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Stayers in China's "hollowed-out" villages: A counter narrative on massive rural–urban migration

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Abstract

China has been undergoing a rapid industrialisation and urbanisation process with an ongoing transfer of people and economic resources from rural to urban areas. Labour migration from rural to urban areas has been massive and become a “rite of passage” for rural young people. There is a widespread view that modernisation and the subsequent transformation of peasants, agriculture, and the countryside have undermined agriculture and hollowed out rural communities. However, due to the peculiarity of the *hukou* system and the circularity of rural urban migration, the large rural population can all be institutionally regarded as *de jure* rural stayers. The *de facto* rural stayers consist of the left-behind ones and the non-left-behind ones. Yet these categories are quite fluid links with migration as people make different decisions at different stage in their life cycle. Motivations for migrating and staying in the countryside are highly complex. Those who migrate often do so because of economic pushes resulting from the commodification of subsistence. Many women who stay behind do so because of structural forces, such as the traditional culture of gender division and economic coercion. The non-left-behind people who are not stuck in the countryside are often able to actively pursue alternative rural livelihoods. These rural stayers develop diversified livelihood strategies that involve multiple job holding and make significant contributions to their household livelihoods and to driving rural development. The paper concludes that rural villages are not, as is often supposed, hollowed out, and many rural stayers do so voluntarily.

KEYWORDS

left-behind population, livelihoods, rural development, rural stayers, rural urban migration, urbanisation and industrialisation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, developmentalism and global capitalism have driven China's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation and its pursuit of modernisation. This has led to a massive outflow of labourers from the agricultural to the industrial sector, which occurred as a result of the institutional replacement of agricultural collectivisation by the Household Responsibility System and of the planned economy by a capital-led export-oriented economy (Pan, Lu, & Zhang, 2012:1–2). The relaxation of the Household Registration System (*hukou*), further contributed to huge movement of labourers from rural China to cities. Statistics show that the number of migrant peasant workers in China is continuing to expand having already reached 169 million in 2015. In the meantime, there were 109 million *in situ* peasant workers giving a total of 278 million peasant workers (National Bureau of Statistics

of the People's Republic of China, 2016).¹ According to estimates from the National Population and Family Planning Commission in 2009, in 30 years' time, there will be 500 million inhabitants in cities, 500 million in the countryside, and 500 million floating between rural and urban areas (Xinhua Net, 2009).

China's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation have been accompanied by a constant transfer of economic resources and people from rural to urban areas and from the agricultural sector to the industrial one. Indeed, developmentalism implies a set of transformations, including the transformation of an agriculture-based society and economy into a modern industrial system via industrialisation; the transformation of the countryside into the cities through urbanisation; the transformation of a traditional social system oriented towards traditional values into a modern system geared to modern culture through modernisation and commodification; and the transformation of a class of small

landholding agricultural producers into a proletariat of wage labourers and an industrial reserve army of surplus labour via proletarianisation (Wise & Veltmeyer, 2016: 39–50). During these processes, it is the peasants, agriculture, and the countryside that are being transformed and that pay the price through the migration of peasant workers, the depletion of agriculture, and the hollowing and vanishing of rural communities.

Rural commodification implies that peasants generally need more money to buy subsistence and production inputs, yet at the same time, their “fall-back” options are reduced or eliminated (Scott, 1976: 79). Peasants became more involved with and locked into, the market economy. Household livelihoods can no longer be met solely by relying on farming a small plot of land. As a result staying at the countryside and being reliant on semi-subsistence farming is no longer a viable option. Peasants are often obliged to migrate to work in precarious jobs in urban areas and continue to maintain the farm in order to obtain a double income. This “hoe and wage” (Cordell, Gregory, & Piché, 1996: 1–3) livelihood strategy is neither a free nor a rational choice, but a “must” forced upon them by the “dull compulsion of economic forces” (Bernstein, 2010: 27). Nonetheless, it is generally regarded as a correct and right thing to do.

Indeed, labour migration to cities in China has become a “rite of passage” for young rural people. Despite the enormous economic contribution that they make to urban and industrial development, migrant peasant workers cannot usually move their families to the cities. This is because of the institutional segregation between rural and urban areas, the absence or curtailment of their “citizenship” rights and/or their own economic constraints (Wang, 2009). This form of “split labour reproduction” (Shen, 2006) leads to the phenomenon of “left-behind households.” Migrants have no choice but to leave some of their family members in the village and a unique “left-behind population” of women, children, and the elderly has thus emerged in rural areas. Reports indicate that there are at least 47 million left-behind women (Zhang & Zhang, 2006), 61 million left-behind children (ACWF (All China Women's Federation), 2013), and 50 million left-behind elderly (Wu, 2013: 147), meaning there is a left-behind population of at least 158 million people in rural China.

As a consequence of rural labourers migrating out and women, children and elderly staying behind, agriculture has been mainly conducted by women and old people, and the contribution it makes to rural household income greatly decreased (He & Ye, 2014; Wu & Ye, 2016). This feminisation and greying of agricultural production probably mean that the rural labour force lack the capacity to further develop agriculture, thus raising the a question: Who will till the land? (Zhu, 2011).

