigated by advances in communication technology and transportation. A form of 'long-distance elderly care' has emerged among migrants in which the family manages care-giving with the support of relatives and neighbors, which lessens the sense of abandonment of the elderly (Baldassar et al. 2007; Vullnetari and King 2008).

The international literature does provide a good foundation for discussions of left-behind elderly people in China, although it seldom addresses the Chinese context. For a long time, Chinese scholars have paid more attention to the economic contribution of migration to both the sending areas and receiving cities than to the impacts on the families and people left behind in the countryside. Only in the past five to 10 years has research been conducted touching the issue of rural left-behind elderly.

Within the available Chinese literature, one can find two sharply contrasting conclusions on the impacts of migration on rural left-behind elderly people: positive and negative. The majority of scholars in the field tend to believe that the massive rural-urban migration leads to negative impacts on rural elderly people, and weakens family-based elderly care provision, resulting in a serious care deficit for the rural elderly (Zhang 2002; Du et al. 2004; Zhou 2004). In terms of economic support, remittances from migrant children are usually unstable and low, and are often used for the expenses of the grandchildren, sometimes impoverishing the elderly (Zheng 2004; Wang 2007; Ye and He 2008). In terms of daily care provision, most scholars conclude that the spatial separation between adult children and elderly parents leads to a serious deficit in support with everyday life, medical help and security, and an increased workload for the elderly parents for family chores, childcare and farming (Du et al. 2004; Zhang and Li 2005; Sun 2006). In terms of emotional comfort, contact and interactions between migrant children and elderly parents are very limited. The telephone is often the main means for contact, but phone calls are usually between the migrants and their children, so separation has led to loneliness and everyday low quality of life for rural elderly people, whose emotional needs are barely satisfied (Du and Du 2002; Du 2004; Wang 2007; Ye and He 2008). As there is no well-established social security system for the rural elderly, the migration and absence of adult children have resulted in a serious shortage of economic support, daily care and emotional comfort for the rural left-behind elderly (Xie 2007).

By contrast, some research findings show that migration has positive impacts, particularly since remittances from migrant children contribute positively to their parents' economic situation. Migrant children tend to compensate financially for their absence and the lack of daily care, thus improving the standard of living and medical care of their elderly parents (Du et al. 2004; Sun 2006). Some argue that the inflow of cash and material goods can increase the status of the left-behind elderly amongst village fellows which can, to some extent, mitigate their loneliness (Du et al. 2007). Some scholars do not think the migration of the young generation changes their concept of filial duty to their elderly parents, so the status of elderly people in the family does not change (Zhang, Jin, and Feldman 2007).

The above review indicates that the impacts of migration on the rural elderly are complicated and depend on many interlocking factors. Some of these have been briefly discussed above, although others, such as the asset position of the elderly parents and job security of the younger generation, have been less addressed in the literature. There is

no consensus over whether migration has brought positive or negative impacts to left-behind elderly people. This theme is closely connected to many socio-economic factors, such as agrarian change, rural governance and public policy, and has not been sufficiently discussed amongst academics, the media and policy circles. Moreover, to date, discussion of the rural left-behind population in China has been quite limited amongst Chinese academics, and is little understood by international society. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* has already published one Grassroots Voices feature on China's rural left-behind children (Ye 2011) and one on left-behind women (Ye 2016). This collection completes a trilogy on the 'three left-behind groups' (*san liushou*) in rural China, which will contribute to historical documentation of the rural-urban interconnection, one of the key themes of agrarian change in contemporary China (Bernstein 2015).

This collection is based on materials collected by a research team from the College of Humanities and Development Studies at China Agricultural University. Since 2004, the team has been researching the issues related to China's internal rural-urban migration and the associated left-behind population.<sup>3</sup> The work started from sociological analysis of the impacts of rural-urban labor migration, and has incorporated perspectives from politics, political economy and bio-politics. The team has been at the center 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. Rich research data have been collected during the last 10 years.

This collection starts with a portrayal of a 69-year-old man, Zhang,<sup>4</sup> whose story is typical of thousands of people in rural China. His son and daughter-in-law have both migrated to work in cities, leaving his grandson and granddaughter at home. Zhang and his wife shoulder many farming and family responsibilities. They do what they can to support their son and his wife. In Zhang's view, working in the city is the only option for his son and daughter-in-law; there is no alternative. The massive migration away from rural areas has shifted agriculture: first it became feminized and now is increasingly carried out by older people. Mechanization and the widespread availability of commercialized waged labor have made it possible for elderly people to adjust the amount of land they farm or to employ farmhands if they are short of labor. However, almost all of them choose to work on the land, to safeguard the family's livelihood and ease the financial burdens on their children. Zhang is worried about what will happen when he and his wife lose the ability to take care of themselves, because of the burden this will put on his children. Zhang and his wife have the heavy responsibility of raising their grandchildren, but see

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<sup>3</sup>The research team pioneered the first comprehensive research on left-behind children in China in 2004, and expanded the research to left-behind women and left-behind elderly people in 2006. The team has 26 members, including faculty and postgraduate researchers. The team has also conducted interventions aimed at helping the target group of left-behind populations in several rural communities in China. The team's research is leading work within Chinese academic communities and has generated in-depth 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' Programme, The Programme for New Century Excellent Talents in University (NCET-06-0118) (China), and The National Social Science Fund of China (Project No. 13ASH007).

<sup>4</sup>The names of interviewees, villages, townships and counties in this contribution have all been changed.

this as unavoidable. The paper ends with a critical analysis of the issue of left-behind elderly people from the perspective of political economy.

The second paper is an in-depth interview with a migrant son, Huang, in order to show the career path of a male migrant, his interactions with his parents in the countryside and his perceptions of their life during his absence. The case study reveals a 'floating' situation typical among migrant workers in China, with insecure jobs, unprotected rights and frequent changes of residence. According to Huang, migration has both advantages and disadvantages for the family, but there are more disadvantages for the left-behind elderly because they shoulder more of the physical and mental burdens of farming work and child-rearing. His parents try to farm as much as they can, not only for income, but to feed the family. Farming also enables his parents to prepare homemade food for the migrants to eat when they visit and to take back to the city. Homemade food has become one of the special connections between the left-behind elderly and their migrant children. Huang tries to keep in close contact with his parents, but they tend only to give him positive news, and the children are always the main topic of discussion. No matter how difficult and expensive, going home for a reunion during the Spring Festival is a must. Migrants of Huang's age are already thinking about returning to their villages in the future to farm and care for the elderly, as they realize that the city will not always be their home.

The third paper analyzes two brief interviews with a non-left-behind woman and a non-left-behind elderly person, who represent ordinary community members. The discussion focuses on economic support, farming and agriculture, and the possible future for the rural left-behind elderly population. In general, the rural left-behind elderly have little capacity for earning money, and medical care and daily needs can be the most challenging issues for them. Elderly people do not like to see their land abandoned, and hold on to the possibility that their migrant children will continue farming the land when they return to the village one day. While many elderly people are industrious and cultivate the land with great care, the general quality of farming has deteriorated. For rural people, the view that 'everything costs money' is the key driving force for migration to the cities. Making money or getting rich has become the core motivation for many people, including the elderly. Rural people have increasingly accepted the reality of migration and the resulting phenomenon of left-behind people as normal, and even tend to believe that making one's parents rich is more important than being with one's parents. They believe that local industrialization and having young laborers employed locally could be the solution to the problems caused by leaving elderly parents behind.

The final paper deals with the perspectives of local governments by interviewing representatives at county, township and village level. Sandan County set up a new unit to address issues related to left-behind elderly people and children after an elderly man was found dead and his granddaughter was near to death from starvation. Although the government initiatives tend to be weak, and the effects limited, particularly at the village level, this indicates that local government and public policies are responsive to events. However, all the interviewees expressed the view that the new institutional set-up and the measures it offers are not a solution to the problems of left-behind people. Instead, they think that more economic development of rural areas is required. Local government officials think migration results from poverty and is driven purely by financial considerations: the conflict between the rising population and the decreasing availability of land leads to the situation where migration is the only option for rural people. Migrants' remittances have become particularly

important to local development, while the most negative effects are the care deficit and the uncertain future of farming. The ageing of farmers is considered a danger and informal land transfers are increasingly taking place. Local government officials believe that large-scale agricultural production should be adopted.

Various studies, including this collection of papers, do not reach a clear conclusion, but illustrate the issues facing rural left-behind elderly people. China's 30 years of continuous economic growth have been accompanied by a constant transfer of workers from rural to urban areas. China's urban-biased development has come at the price of millions of separated families, with the left-behind elderly people bearing disproportionately heavy burdens for farm work and family care, although economic returns of various kinds have been brought to the countryside. After 30 years, rural migration has been accepted as the norm by almost all the actors involved, and the left-behind elderly regard their burden as unavoidable.

'Everything costs money' is the key driving force for rural–urban migration. Rural life is increasingly commodified: as shown by the monetarization of everyday subsistence and the waged labor working in cities and local sectors. The pervasive rise of rural commodification has swept away most of the 'fall-back' options for peasants' livelihoods (Scott 1976). Overpopulation and land scarcity mean that local people believe 'there is no alternative' to earning cash income from temporary jobs in cities. The millions of 'precarious' (a social class formed by people living without predictability or security) are a special class in contemporary China; they are semi-proletarianized, as they work in the global production chain, but also have plots of land at home, cultivated chiefly by their left-behind parents.

Farming is currently mainly carried out by left-behind elderly people and some left-behind women; these phenomena are called the 'greying' and 'feminization' of agriculture. The left-behind family usually changes its farming practices in response to the shortage of family labor. However, to date no massive abandonment of farmland has taken place, as left-behind elderly people clearly prioritize 'subsistence security' (Scott 1976). The left-behind parents always try to farm as much as they can; they do not wish to see their land abandoned, but like to maintain the possibility that their migrant children will continue farming the land at some point in the future. This practice is considered regressive or conservative by local government officials, who believe large-scale agricultural production shall be adopted in the future.

The various case studies and interviews in this collection display a range of views on the issue of rural–urban migration and left-behind populations, especially the left-behind elderly. We are not seeking neutrality or objective answers, but draw upon different perspectives from different actors, so readers can gain a comprehensive picture of this issue and how it is affecting Chinese society. Although their responses vary, most social actors are enthusiastic about economic development, and believe that its social costs can only be compensated for by further and deeper development. This concept has also been widely internalized by most Chinese people, resulting in a pervasive materialization and secularization of society, in which reciprocity, familism and many other community practices are less and less valued. Making money and accumulating wealth have become the core aspiration for many people, including elderly people, who even tend to believe that 'making one's parents rich' is more important than 'being with one's parents'. These ongoing cultural and social changes are an important theme for contemporary social researchers, especially as local governments pursue the objective of social equity, societal harmony (*hexie*) and social stability.

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## A portrait of an elderly man left behind in rural China

Congzhi He

Since the early 1980s, rural Chinese society has undergone a third great transformation after land reform and collectivization. One prominent feature of this transformation is the large-scale commercialization and de-agrarianization of youth labor as the result of a massive rural–urban labor migration. In migrant-sending communities, remittances have enabled many new houses to be built, but only the elderly, women and children now remain in these communities. The hollowed-out village and fragmented family have become symbols of the irreversible decline of villages and the peasant economy. Once neglected, the experiences and situation of the so-called ‘left-behind’ population, including the left-behind elderly, have received more public attention since the mid-2000s.

Currently in China, mainstream academic, policy and media discourse concerning the left-behind elderly focuses on two concerns. The first is the impact of adult children’s migration on the welfare of the elderly in rural China, where care of the elderly depends heavily on the family and there is little in the way of state support. It is commonly agreed that the left-behind elderly lack daily care and emotional support following their children’s migration. They also have heavier workloads because they must take over part of the production and family responsibilities of their migrant children. However, there remains some controversy over whether the elderly benefit economically from their children’s migration or not (Ye and He 2008; Zhou 2009; Lu and Qian 2014). Underlying all these studies is the problematic assumption that the predicament of the left-behind elderly results from the choices made by individuals and families. Very few studies approach the roots of the issue from a political economy perspective (Ye et al. 2013).

The second concern dominating discourse about the left-behind elderly relates to their take-up of productive and reproductive roles in rural communities, and the impact of this on the care of left-behind children and on agricultural production. In these studies, the left-behind elderly are commonly constructed as unqualified guardians, who are unable to offer proper nutrition, care, instruction, supervision and guidance for grandchildren (Li and Liao 2005; Ye and Pan 2011). In addition, the ageing of the agricultural labor force and the large-scale absorption of young people into industry has commonly been seen as hindering the progress, competitiveness and sustainability of Chinese agriculture. These worries are widely voiced in media coverage of the abandonment of farmland and debates about the loss of farming skills among the new generation of rural migrant workers (Wang 2001).

Against this background, this paper draws on the story of a left-behind old man, named Zhang, to illustrate the social changes underway in rural China and the impact they have on the well-being of the rural elderly.

In January 2012, just before the Chinese Lunar New Year, I interviewed Zhang in his home in Wunan village, Gushi county, Henan province, the largest rural labor-sending province in China. Wunan is a mountainous village with a large population but little land. On average, villagers have only 0.9 *mu*<sup>5</sup> of arable land per person. They grow mainly rice, wheat, peanuts and corn. Rural–urban migration began in the mid-1980s, at which time it was practiced by a minority of families. Since then it has become the norm. Wunan has a total population of 2250

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<sup>5</sup>One *mu* equals 1/15 ha.

people in 526 households. Of these, about 900 are migrants, who work primarily in factories, construction sites and restaurants in Beijing and coastal cities. Most male laborers enter the demolition, construction and interior decoration industries while women go to work in electronic and garment factories as well as in the service sector. Most migrants move to other provinces and return home only briefly for the Chinese Lunar New Year. There are also a few migrants working close by, who return home to help during the busy agricultural seasons. These migrants have multiple, shifting occupations. They leave their land to be cultivated by their parents (in most cases) or wives, or even transfer it to others. Once they quit migrant labor, or during periods of temporary unemployment, they transfer their labor back to the land. Nowadays, this traditionally agricultural community is highly dependent on the cash income earned by migrant workers, which accounts for 60 percent of village income, and the income from horticulture and animal husbandry has become marginal. As most family members work away from home, the entire community has become 'left behind' and it is hard to find any elderly people with sons or daughters in the village. Seldom did I see unmarried young people, as they had left to work in cities after graduating from middle school or technical secondary school. Nor could I see school-aged children, for they had been rounded up into township and county schools.

Zhang still lives in an old house built many years ago, with simple, old-fashioned furnishings, which made me keenly aware of his poverty. Aged 69, Zhang lives with his 71-year-old wife, a 14-year-old granddaughter and a five-year-old grandson. Such skipped-generational residence and parenting is quite common, with about 130 families living like this in Wunan. Zhang has a son and daughter-in-law based in this village and two daughters married into other villages, all of whom now work away from home. According to traditional Chinese patriarchal, patrilocal culture, sons (and daughters-in-law) but not daughters inherit family property and support the elderly. The state has introduced laws to remove the gender difference, but these norms remain deeply rooted in villages and Zhang's family is no exception. Zhang's son is 41 years old. As soon as he finished middle school, he left with a group of other villagers to look for work away from home. His occupation and place of work have been in flux for the last 20 years: 'He'll do whatever work is available, wherever it is, as long as he can earn money'. His daughter-in-law had already gone out to work before getting married. She got to know her husband in Hangzhou Municipality, but returned to the village temporarily to give birth. When her daughter was two years old, she left the child with her grandparents and went back to work with her husband. Zhang's grandson was born in Shenzhen Municipality and was sent back to the village when he was one year old, after he'd been weaned.