Under these circumstances, there is a widespread view that the countryside has been step by step hollowed out by this large scale rural–urban migration. Research has revealed a general tendency to the decline and increasing isolation of rural areas, and the deteriorating of traditional values of an acquaintance society, a communalist, and reciprocal culture and social solidarity (Chen & Liu, 2012; Wang, 2016; Wise & Veltmeyer, 2016: 19; Zhou & Lu, 2014).

Against this backdrop, it seems everything in rural areas is in decline and that there is self-evidently no future in staying in the countryside. The seemingly logical and right thing for rural inhabitants is undoubtedly to escape from the countryside and agriculture, and from

being peasants, as quickly, early and completely as possible. Even if we discount the 169 million migrant peasant workers and the 29 million children and 18 million elderly brought along by the peasant migrant workers to cities (ACWF, 2013; NHFPC, 2016), there was, in 2015, still about 400 million people staying in the countryside.² Given this magnitude of rural population, it seems premature to talk about a hollowed out countryside. But who are these people? Is their staying a purely unintended choice? How do structural forces and personal agency combine to shape the landscape of movers and stayers? And, what kind of agrarian structure emerges from these patterns?

The data in this paper are drawn from a number of research projects that my team and I have carried out in several provinces over the past 10 years (see Figure 1). These include the following:

1. A research project on migration and rural left-behind population conducted in 10 villages in Jiangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, Anhui and Henan Province during 2006–2008, for which, 1,200 questionnaires for left-behind population and 600 questionnaires for non-left-behind population were completed, and about 200 case studies of key stakeholders involved with the left-behind population were studied.³
2. A research project on migration and left-behind women conducted in 10 villages in Henan Province in 2013, for which 136 questionnaires from left-behind women were completed, and 69 cases of left-behind women were studied.⁴
3. A research project on community transformation conducted in Liu Village in Hebei Province during 2011–2016, in which 20 cases of peasants with livelihood innovations were ethnographically studied, with a particular focus on chronologically documenting their livelihood trajectories.
4. A research project on rural stayers conducted in Ge Village in Sichuan Province in January 2017, in which 54 rural stayers were interviewed with a particular focus on their moving or staying at different phases/stages of their life-cycle.⁵

The data are analysed by taking full consideration of the broader structural context, particularly the institutions and structures that strongly influence peoples' options, generally by constraining the motivations, decisions, actions, and livelihoods of peasant migrants and rural stayers. We balance this focus on external forces by also looking at the agency of rural stayers and, particularly, their attempts to develop various livelihood options in the countryside. The rural population is both fluid and highly mobile and rural people can, at various stages in their lives, be movers/migrant workers, returnees or stayers. There is an open-ended dynamic at play that can change at different stages in peoples' life cycle, thus any analysis of rural people needs to adopt a life course perspective, either comparing different life course stages or focusing on a particular life stage.

2 | THE HETEROGENEITY OF RURAL STAYERS

Who stays in the countryside? It is difficult to give a straightforward answer to this question, due to the peculiarities of the *hukou* system