When asked about this family separation, Zhang said: 'the young have to work away from home, there's no other way'. He explained the reasons.

We have very little farmland. When the children were young, we could only meet our basic needs and cover the costs of the children's education as well as various taxes. Things got better after they started working away from home. Nowadays, it's usual for young people to go out, as apart from covering the cost of fertilizer, seeds and pesticides, we'd make no money if they worked the land, let alone earn enough to make ends meet. If they work away from home, we can transfer the land to others or farm it by ourselves. Also, they can [earn enough to] support the family and wear decent clothes, so they won't be laughed at. Some people have even made a fortune and bought houses and cars.

Zhang's profound awareness of tremendous livelihood pressures and his realization that farming will not enable them to escape poverty, as well as his understanding of his village's history over the last three decades, has given him a favorable view of the benefits of migrant

work for families and individuals. He believes and expects that the younger generation can change their fate through migration. For him, young adults must work away from home and their elders must shoulder the responsibility of keeping up the family's productive and reproductive functions. This is, in fact, a common decision taken by rural households, based on cooperation and a re-division of labor in the family and amongst close relatives.

The land left by migrant workers is mainly farmed by left-behind family members or other villagers. In the early years of migration, men were the main migrant workers while women and the elderly did the farming at home. But recently, with more female migrant workers and women accompanying their children to school in town and county,<sup>6</sup> there has been a shift from the feminization of agriculture to its ageing. Zhang noted, 'I seldom see any young people on the land and the old have become the main farmers. There were quite a few women farming a few years ago, but nowadays there are hardly any'. The transfer of land between peasants is based on flexible, unstable arrangements. During a survey, we found that the standard village rate for leasing land was 50 kg of rice per *mu* (discounted for cash). In the last 10 years or more, a lot of land has been transferred to others or abandoned, due to the low profitability of agriculture. Nowadays, along with youth de-agrarianization, commercialized agricultural work teams have gradually emerged, agricultural machinery and herbicides have become more widely used, and oxen (previously used for ploughing) have almost disappeared.

Zhang and his wife previously 'acquired' some farmland, so the total area they farmed expanded to 11 *mu*. But after their grandson returned three years ago, and because of their age, they reduced their land holding and now only farm their own and their son's land – 3.5 *mu* with rice and less than one *mu* with vegetables. When asked why they still keep farming, Zhang said

Our children often say that we don't have to keep maintaining the land, we should hand it over to others if we can no longer manage it. It's true we're getting older now and can't manage the work, but if we don't farm, what will we eat? The land has to be farmed, farming is our roots. It's been our way of life for so many years, we can't give it up now. When the young go out to work, the old people should do as much farming as they can manage. In the past, we could manage the work and even farm others' land. It can help ease the [financial] burden on our children if we do more work while we are still fit enough.

For Zhang and other elderly people, working on the land is a choice and a means of safeguarding the family's livelihood and easing their economic burdens. The migration of labor and subsequent 'release' of land from some farmers, mechanization, and the increasingly widespread availability of agricultural waged labor have made it possible for elderly people like Zhang to adjust the amount of land they farm, or employ farmhands if they are short of labor in the family.

Nowadays, mechanized ploughing and harvesting have made it easier to work the land. We are too old to do all the work and can't afford for our children to travel back home to help. Our relatives are also either working away from home or busy with their own affairs, so I have to hire someone to help. It's hard to find people to exchange labor with, and in any case, many of the younger ones aren't willing to exchange labor with older people. In previous decades, we helped each other regardless of money but now they put money above all else

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<sup>6</sup>A lot of schools closed in rural China in recent years because of the school mapping policy. Parents are increasingly sending their children to schools in the towns or county cities in order to get a better education or because there are no schools nearby. The mother or a grandparent often rents or even buys an apartment near the school to look after their children.

and it takes money to ask for help. We mostly hire old people as laborers as all the young people have left.

While affirming the value of mechanization and waged labor as ways of sustaining agricultural production, Zhang sighed with emotion about the fact that the tradition of showing kindness and helping each other is being replaced by monetized exchange relationships. For the left-behind elderly, who are mostly very poor, the commodification of farm labor adds to their financial burden, reducing their gains from agriculture and compounding their difficulty in getting outside support. To save as much money as possible, Zhang and his wife use hired labor only in the busiest periods, for ploughing and harvesting, and do the rice transplanting and other work by themselves.

Farm work is really tiring. We're old and our health is not so good. The work hurts our legs and backs. And we can't work quickly. What takes others three days to complete takes us five days, and it takes us two weeks to finish the rice transplanting. The plot is too small for machines, so we have to do it by hand. After harvest, the grain lies in the field, waiting for us to carry it back. If we can't carry it all at once, we have to take it back a bit at a time. When we get too tired to move, we just have to rest. Once, I was so tired I fainted at the top of the field. But it's no use telling our children our troubles – they're too busy to help and I don't want to ask them for help anyway. We have no choice but to adapt.

The work that Zhang and his wife do causes them pain and exhaustion, but they choose to endure it without complaint. Although more and more major land-leasing families have appeared in Wunan, there is also more than 60 *mu* of abandoned farmland. Zhang finds this hard to accept: 'Most of the abandoned land is rich and highly productive. After we've used machines to plough and plant the rice, we can harvest at least 400 to 500 kg per *mu*'. This generation of rural people has been through major changes in land ownership, with the shift from agricultural collectivization to household farming. Compared with the young, they have a more profound understanding and appreciation of what the land means for peasants. 'After our death, the children won't be able to farm, and the young people won't want to, so what will happen? Nowadays, the village collective pays less and less attention to agriculture'. Having witnessed large-scale outmigration, a weakening of the village government's ability to organize and mobilize labor, and a decline in the emphasis placed on agriculture, Zhang expressed deep concern for the future of the village.

To date, this old couple has not asked for any financial support from their son; Zhang said:

I never ask them for money since they have to support their own family. If our son and daughter-in-law have the means, they'll give us a little money. If not, we have enough food to support ourselves. The two of them don't earn much away from home and their costs are high, so they can't save. They want to build a house and the costs of their children's schooling are getting higher and higher, so they can scarcely meet their own needs.

Zhang and his wife try as hard as they can to support themselves through various means. He said: 'As long as we can work, we'll do all we can to support ourselves. In a couple of years' time, though, we'll be too weak to farm and then it'll be time to live off of them'. The farmland provides Zhang and his wife with basic security. They sell all the rice and the wheat that is surplus to their own needs. After paying for agricultural inputs, this made them a net profit of about 4500 *yuan*<sup>7</sup> in 2012. In addition, they raise a dozen or so chickens and sell a few eggs each month, and Zhang has been able to supplement the family income a

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<sup>7</sup>*Yuan* is the Chinese currency; one *yuan* equals to approximately 0.16 USD.

little by doing odd jobs nearby, including helping others with ploughing and transplanting rice. The government also provides them with a small amount of financial support, including a pension of 60 *yuan* per person per month and a subsidy of less than 100 *yuan* per mu of farmland. If they suffer from serious illness, they can draw on the rural cooperative medical insurance scheme to apply for the reimbursement of medical costs. Historically, the Chinese state has long siphoned resources out of the countryside, this being the original source of funding for industrialization. In the last decade, however, while there has continued to be an obvious urban bias in financial investment, the government has shifted from purely extracting from the countryside to investing in it, and, in Zhang's eyes, this has strengthened the state's legitimacy and authority: 'We have embraced a favorable policy. We had to pay taxes before, but now we not only don't need to pay taxes, they give us money. We ordinary folk have truly entered paradise'.

Previously, when Zhang and his wife were only taking care of their granddaughter, they bore all the child's expenses. Since their grandson has joined them, their son and his wife give them 2000 *yuan* each year for the two children's maintenance and school fees. However, the real costs are far greater, so the elderly couple must use their own funds to subsidize this. They do not complain, but are very understanding of their son's and daughter-in-law's difficult situation, and try to limit their own expenses:

In past years, they've never supported us; rather we've had to support them. But we have nothing against that. They also have a tough life living away from home. All the grain and vegetables we eat at home we grow ourselves, and the eggs come from our own chickens. We only occasionally buy a bit of meat to supplement the children's diet.