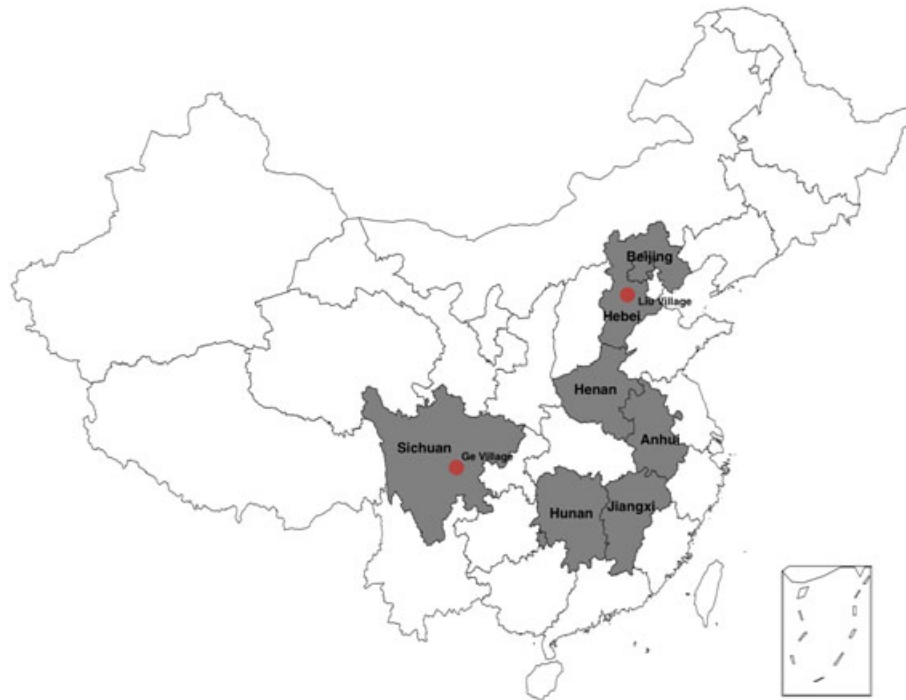


FIGURE 1 The research localities in China

and circularity of rural urban migration in China. *Hukou*, the official form of identity based primarily on place of birth, is a special household registration system imposed in 1950s to prevent rural inhabitants from moving to cities, and to support the so-called socialist primitive accumulation and initial industrialisation, together with the people's commune system and the unified purchase and marketing system for agricultural products (to keep grain prices low). Under the *hukou* system, people born in urban areas were registered as "citizens", officially named as *non-agricultural hukou*, to whom the state distributed food for family consumption. By contrast people born in rural areas were registered as "peasants", officially named as *agricultural hukou*, who were responsible for producing their own food. Thus, two distinct categories were created citizens and peasants each embodying contrasting social status, welfare, rights, obligations, administration, and identities (Lei, 2001; Wu & Ye, 2016; Xiang, 2007; Ye, Rao, & Wu, 2010). Although the rural urban *hukou* system has been relaxed since 1980s and the official classification of agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* abolished in 2014, the sharp difference between citizens and peasants still continues.

The identity of peasant still has profound impacts on rural migrants working in cities. Stepping out of rural areas, rural labour migrants are assigned a special social category - 'peasant worker' (*nongmingong*), meaning their identity is still peasant, while their occupation is 'worker'. Under the current *hukou* system, peasant workers are excluded from the entitlements of a "citizen" for labour, social security, public education, and administration (as their identity is still peasant). It is almost impossible for the children of peasant workers to be admitted to public schools in the cities, and even when a child does manage to enter a school in the city, he or she has to return to his or her home place to take the entrance examinations for high school or university, the contents of which are place specific. There are also specific quotas for university enrolment for each province

(Xiang, 2007). This identity discrimination leads most peasant workers to wander around in the labour market: a cheap labour force, whose lives remain marginal, transitory, and precarious (Chen, 2005; Fu, 2006; Ren & Pan, 2007).

Social and economic rights and obligations in China are largely place, or *hukou*, based. These rights and obligations and the way they are administered differ greatly between places, and especially between urban and rural areas. Population management is heavily identify-biased, leading to distinct rural-urban segregation. As a consequence, rural urban migration takes place in the form of "split labour reproduction" which results in the emergence of left-behind populations as described in the first section of this paper.

Although the number of peasant workers in cities in China is very high, almost all of them are temporary and very few can or will become permanent urban residents. For them, urban areas are merely workplaces, not homes. Temporary peasant workers flow into and out from the urban and rural areas seasonally and are often compared to migratory birds (Li, 2007). Xiang (2007) pointed out that the Chinese narrative of rural urban migration implies that migrants are expected to eventually return to the countryside, as the term "left-behind" (*liushou*) literally mean those who "stay and hold the fort," practically meaning that the family members are waiting for migrants to return. This is quite distinct to the English phrase left-behind which has the connotation that the left-behind could have been brought along by the movers/migrants (*ibid.*). In other words, the *hukou* system has created, framed, and maintained, a circular flow of rural urban migration in China (van der Ploeg & Ye, 2010).

Given this system and its particularities, the 169 million migrant peasant workers in China are institutionally, administratively, and practically tied to and rooted in the countryside, the place of their families and the harbour that they return to when they cannot find work, and get injured or disabled or become too old to migrate for work. Very

few of them can permanently move to cities with their families and obtain the identity of a citizen, and if they do, they will no longer be counted in the statistics as migrant peasant workers.

During our surveys, in any rural village in China, whenever we ask about the population size, the village accountant always, without any hesitation, provides the number of the people whose *hukou* is registered in the village. This figure includes the migrants (and children and elderly brought along by the migrants to cities) and people stay behind. Table 1 shows the demographics of 10 villages in Henan Province, the data is either drawn from the village archives or an estimation by village accountants.

In Chinese official statistics, a migrant worker is defined as someone who works outside his or her town/township for more than 6 months in any given year. Yet some of these migrant workers might work within their county and be able to return to their village every night. Previous surveys have indicated that about 10% of migrant workers were working within their county (Ye & He, 2008: 72; Ye & Wu, 2008: 65). At the same time those migrant workers who work far away (outside their county) often spend several months a year in their home villages. Previous surveys indicate that around 25% of migrant workers stayed in their home villages for at least 2 months a year (Ye & Pan, 2008: 81; Ye & Wu, 2008: 67). In Ge⁶ Village in Sichuan Province, the total population in 2016 was 3,106 in 1,106 households, including 1,160 migrant workers. Amongst the migrant workers, about 500 worked within the county and 660 worked outside the county. Of those who worked outside the county, 28% stayed in the village for more than 2 months a year. In addition, almost all the migrant workers come back to the village for a family union during the Chinese Spring Festival, this event sparking what is known as the “Spring Festival travel rush”, the largest population movement within a month in the world.