However, as he has aged, Zhang has come under greater and greater financial pressure, especially since his wife was diagnosed with diabetes last year. She must take medicine every day. He said: 'Lack of money has become our main concern. We save every cent. We've nearly drained our several years' worth of savings. We are too old to make money and life gets harder each year'. It's hard for Zhang to be optimistic about his own health too, but he downplays his health concerns so as not to add to his children's burden.

Zhang did not express a need for daily care: 'We can more or less look after each other. The children call to ask about our health almost every day'. However, influenced by what they constantly see and hear about the fate of the left-behind elderly, they are privately deeply worried about their growing needs for care and the risk of illness as they get older.

Elderly villagers get upset if we're not able to eat properly. The most pitiable thing is a single old man with no one to care for him or cook for him or even make a cup of tea when he's ill. Nowadays, all the young people are working away from home, and they only return when the old get seriously ill, not for minor illness. There was an old man who died in our village and was only discovered after several days. It's a sin. We'll take one day at a time until we're too old to move, and then we'll see. But if we have any serious health problems, it'll have an impact on our ability to look after the children and manage daily affairs, and we'll also have to pay a lot in medical expenses.

Raising their grandchildren adds to the old couple's heavy burden. They have taken responsibility for all aspects of the children's care since they were very young, and this has not only been physically tiring, but has brought mental pressure and anxiety.

We've raised them since they were one or two years old. It's so tiring and stressful that we have no energy, especially my wife, who has to get up at six to prepare breakfast, do the washing and take them to school. Every day she has to look after them and accompany them just like their

mother. They also keep her up at night. My grandson is a particularly poor sleeper. When he first came to us, he'd cry all night long, and my wife would have to hold him until 11 or 12 o'clock in the evening. During the busy season, we don't have time to attend to the grandchildren, so we take them to the fields. What we fear most is the children getting sick. We're even more afraid of that than getting sick ourselves. Now it's not the mom who brings up a child, it's the grandma.

It's terribly tiring, but we have no choice. It's popular here for the old to care for the young if they can. Nowadays, many old people begin raising grandchildren from the age of one. Many children are weaned and handed over to the old folk as early as seven or eight months. The young couples just send money and ring home at New Year or when there's a holiday, and that's it. It's the responsibility of us elderly folk to look after our grandchildren, it has to be. For the time being, we're still able to help out by looking after the grandchildren, so their parents don't have to worry and can work away from home to make a bit of money and improve things for the family.

The old couple is mostly willing to bear these costs. The importance that Chinese people have traditionally placed on carrying on the family line, their family-oriented morality and the natural feelings created by blood ties mean that elderly people like Zhang have internalized the care of grandchildren as an inevitable responsibility. Livelihood pressures on the family and the common occurrence of skipped-generation parenting in the village further contribute to Zhang's rationalization of his situation. As he put it, caring for their grandchildren has a direct impact on the status of elderly people in the family: 'The elderly only have status in the family if they can help their daughter-in-law by caring for the children'. In some respects, the effort that the left-behind elderly put into raising their grandchildren, and the great costs they bear in terms of energy, time and even money, are bargaining chips, enabling them to reshape their family status and ensure resources for their future care.

Since Zhang's son went away to work, the family has spent very little time together. Before he married, his son tried to save money by returning home only once every two years. After they had children, the young couple tried to come back each year and stay for a couple of weeks for the Chinese Lunar New Year. Previously, phones weren't as common as today, and while his son and daughter-in-law were away, they scarcely had any contact with them. Four years ago, his son bought him a mobile phone and now he rings home every 10 days or so to ask after the children and his parents.

Zhang predicted that his adult children would eventually return to the land because they cannot settle in the city, and he was vaguely aware that it was probably the fate of the younger generation to take up migrant work again in their place.

I see little prospect for the future, it's not a long-term strategy. My son often talks about the hardships he endures, but he earns very little. And he isn't getting any younger. Nowadays the factories only hire young people under the age of 30, so people his age will earn less and less as time goes on. He'll have to return here when he gets older. Whatever happens, there'll still be plenty of farmers in the countryside in the future. But it's a hard life and you never have enough money for food and other expenses, so young people will still have to go out to work. For now, I can only think about my grandchildren's future education. But my granddaughter is doing poorly at school, there's no way she'll get into senior high. How these children will get on in the future, I cannot tell, I don't know what changes there'll be in the future.

Zhang's story is just one example of thousands of left-behind elderly people in rural China. It illustrates how, in adapting to migration, rural communities have formed a new social order and norms, including new identities, roles and obligations for elderly people. At the same time, this new social order has reconstructed elderly people's self-images. In China, 'familism' is not only the core of Confucian ethics but also a metaphor for the social structure (Fei 1985; Liang 1990). The left-behind elderly accept this, regarding it

as inevitable fate, and they take on burdensome moral obligations because of their identity as 'heads of the family'. This could explain why they seldom complain, but silently endure the hardships and anxieties of everyday life.

Left-behind elderly people occupy the least important position in the Chinese economic system. However, their very existence has played a significant part in the development of the country. They are maintaining latent labor reserves for the 'salaried worker' pool by raising their grandchildren with little support. Also, they provide a back-up scheme for the 'surplus populations' who are temporarily or permanently elbowed out of the 'capital-labour' system, by maintaining and safeguarding agricultural production together with their home and land. It could be argued that these left-behind elderly people are the reason why villages continue to be a reservoir of surplus labor for urban areas. They keep down the cost of labor reproduction via 'self-exploitation', enhancing capital accumulation. Equally, their dependence on farming and their fervent desire to hold onto the land that sustain China's small farmer economy.

However, these left-behind elderly also bear the negative side effects of China's industrialization, modernization and entry into global capitalism. In most cases, rural migrant laborers' incomes are meager and unstable, and do not make any fundamental improvement to a family's economic status. Moreover, those incomes are not equally distributed among generations. Inter-generational relationships in rural families are gradually shifting from being bidirectional and balanced with the emphasis on 'repayment' to one's parents 'nurture' and 'support' of the elderly (Fei 1982) to being unidirectional and unbalanced. In other words, resources keep flowing from the elderly towards their children, while the repayments are negligible. Meanwhile, in rural areas, where the aged have for generations relied primarily on family care, the support vacuum generated by the outmigration of the younger generation has not been effectively filled by the state or market. Furthermore, the risk peasant workers face in labor markets is evolving into a risk to the support of the older generation. As a result, the left-behind elderly are deprived of their traditional security and support system, and placed in a situation full of hardships, risks and uncertainties. Poverty and lack of care have become the dominant features of this group's lives. And their responsibilities for farming and childcare compound their difficulties. In the last 10 years, the suicide rate among the elderly in rural China has risen sharply (Chen 2009; Liu 2013). These tragedies point to the impact of change suffered by this generation. There are other trends emerging too: for instance, the pace of capitalist land grabbing is accelerating, and more and more peasant workers are becoming citizens in cities, through the process of state-promoted urbanization. These trends threaten to destroy the livelihoods and lifestyles of the left-behind elderly, and reduce the likelihood of their adult children's permanent return. All these changes are occurring so rapidly that the responses and reactions of both the state and communities are lagging far behind. Against such a background, what kind of challenges will the left-behind elderly encounter in years to come? How can families and the state balance economic and social needs? How should the welfare system in China be adjusted to meet the basic needs of this elderly group? These issues need further exploration and observation.

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## A migrant child's perspectives on left-behind elderly people

Juan Liu

On a Sunday morning in April 2013, I arrived at an urban village (*chengzhongcun*)<sup>8</sup> in the northwest of Beijing, about 40 km from the city center. Huang, a man from a village of Hunan Province, moved here one year ago. He finds it hard to recall how many places he had lived in in Beijing in the last seven years; he is always moving farther away from the city center due to urban sprawl and the related demolition of urban villages.

Huang is one of millions of rural migrant workers in contemporary China. Mostly because of structural and institutional constraints, migrant workers are pursuing a 'floater' strategy in a 'split labor reproduction' regime (Shen 2006), which entails splitting the family between two or more places for most of the year (Fan, Sun, and Zheng 2011). Rural–urban migration is giving rise to a wide range of social impacts in both the home and destination communities. Considerable media and scholarly attention has been paid to this kind of internal migration and the groups of geographically separated family members that result from this process: migrant workers in the city (Li 2004; Yan 2008; Pan, Lu, and Zhang 2012) and the left-behind populations, mainly the children, women and elderly people who stay in the rural areas while their family members are working away from home (Xiang 2007; Ye and He 2008; Ye and Pan 2008; Ye and Wu 2008).

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<sup>8</sup> 'Urban villages' refers to concentrated residential areas which were previously villages inhabited by peasants, but the farmland has been expropriated for urban construction and peasants have become 'citizens'. Urban villages appear on both the outskirts and in the downtown segments of major Chinese cities, surrounded by skyscrapers, transport infrastructures and other modern urban constructions. Many rural migrant workers rent places in such areas, as the rents are relatively low.

The combination of rural–urban migration and population ageing is giving rise to a growing concern about the issue of rural left-behind elderly people. As most rural elderly people still depend on their adult children, especially male ones, for economic and emotional support, the separation of generations resulting from migration has changed the context for elderly care and redefined intergenerational relations. Nonetheless, remittances from migrant children are important in ensuring that the left-behind elderly are adequately provided for (He and Ye 2014). Yet financial support from migrant children is low in general, despite differences between areas and households, and 18 percent of left-behind elderly people do not get any monetary support from their migrant children. To some extent, when their children migrate, rural left-behind elderly face the loss of locally based intergenerational care, intimate family relations and psychological well-being, although some are able to mobilize social networks or technological resources to help them cope with difficulties.

Research on the left-behind elderly usually looks at people in the countryside, with the elderly people themselves as principal respondents for surveys and interviews. This essay gives the perspective of a migrant son, to help illuminate the issue from a different perspective. I held a semi-structured interview with Huang, covering his work trajectory after school, his interactions with his left-behind parents while he was working away from home, his perceptions of his parents' life during his absence, and questions about possible arrangements for the future. As a case study, this paper does not intend to provide a complete and universal picture of the left-behind elderly and their migrant children, but tries to capture perspectives about migration and the 'left-behind' life from the story of a male migrant. It is an attempt to connect the individual story with the structural and institutional context and agrarian transformations in contemporary China.

Born in the late 1970s, Huang is the only son in his family. He has two older sisters who have married out to nearby villages; both of them have worked away from home with their husbands. Huang's father is 72 years old and his mother is 67 (in 2013); both are peasants. Huang married in 2004; his wife is from another village in the same township. His wife migrated to Beijing with him after their engagement. Twice, when she gave birth, his wife returned to the home village, staying for more than six months each time. Now, their older son, who is eight, stays behind in the village with the grandparents, and the younger son, aged one, lives with Huang and his wife in Beijing.

Huang first migrated to work in 1995, after completing nine years' compulsory education. He worked on a construction site in Beijing. Huang was 'introduced' there by a fellow villager, and agreed an oral contract with the subcontractor covering his daily wage and the mode of payment. On-site dormitories were provided for eating, sleeping and free time. This was the hardest of all the jobs that Huang has done in the past 18 years, entailing more than 10 hours of heavy physical work every day. Luckily, he received almost all the payments he was due; many migrant workers face frequent wage arrears, as well as being vulnerable to workplace accidents and occupational diseases.

After one and a half years at the construction site, Huang decided to make a change. After the 1997 Spring Festival he stayed at home for half a year, trying to pick up odd jobs in the local villages. But while he was able to help his parents with farming work, he was not satisfied with the insecure work opportunities and the lower income available in the village, so he went to Guangdong Province with some friends and worked in a factory for the second half of that year. However, he didn't continue with this job and stayed at home for the three years after the 1998 Spring Festival. During this period, he learned how to farm from his father, which gives him confidence that he will be able to survive as a farmer when there is no longer a job for him in the city. He also learned

technical skills in welding, which provided him with another job option in the local or urban labor market.

Increasing migration from the village motivated him to follow his fellow villagers to leave again. He came to Beijing in 2001, and has been working there for 13 years, although his jobs and workplaces have changed many times. After he married in 2004, Huang's role in the family changed from that of an immature son to being the core income earner for the entire family. In that year, he started to run a small decoration business but it was not easy, as the business environment was very competitive and he struggles to make a living. In 2005, he worked in a logistics company for almost year, as he wanted to try more things while he was still young. From 2006 to 2009, Huang and his wife worked in an event management company, where they could earn 5000 to 6000 *yuan* a month together, and could save a large amount after daily expenses. However, their contracts were terminated at the end of 2009 when they went back to their village to help his parents build their new house. When Huang and his wife returned to Beijing in 2010, they tried to start their own small business. After a year, they had made a minor loss. Huang explained that this was due to his lack of management skills and limited financial and social capital. He found a job in a logistics company in 2011, while his wife and one of his sisters worked for a company supplying drinking water. Later in the year, his wife went back to the home village for the birth of their second child. Huang is now working in a brewery. As his wife needs to take care of the baby, she isn't looking for jobs at the moment; Huang has been the only breadwinner in the family since late 2011.

Many migrant workers in China live precariously, not only because of their insecure jobs, unprotected rights and the inequalities between their situation and those of urban citizens, but also because of their frequent changes of living place. Huang worked out that he and his wife have lived in 10 different places during their stay in Beijing. They have moved from the east of the city to the west and then to the northwest, from one urban village to another, and they move farther and farther away from the center in order to reduce their living expenses, but at the price of a longer journey to and from their workplaces.

Huang has always kept in contact with his parents while living away. Before 2001, he didn't earn much, but still sent most of his earnings to his parents. Since he has worked in Beijing his income has been higher, which has allowed him to send more remittances to his parents. Even after their marriage, Huang and his wife still only kept a small portion of their earnings for their own expenses and emergency use, and sent the larger portion to his parents.

But, according to Huang, his parents have not relied on his earnings for their own upkeep, since they are still able to do farming work, and they have saved most of the remittances and spent them on his marriage, his son and their new house.

The geographic distance means it is impossible for the family members to interact with each other as they would if they lived together. In the 1990s, letters were essential for keeping in contact; Huang and his parents usually replied immediately to each other's letters. Public landline phones were widely used in the cities in early 2000s, but were very rare in the countryside, so Huang only called on special occasions or when there was something really important to tell his parents. Nowadays, mobile phones are the more popular medium, enabling daily contact. Usually Huang or his wife initiates the call, but sometimes Huang also receives calls from his parents. Children are always the main topic of discussion during the calls between Huang (and his wife) and his parents. However, Huang and his wife are often disappointed because their son is not very interested in their phone calls. Health is another central issue, but Huang's parents usually answer his questions positively. Huang explained, 'one reason is that they are really healthy compared

with other villagers the same age; another reason is that they don't want us to worry about their health even if they don't feel very well'.

Through the phone calls, Huang learns about many things in the village, and about the neighbors and relatives. His father sometimes shows an interest in things that have happened in the city, and particularly Huang's and his wife's workload, hours of work and so on. His mother frequently mentions food: she tells Huang how much dried vegetables, preserved food, or smoked pork and fish she has prepared for them. Huang always brings several bags of homemade food when he returns to the city, and sometimes fresh eggs, chicken and homemade wine.

I'm not ashamed of homemade food, I am proud of it. Even my colleagues are keen on the flavour once they have tasted it. You don't have to worry about food safety problems, and it helps us to save money on food expenses here.

Whenever his parents hear about someone traveling to Beijing, they ask them to take food to Huang. In many cases, homemade food creates a special connection between the left-behind elderly and their migrant children.