In addition to this circularity of rural migration throughout the year, there are also changes in migration patterns during the life cycle of individual rural inhabitants. Many older people in rural villages have experience of migration from when they were younger and have returned due to different reasons. In the future, there will be fewer and fewer rural people who have lived in their villages all their lives with no labour migration experience. One survey in Henan Province found that 63.2% women stayers are returnees (Ye, Pan, & He, 2014: 45). In Ge Village, more than 60% of people between 18 and 60 years old have

had experience of migration. But rural migrants are just temporary and precarious labourers in the city and are supposed to return to their home villages afterwards. In Ge Village, within the past 30 years, only 15 households have transferred their *hukou* from the village to city.

Migrant peasant workers in China are deeply attached to the countryside and their home villages. For most of them, their families and the children, wives/husbands, elderly parents, as well as relatives and social networks are all in the countryside. They maintain an identity of being a peasant, and their *hukou* is registered in and administered by their home villages. Almost all of them come back at least once a year and a quarter stay in their home villages for more than 2 months a year. They mainly work in cities to support the livelihood of their households. Except for those working within the county, many of them do not come back to the village at the night. However, they will mostly all eventually return back to the countryside after migration. We can classify these Chinese peasant workers as *de facto* rural tied movers and *de jure* rural stayers. Most of them still have families in their home village, which are actual staying families/households.

The children and elderly brought along by migrant peasant workers to cities are called migrant children and migrant elderly. They are also rural tied movers who will return back when the migrant peasant workers return. The migrant children might return before, to pursue a higher level of schooling.

The people who actually live and work in the countryside at the moment (i.e., disregarding migrant peasant workers and the children and elderly who have migrated with them) fall into two main categories: the left-behind population—the families of the migrant peasant workers, and; the non-left-behind population—families that have nobody working in cities. These are the *de facto*, actual, rural stayers.

The entire rural population, including urban migrants and their families, are institutionally regarded as *de jure* rural stayers: They all have rural *hukou* and a peasant identity. Moreover, they are firmly attached to their villages in terms of bio-politics administration, their access to welfare and services, social policies, and their rights and obligations. Whether or not they live and work outside of the village or are resident, and rooted, in their villages they have a strong sense of membership of, and belonging to, their village communities. However, the realities they face are very heterogeneous. Table 2 summarises data, drawn from different sources, that illustrates the complexity of the current rural demographic in China.

Table 2 shows the Chinese rural population to be made up of 604 million *de jure* rural stayers, of whom 216 million (the first three groups) are migrants with rural ties, and 388 million (the second three groups) are actual rural stayers. However, the distinctions between the two groups are highly blurred. First, those who migrate and work outside their towns/townships for less than 6 months in a year are not counted as migrant peasant workers/movers in Chinese official statistics. This means that some of those classified as stayers might actually be movers for certain parts of the year. Second, some classified as migrant peasant workers/movers might work within their county and be able to return to their villages every night, so in reality are stayers. Third, as many rural people shift between migration and staying at different times, being a stayer or mover is not one-off choice but changes at different phases of an individual's life-cycle and different stages of their life course (Hjälml, 2014).

TABLE 1 The demographics of 10 villages in Henan Province (2013)

Village	Total population	Labour force	Migrant workers	Stayers ⁷
Dajuesi	3,133	1,800	1,600	1,533
Gaohuang	4,200	2,600	1,100	3,100
Taiping	3,341	2,100	1,400	1,941
Qianlou	3,170	1,600	1,100	2,070
Yetai	2,250	1,320	800	1,450
Yinghe	3,560	2,000	1,000	2,560
Sidian	1,648	860	450	1,198
Yuhe	1,323	728	376	947
Gangdian	1,685	913	600	1,085
Huaishudian	1,654	880	506	1,148

Source: Ye et al. (2014: 20-21)

TABLE 2 Rural population, movers and stayers of China^b

Category	Size (million)	Rural stayers or movers	Characteristics
Migrant peasant workers	169	<i>De facto</i> rural tied movers, <i>de jure</i> rural stayers, future rural stayers	Tightly attached to countryside by <i>hukou</i> and identity of a "peasant," most work in cities, do not live in the village and only come back once a year, but most will return eventually
Migrant children	29	<i>De facto</i> rural tied movers, <i>de jure</i> rural stayers	Tightly attached to countryside, brought along by migrant peasant workers to cities
Migrant elderly	18	<i>De facto</i> rural tied movers, <i>de jure</i> rural stayers, future rural stayers	Tightly attached to countryside, brought along by migrant peasant workers to cities
Left-behind population	158	<i>De facto</i> rural stayers, left-behind rural stayers	The families of the migrant peasant workers, mainly work and live in the countryside
Non-left-behind population	230	<i>De facto</i> rural stayers, non-left-behind rural stayers	No family members work in city for more than 6 months a year, mainly work and live in the countryside
Total rural population	604	<i>De jure</i> or <i>de facto</i> rural stayers	

Source: Zhang & Zhang, 2006; ACWF, 2013; Wu, 2013: 147; National Bureau of Statistics, 2015; National Bureau of Statistics, 2016; NHFPC, 2016.

The 388 million rural stayers consist of 158 million left-behind (those with family members working away from their village) and 230 million non-left behind stayers. The left-behind stayers include 47 million women, 61 million children, and 50 million elderly. The non-left-behind stayers have no members in their families working as migrant workers in cities. Obviously, a rural family can easily shift between left-behind and non-left-behind or *vice versa* as different family decisions about migration are made. Thus, the distinction between left-behind stayers and non-left-behind stayers is easily blurred.