Although modern communications technology offers more ways of bridging the geographic distance and facilitating intergenerational contact, a reunion at home during the Spring Festival is important for most migrants and their left-behind family members, no matter how difficult it is for the migrants to buy train tickets and no matter how much they have to spend. Like most of the migrant workers in China, Huang usually makes a yearly visit during Spring Festivals and perhaps an additional trip for some special occasions. He said

If you don't go back home during Spring Festivals, you are seen as behaving badly towards your parents and your children, that's what they have looked forward to for such a long year. The reunion provides some important emotional comfort. Money is not everything.

Huang's mother visited Beijing with her grandson before the Olympic Games in 2008. It was her first visit to the big city and she stayed for almost a month. Huang rented another room in the same building for his mother and son, and showed them the attractions at weekends. He expected them to stay for at least two months, but the boy was not very interested in urban life, felt oppressed in the city environment, and kept asking his grandmother to take him back to the village, so they returned much earlier than planned.

Huang's parents cultivate 4.5 *mu* of paddy field, and some small plots of dry land for maize, beans, vegetables and fruits, and raise cattle, chickens and two or three pigs every year. The latter two are mainly for their own consumption, and for Huang to take to the city. They only have a small surplus of rice to sell after feeding themselves and their animals. Huang's father takes more responsibility for the farm work while his mother is in charge of the domestic chores. Huang's father also rears cattle.

My father already raised cattle during the collective period. They are a very useful way to cope with the labour shortage during my absence. My father can also use the cattle to plough fields for our neighbours and, in exchange, the neighbors will help my parents with some other jobs, like carrying manure to the field, transplanting rice seedlings or harvesting, so we don't need to hire wage labours. But nowadays, most people prefer to hire machines, they think it's simple and straightforward, as you don't need to take care of a machine for 365 days a year like a cow. But with a cow you get manure for the fields and you can get a calf every year or two. They are helpful for the older peasants. My father is one of the very few peasants in my village still raising cattle.

As the younger generation have migrated out, a few households leased their land to neighbors or relatives at zero or very low rent, and many households changed their farming system from double rice cropping to single cropping, which enabled mechanization of the rice harvest and reduced the burden of physical work. Huang's father has planted single-crop rice since 2011. Huang explained:

Farming is not a way to make money, but to feed the family. For my parents, it's their lifestyle. While they are able to do farm work, they can make a good living by themselves, and we can also benefit from it. But farming is a heavy burden for people in their seventies. I don't know who will farm in the future and who will take care of the land. Perhaps we should return to the village when they are too old to farm.

For Huang, farming is an escape route from this, but this is not an option for him at the moment. Both he and his parents knew that it would be impossible to buy an apartment in Beijing and stay there for the rest of their lives as urban residents, so they agreed to build a new house in the village in 2009.

Huang's older son is in the village and has been cared for by his grandparents for eight years. According to Huang, the boy is well cared for, but is naughty, and sometimes it is difficult for the grandparents to discipline him. Huang is also worried about his son's school performance because the grandparents will not be able to help him with school work when he enters the higher grades. The left-behind grandparents were willing to take care of their younger grandson too, but Huang realized it would be too much of a challenge for them at their age, so he and his wife look after the younger boy themselves.

Huang feels that migration has both advantages and disadvantages for the family and its members, but there are more disadvantages for the left-behind elderly people because they shoulder more physical and emotional burdens in farming work, in building a house and in looking after their grandchildren. Nominally, the elderly parents would share some of the economic benefits from migration, but in a single-son family, the majority goes to the grandchildren. However, elderly people gradually evolve from care providers to care receivers, and Huang is considering how to support his parents in the future.

Although my parents look healthy till now, age is creeping up on them. As they get older, they are more likely to get ill, so I worry more about their health. Elderly people don't just need help with physical work, they also need company. Money can't solve all the problems. One day we will have to return to care for them. I am thinking about whether I can find work near home.

Huang's and his parents' story represents the phenomenon of migrant workers in the city and their aged parents in the countryside. Migration is accepted as part of a household strategy to accumulate economic resources and increase the material well-being of the whole family. On this premise, family members endure long separations from each other and play their roles in the household with mutual understanding and support. However, both the migrant children and the left-behind elderly face various difficulties and bear costs from the migration, even though they do all they can to mitigate the negative impacts on the family. Families and communities will face more complicated problems and dilemmas, concerning, for example, farming and caring, as the left-behind elderly people get older during this rapid urbanization and de-peasantization process, and profound and detailed investigations and policy interventions are urgently needed.

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## Community members' perspectives on left-behind elderly people

Weijing Wang

Over the past decade, academics in China have been paying more attention to the phenomenon of rural left-behind elderly people. Various surveys have been conducted in several labor-sending provinces to analyze issues related to economic support, care provision, social support and other impacts of their children's migration on left-behind elderly people (He and Ye 2010; Li and He 2010; Shen and Xiao 2010; Huang, Gao, and Peng 2012). In order to shed further light on the reality of life for rural left-behind elderly people, this paper takes the perspective of ordinary community members and focuses on issues of economic support, farming and agriculture, and possible future developments in the lives of the rural left-behind elderly.

My interviews took place in Hutun Village in Hunan Province. It is a typical labor-sending region and a major grain production base. There are 1308 inhabitants in 359 households in the village. The average landholding per capita is 0.7 *mu*. The main crops are rice, maize and peanuts. Since the early 1990s the majority of young people in the village have migrated to cities. The population of this village now largely consists of elderly people, women and children.

I interviewed two villagers, one non-left-behind woman and one non-left-behind elderly person.

The non-left-behind woman, Dong, runs a grocery store on the village street. Her husband runs a local truck business. Dong also takes care of two elderly people and four children: her parents-in-law, her 15-year-old son and two-year-old daughter, and two children left behind by her husband's sisters.

- WW: Is the left-behind elderly phenomenon very common in the village?  
 Dong: Yes, it is. Seventy to eighty percent of the elderly people in the village are left behind, and their children have worked in cities for a very long time. Most of them also take care of their grandchildren.
- WW: What are their sources of income and what do they spend money on?  
 Dong: Their income comes in three ways: remittances from their migrant children, their own income from farming, and some elderly people also earn money from waged labor work nearby. Basically they don't earn much. Most of them prefer to farm on their own, otherwise they lease the land to others to farm. When the harvest season comes, they often need to rent machines. Their living expenses mainly consist of spending on necessities and medical care. Usually medical care accounts for around 70 percent of their total spending, so many elderly people save whatever they can for possible future medical expenses. For some elderly people, a large proportion of their income comes from their children, but some elderly people never receive any money from their migrant children.
- WW: If the majority of elderly become unable to farm, will it lead to farm land being abandoned?  
 Dong: That won't be the case in this village. If the elderly people are too old to farm their own land, they can lease it to other people – the people who don't go to work in cities will take on their land, for no or very little rent. The elderly people don't want to see their land abandoned, and they want to maintain the possibility that their migrant children could continue farming the land if one day they stop working away and return to the village. But although there has been no major land abandonment, there has been some change in the quality of farming. Due to the lack of labor especially young labor, weeding and ploughing are not done carefully or at the right time, and some land in remote mountainous areas is being gradually abandoned.
- WW: As many laborers work in cities, do people in the village like to redistribute the land?  
 Dong: Farming is very labor intensive, there are not so many people in the village who really want to farm. The left-behind elderly people also think that if one day their adult children can't find jobs in the city, they will return and need the land to farm. Therefore, we never think of land redistribution, it is better to keep the land as it is now. Within the village, there is some informal land transfer. For instance, there are three left-behind elderly people in my village who are all in good health, so they farm some of their neighbors' land and make a good return. In fact, the elderly people are more industrious than young people, they cultivate land with great care and produce higher yields.
- WW: How are elderly people supported while their children are all working in cities?  
 Dong: That is a serious issue. One left-behind elderly woman in my village has no children around to take care of her, so she is looked after by her neighbors. But neighbors can only help you sometimes, not all the time. In a neighboring village, a left-behind elderly man was found dead many days after he died, as his children had all gone to the city. This is the negative impact of children's migration on rural elderly people.