Broadly in terms of age cohorts, the stayers include children (below 18), youth (18–45), middle aged (45–60), and the elderly (above 60).⁹ As most children are of school age, we will focus the discussion on the adult stayers (above 18). The adult stayers are very heterogeneous in terms of personal attributes, household conditions, production and reproduction, motivation of staying, and livelihood strategies, some of these aspects are discussed in the next sections of this paper.

In Ge Village in Sichuan Province, there are about 1,100 adult stayers, the majority are elderly ones engaged in various activities ranging from farming, livestock raising, caring for grandchildren, and to household chores. There are also considerable number of middle age stayers, some have enterprises in the village developed with the capital accumulated from earlier labour migration (returnees), some of these have never migrated but have engaged in various income generating activities based on local available resources, and others do waged labour nearby. Quite a small number of youth, especially those who are below 40, stays in the village. They either have business in the village or are women who stay because of marriage, pregnancy, or child care.

In general, there are more women than men amongst the adult stayers in Ge Village, mainly due to the need for caring children or elderly and domestic work—following the traditional gender division of labour in Chinese culture. Women stayers usually do some farming and livestock raising or some casual work in the village or nearby. It should also be noted that, as is the case in many Chinese villages, about 5% of the rural stayers in the village live on informal social support (family or kinship) and government relief, this group includes persons with disabilities, the chronically sick, and the aged people with no children to support them.

3 | MOTIVATIONS FOR STAYING

Why do people stay in rural areas? Stayers are a very heterogeneous group and the motivations of different kinds of rural stayers are highly different. Against the background of the Chinese *hukou* system and circularity of rural urban migration, the major differences reside in the two broad categories of left-behind stayers and non-left-behind stayers.

3.1 | Left-behind stayers: Double coercion

Left-behind stayers are mainly left-behind women, children and elderly. Familism plays an extremely significant role in Chinese society, particularly in the care and education of children, and the care and support of elderly members. A family split is usually a difficult choice and, to some extent, one that is forced upon the family. As such, studies on left-behind population in China have largely concentrated on the negative impacts of such family splits on the children, women, and elderly who stay behind (Cook & Dong, 2011; He & Ye, 2014; Wu & Ye, 2016; Ye & Pan, 2011). If there were more alternatives, such split family migration would not be people's priority choice. Thus, the decision of the staying of left-behind people is closely linked with peasant workers' motivations for migration: Both staying and moving are coherent family strategies. In most cases, the staying of children and elderly is largely the decision of adult members of their families. Thus, the discussion here will mainly focus on the staying of wives left behind.

During our survey in Henan Province, when asking why the husbands migrated out, the left-behind wives usually responded that, "we had to," "we had no other choice." In fact, they did not show a yearning for modern life in cities. Instead, most of them explained, "there would not be enough food if we all stayed in the village," "by only doing farming we could not make ends meet," "there are many expenditures that need cash which we cannot get if our husbands didn't go out." Their answers were consistent with those from our questionnaire in which one question asked, "why is your husband working outside?" To this multiple-choice question, 71.6% of the wives replied "for children's education" and 65.7% "for daily expenditure." Other common replies were "for paying off debts" (25.4%), "for

reconstructing the house" (20.9%), and "for paying the bills for medical care" (13.4%; Ye et al., 2014: 42). It is safe to argue here that these answers show that migrant peasant workers have been pushed, rather than pulled, to the city. This pushing dynamic comes from the coercion or the dull compulsion of economic forces that make peasant households need more and more cash income, as rural families and rural society in general have become increasingly integrated in the market by various means of "forced commercialization," "encouraged commercialization" and the commodification of subsistence (Bernstein, 2010: 49).

In general, structure and institutions at macro level have set the rules of the game so that some people in rural households have to migrate out to work and some have to stay behind. Between husband and wife, the decision of who leaves and who stays is tied to the division of labour in each family at the micro level. The factors impacting on the decision are mainly economic, cultural, and physical.

As stated earlier, the main driver for migration is the demand for cash income; hence, the level of potential income and job opportunities will largely determine who will be the one to migrate out. Meanwhile, salaries and jobs depend, to a large extent, on the education and skills that a worker possesses. Our survey in Henan Province demonstrated that 60% of left-behind women had an education level of primary school or lower, a generally lower level of education than their migrant husbands (Ye et al., 2014: 37–38). Some left-behind women had migrated out to work in the past, but they could not get a job that paid acceptably and had to come back. Higher education levels largely explain why men are more mobile than women. Only on rare occasions where women had a higher education than their husbands could they earn more than them.

Although left-behind women stayers are disadvantaged compared with their husbands in terms of job and income opportunities, the main factor makes them stay is the gender biased culture. In rural China, the traditional gender relations can be characterised as "the husband dominating while the wife is subordinate" (*nanzhu nvcong*) and "the man being in charge of external affairs and the woman in charge of internal affairs" (*nanzhuwai nvzhunei*), meaning that the man is the main bread earner and the woman is responsible for taking care of the elderly and bringing up the children. Under the impact of such a culture, women who used to be assigned with care duties would naturally stay behind when it is not possible for the entire family to migrate. This is reflected in the statements of some left-behind women: "we stay behind because there are old wo/men and kids to be cared for." Our survey revealed that about 38.5% of left-behind women with migration experience returned to the village because they were needed to take care of children, grandchildren, and/or of the elderly (Ye et al., 2014: 45). Others returned because of a wedding, pregnancy, lactation, illness, injury, or to accompany their children to school (as many local schools have been moved from villages/townships to county towns). The majority of these left-behind women (91.4%) never migrated again because they needed to take care of their dependents (Ye et al., 2014: 45).

In sum, this traditional gender culture has posed an overt coercion on rural women when a decision on who should work outside and who should stay behind is needed, as it is taken for granted that women stay for the care duties. Taking the covert coercion of economic forces

on rural families into consideration, this double coercion is the key force behind the left-behind women stayers. In highlighting the structural and institutional forces that lead to the decision of men migrating out and women staying behind, it is not our intention to deny the agency of the women stayers or the men movers. In fact, such family arrangements are, to a certain extent, a proactive choice made in response to macro and external forces. At the same time, left-behind women stayers are striving for more space within family sphere and beyond: taking on more roles within the family, increasing their bargaining power and autonomy in family decision-making, making their unpaid work more visible, and participating more in village public affairs (Ye et al., 2014).

3.2 | Non-left-behind stayers: Stuckness or alternative livelihoods?

Most rural residents we interviewed, be they men, women, the elderly, or even children, would firmly support their able-bodied family members (husbands, wives, parents, or children) to migrate and find work in cities, as they understand that the cash income the migrants can earn is critical to their livelihoods and so migration is considered the right thing to do. In the meantime, both the movers and stayers (including left-behind stayers and non-left-behind stayers) are painfully aware that there is a huge social price to pay for split family migration. It is widely recognised that migrant workers live difficult, dirty, and dangerous (called "3D") lives in the cities. The heavy work, harsh, and dangerous working conditions pose constant health risks. Many migrants have contracted chronic diseases or have been injured and disabled, some even losing their capacity to work. Moreover, due to the absence of one or both parents and the "care deficit", the inadequacy of alternative child care, some left-behind children face risks and hidden troubles as they grow up: including a sense of insecurity and helplessness which sometimes lead to behavioural problems (Cook & Dong, 2011; Ye, 2011; Ye & Pan, 2011). Left-behind women suffer from the "three big mountains," that is, heavy workloads, overwhelming mental stress, and a sense of isolation and insecurity that stems from having to deal with farming, child raising, and care for the elderly alone (Chen, Qin, & Zhu, 2005; Wu & Ye, 2016). The left-behind elderly encounter many difficulties in economic support, daily care, and spiritual comfort, have to undertake farm work and look after their grandchildren (He & Ye, 2014).

Even with such a generally accepted migration culture and the widely recognised social price that individuals and communities pay for migration, almost all rural migrants and rural stayers state that "if there were ways of earning enough in the countryside, nobody would be willing to migrate for work." One survey indicated about 90% migrant workers wanted to come back and live with their families in rural communities (Ye & Pan, 2008). Migrant workers said, "everything would be good if we could stay at home, and everything is difficult when we migrate out." Staying in the countryside, together with the family, is undoubtedly the preferred choice for most rural people, particularly those with children and elderly parents, but they need to follow the opportunities to sustain their family's livelihoods.

For non-left-behind people, their stay can be a combination of choice (stillness) and/or a product of constraints ("stuckness"; Coulter,

Van, & Findlay, 2016). For sick, persons with disabilities, the chronically sick, those with a heavy care burden for children, or aged people, stuckness is likely to be the stronger factor. For other non-left-behind people, staying can be a proactive and deliberate choice for pursuing alternative livelihoods by grasping or developing different opportunities. Some non-left-behind households are able to develop alternative livelihoods through their extended social networks (for instance, village cadres and some peasant entrepreneurs; Ye, Wang, & Long, 2009), or their available financial or physical assets (for instance, returnees). Some who stay in the countryside get equivalent or even more social and/or economic rewards than those who migrate.

First of all, quite a number of rural stayers find paid labour within, or close to, their communities. Amongst China's 388 million actual rural stayers, 109 million are counted as *in situ* peasant workers, engaged in non-agricultural work within their towns/townships (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In Ge Village in Sichuan Province, there are 512 peasants doing labour work within their village or township. In Ge Village, there is a timber processing enterprise that has been operating for more than 10 years and employs over 20 peasants. These workers are all from the village or surrounds and are between 40 and 60 years old. They have a free lunch, provided by the enterprise, and earn more than 3,000 *yuan* per month.¹⁰ Many of these *in situ* peasant workers are non-left-behind stayers. Village cadres are also prominent amongst the non-left-behind stayers: Many of them have held village leadership positions for many years and also run a local business or enterprise.¹¹ They receive a salary or support from the local government or from the village collective but, more importantly, their wider network usually gives them much more access to business opportunities. In Ge Village, there are five cadres at village level and nine directors of different production groups who are also regarded as village cadres. Their monthly salaries/subsidies range from 560 to 1,200 *yuan*, but 12 of the 15 have business/enterprises in the village, such as cow raising, aquaculture, vegetable production, pick-your-own grape farm, agro-tourism and restaurants, vegetable and timber processing, hiring out bulldozers and excavators, and shops. Besides, there are quite a few non-left-behind stayers who are not village cadres but who operate different, and sometimes multiple, types of enterprises in the countryside. Some of them are returnees who have invested the capital accumulated from many years of migrant labour. These enterprises mostly utilise locally available resources. In Ge Village, at least 50 non-left-behind households have developed enterprises that include a pig farm, a duck farm, bee keeping, cow raising, vegetable production, a ginger farm, a tea farm, transport services, and shops.