After the discussion with Dong, I interviewed a non-left-behind elderly man, Shang, who has a son and a daughter living in the village. When Shang was young, he worked

in several cities. As an elderly man who has migrated to work himself, he has a unique perspective on the phenomenon of left-behind elderly people.

WW: In your opinion, what causes the phenomenon of left-behind elderly people?

Shang: The everyday expenses of rural households are extraordinarily high at present, everything costs money. In a three-generation family, we need money for building a new house for the young adults, for children's schooling, medical care, farm inputs, electricity, the telephone bill, gifts to neighbors or friends for maintaining social relations, and daily necessities. If young people just stay in the village and only depend on farming, how could they afford all these expenses? What can they do if their children have to go to school or if the elderly relatives get seriously ill? Moreover, villagers like to compare and compete with each other. For instance, if one household buys a motorbike, others also want to buy one; otherwise, people will look down on them. If nine people out of 10 have nice shoes and one has bare feet, how could he or she stay in the village? This is life. There are neither factories nor mineral resources in my village, so young people have to go away to work. Everybody would prefer to be with their families; unfortunately, life is always imperfect.

WW: How about your earlier work as a migrant?

Shang: I worked away from home since I was 30. I know how difficult it is. For migrant workers, everything is unstable and uncertain. Sometimes you have nowhere to sleep and no money to buy food. The ultimate aim is to earn and save as much money as possible and bring it back to your families. I worked in a coal mine, in a timber plantation, on a construction site, and so on, all kinds of manual work, which didn't pay much.

WW: What is the difference between left-behind elderly and non-left-behind people like you?

Shang: My son and daughter are both at home and can take good care of me. In my opinion, left-behind elderly people can easily feel lonely, with their responsibility for looking after their grandchildren. But they have to accept realities.

WW: In China, we say 'filial duty is the foundation of all virtues'. What do you think filial duty means? Does it mean 'being with your parents' or 'making your parents rich'?

Shang: It is impossible for most young people to be with their parents. Migration is almost the only way to earn money for the family and for the elderly parents. If children earn, their parents will be happy. Who wants to be separated from their family? But there is no alternative. I would say, if there's no migration, then there's no money and no harmony.

If you farm in the village, you need to buy a lot of inputs but you make very little. For example, if I farm, I need to spend thousands of *yuan* on renting machinery or a cow, let alone on tools, fertilizers, pesticides and so on. Sometimes you even need to hire waged workers to spray pesticides. In my opinion, 'making your parents rich' is more important than 'being with your parents'.

WW: In your opinion, how will the phenomenon of left-behind elderly develop in the future?

Shang: I think rural-urban migration will surely continue and the number of left-behind elderly will increase in the next ten years. In my opinion, the only way for young people to return home is to build some factories in the county, so that young people will have stable jobs in their home county and be with their families. Many young people don't know how to farm now, I am afraid in the future a majority of people will have no farming knowledge. It is also possible that the land will be concentrated for modern agricultural farming.

These interviews show that rural left-behind elderly people have little capacity for earning money, while medical care and daily help are the most challenging issues they face. Although filial duty traditionally means being with and caring for one's parents, people – including migrant workers, the left behind and others – have come



to accept rural–urban migration and the associated phenomenon of left-behind people as normal, showing the tendency to pragmatism and utilitarianism prevalent in Chinese society.

The massive rural–urban migration means that more and more peasants in China have been transformed into ‘half worker, half cultivator’ (Huang, Gao, and Peng 2012). This has resulted in a large left-behind population and the hollowing of Chinese villages. In addition to the need for care and support for the people left behind, there are many further issues that need to be researched. In particular, what will be the future of farming and peasant life? Many signs indicate that China will vigorously promote land transfer and modern scaled-up agriculture, so that many more peasants will be ‘freed’ from the land. This raises the question of where these peasants will go. Will urbanization be able to absorb them into cities? If employment remains insecure and temporary, what will they do when there is an economic downturn and their land has been incorporated into capital-intensive modern farms? These questions remain unanswered.

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## Local government’s perspectives on left-behind elderly people

Shidong Chen

The outmigration of rural young people and the emergence of rural left-behind elderly people has been widespread in China in the past decades. Various investigations have demonstrated that left-behind elderly are confronted with heavy workloads, loneliness and insufficient support in terms of care and livelihood (Hu 2006; Sun 2006; Li and He 2010). Rural–urban migration has also led to a ‘greying’ of farming, which has, together with the general ageing of rural society, brought forward serious concerns about food security, land regimes, rural development and village governance (Ye and He 2008).

In order to explore the perceptions of and policies towards the issue of left-behind elderly people by local government bodies, I visited Sandan County, one of the largest

counties in Hunan province in population terms and with the largest number of migrated rural people.

At the county level, I interviewed Hong from the Civil Affairs Bureau, who has been working there for nearly 30 years and answered my questions with great caution; and Feng from the Women's Federation, who was very enthusiastic and positive but mainly answered my questions by reading from written material she held in her hand. At the township level, I interviewed Tang, Ning and Bai from the Civil Affairs Office, Women's Federation and Rural Affairs Office of Libu Township, respectively. At the village level, I interviewed Wang, who is the Director of the Hutun Village Committee.

In October 2011, Sandan County Government set up a new unit named the Service and Management Agency for Left-behind Children and Elderly (henceforth, SMALCE), to collect data about the left-behind population, and to formulate and implement policy measures in the county.

SC: Before setting up SMALCE, did Sandan County Government pay any particular attention to the issue of left-behind elderly?

Hong: (County Civil Affairs Bureau): In Sandan, there are 140,000 aged people, about 16 percent of the total population; many of them are left-behind elderly people living in rural villages. There was no special attention paid to left-behind elderly until the establishment of SMALCE. Like other rural people, the left-behind rural elderly were covered by the general national social policies, including the minimum living standard guarantee, rural health care and temporary assistance and relief for disaster affected areas, and so on.

SC: Why did Sandan County Government set up SMALCE?

Hong: Frankly speaking, it was directly related to an unfortunate and unexpected event which was connected to the large-scale outmigration and split families in the countryside. In September 2011, a left-behind elderly man died at home in Fuqing Village. He was only found after his migrant son came back from city a week after he died. Moreover, the one-and-a-half-year[-old] granddaughter the elderly man was raising was found starving to death. The accident was widely reported in the media, and the county authority came under much social pressure; thus, a new unit was established one month after the accident.

SC: What policies has the SMALCE taken up to avoid another tragedy like this?

Feng: (County Women's Federation): The SMALCE is a liaison unit of many government bureaus, with the Women's Federation as the coordinating agency. This is because care of children and elderly people is always regarded as women's work. Specifically, we have mainly carried out following measures. Firstly, we are collecting data about rural left-behind elderly people and will establish a comprehensive profile for each rural elderly person, including their name, age, address, health condition, grandchildren living with them and contacts for their migrant children, etc. This profile will be updated every year. Secondly, we are trying to provide rural left-behind elderly people with priority access to current social support and relief policies and programs. The county health bureau and hospitals at township level will organize annual physical examinations for rural elderly people. Thirdly, we have launched a 'point to point' connection and support project for matching officials at township and village levels with all rural left-behind households. Volunteers are encouraged to take part in village cultural activities aiming at enriching the life of the left-behind population. Fourthly, we will provide financial support for villages to establish elderly associations, through which elderly people can be more socialized.

According to Ning from the Libu Township Women's Federation, many of the measures mentioned above have already been tried. She said:

In January 2012, we held a meeting to discuss how to reinforce the assistance to left-behind elderly and children. We also made efforts to promote the 'Spring Action' campaign, which aimed at persuading migrant workers to come back and find jobs in local factories. During the Spring Festival period, township leaders visited several left-behind families. In March, we established data on all the left-behind elderly people in our township. We also publicized contact information for employees working in the township government and all the village committees so that left-behind elderly people can contact us. For instance, I am responsible for four left-behind elderly people and I drop in on them when I visit their village every two weeks or I will call them and check how they are, and they can also call me.

However, according to village director Wang, many of the measures mentioned above have not been put into practice. He said:

We village officials should have been matched to left-behind households. But to be honest, as members of the village committee, we have to earn our own living and take care of our own family. It is impossible to keep your eyes on left-behind families every day, even for one's neighbours. There is not enough time or energy. Occasionally, we chat with the left-behind elderly people when we meet them. They can also drop in on us or call us when they need to. On the other hand, social relief subsidies from the higher governments are mainly for disabled people with no income, whereas left-behind families do receive remittances, and their life can usually be improved. It is impossible to rely on the village committees and communities to take measures – with no money, what can we do?

Hong later commented on the limited impact of the county government's measures towards left-behind population:

These measures can only work in two ways. Firstly, they are mainly to show that we are concerned about the left-behind population. Secondly, we can respond in some urgent cases; for example, when a left-behind elderly person hasn't been seen for several days, we can mobilize the neighbours to visit and have a check. However, we cannot fundamentally solve the problems.

Tang, from the Township's Civil Affairs Office, claimed that he was not a suitable interviewee on the left-behind issue. He said:

The problem of left-behind elderly people and children has little to do with the Civil Affairs office. We are mainly responsible for implementing routine policies and emergency support. Of course, if the left-behind elderly people and children are poor, they will be covered by the range of poverty relief policies. Generally speaking, if there are migrant workers in the family, it is impossible to [be] poor enough to get government relief subsidies. Therefore left-behind families are not the targets of our work.

In my opinion, the main problem with left-behind elderly people and children is the lack of care from their families. There is much that can be done to address the problems of left-behind population, such as various cultural and recreational activities, and village elderly associations. But these efforts are no substitute for care from their families.

The above interviews show that local government and public policies did respond to the accident that occurred to a member of the left-behind population. However, all the interviewees expressed the view that SMALCE and its measures were not a solution to the problems facing left-behind people. Instead, they think the solution to the problem entails further economic development of rural areas.

As to further measures for responding to the left-behind phenomenon, Feng commented:

The left-behind issue was caused by labour migration. Migration is an inevitable trend of social development that will continue for a long time. At the county level, I think the most important thing is to further speed up local economic development, which can create more employment. Meanwhile, we should develop public infrastructure in cities so they can accept more and more migrating workers, so workers' entire families can be accommodated in cities. For example, more affordable housing and more schools are needed to resettle migrant workers and their children. The integration of urban and rural development is a fundamental strategy to solve the problems of left-behind children and elderly people.

The township government can play a key role in this. On one hand, various trainings can be organized in order to improve rural workers' skills so that they can be employed. On the other hand, workers will be encouraged to look for jobs locally. This will both contribute to the development of local economies and the support for families.

We have built an industrial park in the county town with various favorable policies for attracting investment since 2005. There are about 48 companies in the park now, and most of them are branches of national or international corporations. These local companies and factories will provide more and more jobs. We have been disseminating information about local jobs to every rural household since 2010, to encourage more migrants to work locally.

Bai from the township Rural Affairs Office acknowledged the importance of local development, but also indicated the difficulties and dilemmas involved:

Yes, it will really be good if the local factories can attract migrants back to work locally. However, it is not an easy job, as many migrants don't want to come back for lower wages, especially those who have got used to working in big cities during past decades. No one wants to come back and start again from zero.

After the interviews about SMALCE and discussions about the counter measures to support left-behind elderly people, I asked questions on the causes and impacts of migration.

SC: Why do rural laborers migrate?

Bai: (township Rural Affairs Office): Primarily, it comes down to poverty. Earnings from agriculture are very low, while wages from working in a city are much higher. So it is purely economically driven. Today, with no money there's no life, and with little money it's a poor life. In the early 1980s, cultivating one *mu* of land could feed a whole family, and now it costs a lot but earns very little. Farming is no more than harvesting some grains for your meals. If you can get 20–30 *mu* of land, or even hundreds of *mu*, and if you can manage it well and control the costs, you may be able to make a profit. But land is not enough. There is a conflict of growing population and reducing land availability, so migrating to work is almost the only way for rural people.

SC: At the same time, it has a lot of consequences.

Bai: Yes, some things go better and some things get worse. It helps to improve local people's standard of living. In local banks, 80 percent of the deposits come from migrant workers, which is critically important to local development. The most negative effect is the lack of care for elderly people and children. Another possible negative effect is the uncertain future of farming, as many young people migrate to cities immediately after middle school and know nothing about farming. Only the left-behind elderly are farming now, so who will succeed them in the future? I think the central government has to pay more attention to agriculture. There is a danger if farming depends on left-behind elderly people.

SC: Why is it a danger?

Bai: On the one hand, with insufficient physical strength and less family labor at home, many left-behind elderly people reduce the amount of land they farm. On the other hand, there is an obvious change of cropping structure. Previously, peasants planted crops in early spring and mid-summer; now elderly people only plant in late spring.

As a result, production decreases. The County Government has issued a policy to encourage peasants to plant more grain crops by providing technical training and free seeds, and if someone plants more than 50 *mu* of land, he or she will receive a bonus of 5000 yuan. But still many people consider farming a heavy burden, and prefer to migrate to work or do business. Some land is abandoned, especially in remote areas.

SC: Is land abandonment and land transfer related to labor migration?

Bai: Yes. Land abandonment mainly happens in hilly and remote areas, where the physical conditions are very hard. It is very understandable that such land is difficult for elderly people to farm. Flat and fertile land is rarely abandoned. Left-behind families can also transfer some of their land to others. This informal land transfer is increasingly taking place, which can promote large-scale farming. That might be the future trend. In the long run, we can probably only produce enough food through large-scale agriculture. However, peasants still need farmland for their livelihoods. And large-scale farming usually requires flat land, which is usually what a peasant needs to farm. This remains a contradiction.

SC: How is the infrastructure for farming?

Bai: It is not good, almost no one cares about it. The ponds and irrigation canals have suffered from neglect for many years. Today mainly elderly people are left in the village. It is impossible to organize them to maintain the community infrastructure. Moreover, it is difficult to organize any kinds of programs for constructing public infrastructure, such as roads, irrigation and drinking water. It is very different from the collective period when peasants contributed a lot to the collective; the collectivization concept faded away in the process of privatization and individualization.

With regard to the future of the countryside, the interviewees at different levels expressed different views.

The living standard of rural households can certainly be improved, but the really wealthy people will always be a minority and the disparity will become larger and larger. As to agriculture, the County Government is promoting large-scale modern agriculture, which might be the future. (Hong from the County Civil Affairs Bureau)

There is no doubt that fewer and fewer people will be engaged in farming. In the future, large-scale agricultural production will be developed, and land transfer will be accelerated, for which state-led investments are required. (Bai from the Township Rural Affairs Office).

It is difficult to forecast as the future mainly depends on national policy. If the state invests more in rural areas and builds more factories in villages, many changes will take place. If it continues like now, migration and the phenomenon of left-behind people will become more serious. (Wang, village director)

From these interviews, with different actors from local government at different levels, some brief conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, Chinese governments at both national and local levels have for a long time adopted an urban-biased development strategy, and little investment has been allocated for the countryside, in terms of both public goods and services and social welfare policies. As a result, rural people have low expectations from governments. Secondly, local governments can be very sensitive and responsive to the issue of left-behind populations when there is an accident and social pressure from the public. However, measures adopted by local governments are not always put into practice. This shows a kind of hidden agenda of rural governance of maintaining social stabilization in the long-term pursuit of national industrialization and modernization (Luo 2006). Finally, in relation to agriculture and rural development, the impacts of migration are varied. The left-behind families develop various strategies

to respond to the shortage of labor, but the future of agriculture and who will farm in the future are open to question.

### **Disclosure statement**

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