Rural stayers can obtain a decent or even high household income, and some, such as the village cadres, also enjoy a high social status. In addition, the rurality and countryside landscape, social ties and community culture, familism, and psychology all confer significant benefits and motivate these non-left-behind stayers. In Ge Village, many stayers say that the village has good environment, clean air and clean water, and a beautiful landscape (it is set on a major river, beyond which a mountain is visible) and plenty of forests. They are also very proud of their access to unpolluted fresh vegetables. A 48-year-old male peasant said, "I have built a new house in the village, I do not think it is necessary to buy an apartment in the county town, very little housing in cities is comparable to the organic type of settlement in the

countryside." A 25-year-old rural young migrant said he would not stay in the city in the future; instead, he would like to return and stay in the village, as he particularly liked the fresh, clean, air, and the beautiful environment. Moreover, some rural stayers prefer living in a community culture characterised by acquaintances and its communalism, reciprocity and solidarity. Stayers in Ge Village indicated that households in cities had little communication and few interactions between each other, even they lived a very short distance away from each other, and said that they would never be able to get used to living in such a "society of strangers." They explained that they could obtain sufficient food by farming their land, were not restrained by having a boss and so were much freer, often playing *Mah-Jongg* with their peers in their leisure time. Many young migrants like the village lifestyle, particularly when everyone returns for the Spring Festival, when the village is extremely lively. Another obvious but important aspect is that staying in the countryside enables family members to be together, avoiding the family split that affects huge numbers of left-behind households. In addition, rural people have most of their relatives and friends in the countryside, and such social ties and network often offer them significant informal social support. This physically being together with the family and the social support that rural stayers receive are important foundations for their psychological well-being.

4 | THE LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES OF RURAL STAYERS

The lives of rural stayers can be usefully understood by examining their approach to securing their livelihoods. A key feature of their livelihood strategies is multiple job holding (van der Ploeg & Ye, 2010), a way of strategic diversification through developing a wide range of income generating activities (Scoones, 2015).

First, for the left-behind households, the combination of migration and agriculture ("hoe and wage") is a typical type of multiple job holding by different family members. When men migrate for labour work in the cities, their households keep their contract land, and the left behind women and elderly usually continue with agricultural production. An earlier survey showed that 90.1% of left-behind women and 80.6% of left-behind elderly did agricultural work (Ye & He, 2008; Ye & Wu, 2008). Although the salaries of the migrant workers account for a much larger share of the income of the left-behind households, the continuation of agriculture by left-behind stayers provides the basic household security or is used to obtain additional income by marketing surplus produce.

Second, in addition to farming their land, some stayers (mostly non-left-behind stayers) have developed various types of local enterprises by utilising locally available resources, including social capital. The diversity and number of such enterprises varies greatly from place by place, some villages with more resources have much more variety others, with less resources, have fewer. Huang is a 42-year-old peasant in Ge Village. He and his wife have never migrated out. They have a pig farm with about 200 pigs and a 15 *mu* tea farm in hilly land. They also have two *mu* of walnut trees and grow grains for their own consumption.¹² Huang said they loved to stay in the village with its beautiful landscape and to work in the open air with nature, plants, and animals

and more importantly have the freedom to organise their own work and time. Wang is a 62-year-old peasant in Liu Village. He has been engaged in goat raising and goat trading since 2000. More significantly, he has become involved in contracting mountainous land for forestry development, including 500 *mu* of robinia trees, 500 *mu* of poplar trees, 7 *mu* of walnut trees, and 4 *mu* of apricot trees (almond). All these undertakings have been developed on the basis of a well-established social network. He told us that these entrepreneurial undertakings were designed to secure a livelihood for himself and his wife as they become older. In fact, Wang has rarely worked in city as a wage labourer. He said, "I once worked in a city for 17 days, but was not used to it and felt strange. I do not like migrate to work in city, I like to strive in the field."

Third, many of the village cadres hold multiple jobs. They receive salaries/subsidies and undertake agricultural production and many other types of business activities. For instance, the 53-year-old accountant of Ge Village has been in the position for 12 years. He receives a monthly salary of 1,000 *yuan*. He continues farming the land contracted by his household. He has also contracted three reservoirs for fish farming from the village collective, which can give him an income of 30,000 *yuan* per year. He has also opened a restaurant along the river to receive tourists from the cities.

Fourth, in addition to the 109 million *in situ* peasant workers (engaged in non-agricultural works within their towns/townships for more than 6 months a year), there are people counted as migrant peasant workers in the official statistics who work within their own county who are able to stay at home or return home at regular intervals, as well as many others who work within their county or town/township but for less than 6 months a year (and are thus not counted as peasant workers in the official statistics). They are engaged in non-agrarian sources of income generation, which they maintain alongside their agricultural activities in their home villages.

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

During the processes of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation in China, rural urban migration has been normalised and become part of the culture and a "rite of passage" for young rural people. This has given rise to a tendency towards the hollowing out and vanishing of rural communities. This has led academic and social discourse to focus on the themes of migrant peasant workers and left-behind populations. Little attention has been paid to the people who are staying in the countryside, and only very few studies of this phenomena have been conducted. The general take is that most rural people want, and are in the process of moving, to cities, as staying in the "hollowed" countryside is no longer desirable. However, analysis has shown that the rural population of 604 million are *de jure* rural stayers of whom 388 million are actual rural stayers. Although constrained by structural and institutional forces, many rural stayers have proactively developed diversified livelihood strategies in terms of multiple job holding in order to remain and thrive in the countryside. Many do this because they appreciate rurality and the countryside landscape as well as the social ties and communitarian culture. As such, we can confidently conclude that rural villages are not hollowed out and rural stayers are not all unintended.

The complicated rural demographic in China cannot be simply understood in terms of a dichotomy between migration and being left-behind or of movers and stayers. Rural stayers are very heterogeneous and include the active and passive, the intended and unintended, the deliberate and forced, and many in between. In China, rural stayers are classified into two clusters, the left-behind stayers and non-left-behind stayers. Yet the distinction between the two is far from clear-cut because decisions about moving and staying can change according to the different stage of any individual's or family's life course. Structure and agency, coercion and deliberation play important roles in influencing the decisions and motivations of rural stayers.

Rural stayers make a significant and varied contribution to their households' livelihoods and to rural development. First, while millions of peasant workers have and continue to migrate to cities, their family reproduction mainly takes place in the countryside. Left-behind women, left-behind elderly, and sometime the non-left-behind stayers bear the major responsibility for the care, bringing up, and education to the aged, sick, and persons with disabilities need. This family-based system of support removes a huge responsibility that the national social security system would otherwise have to shoulder. Second, the rural stayers remain connected with the out-migrants and enable the movers to maintain their attachments and ties with the countryside, as well as maintaining the village home as the last safety net for when they return. Thus, rural stayers are the key actors for maintaining the rural urban link and communitarian cultural traditions and support networks. Third, to a great extent, the rural stayers sustain farming and agricultural development. This is critical for food security and food safety at the national level. Fourth, returnees often start business activities in the countryside by investing the capital (and knowledge and sometimes contacts) they have accumulated from migration. This, to some extent, is contributing to an integrated rural-urban development. Fifth, the enterprises rural stayers develop are creating huge local employment opportunities, which make the option of staying more attractive and more feasible for many peasants. Finally, rural stayers are the key actors for the construction of the new countryside and the key participants in village governance.

In analysing the dominant discourse of rural-urban migration and the important role of stayers in the countryside, one can easily recognise the bifurcations that emerge when looking at different sectors or from different perspectives. China has adopted prioritised industrialisation and urbanisation as the national development strategy for over 30 years and this has generated a continuously high rate of economic growth. Yet at the same time, its policies have been extremely protective of agriculture, the countryside, and the peasantry. Many agrarian policies have specifically aimed to increase peasants' incomes and agricultural production, enhance rural stability, and to develop the countryside. The agrarian structure in China is not linear but is complex and has bifurcated features. In particular, land and labour are not treated as mere commodities in China, they are far too important for that. Peasant agriculture remains the dominant mode of production. Although massive numbers of rural labourers have moved to the cities for temporary wage work, they have never completely broken their link with the countryside, rather, the countryside functions as a safety net for them.

It should be noted that, since 2015, the number of rural migrants in China has stagnated (Chen, 2017) and the rate of urbanisation is also slowing down (Ba & Yang, 2011). Even when 70% of China's population is urban, there will be still 400–500 million rural stayers (*Xinhua Net*, 2013). This raises a lot of challenges and issues that deserve attention and further research. With rural stayers being mostly middle aged and elderly, we need to ask how we can revitalise rural dynamics and community vitality, who will take over the development of the countryside, and how to maintain the long term balance between the rural and the urban. In general, China needs to develop policies that create more favourable conditions for rural people to remain in the countryside and to develop their livelihoods. More importantly, in this era of developmentalism, we should ask some more fundamental questions about the kind of lives that rural people really want to live, the kind of countryside peasants can have in the face of deep industrialisation and urbanisation, and whether modernisation leaves peasants with sufficient space and autonomy to choose their own mode of agriculture and style of life?

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Migrant peasant workers are those who work outside their towns/townships for more than 6 months in any year, *in situ* peasant workers refers to those engaged in non-agricultural work within their towns/townships for more than 6 months in any year.
- ² The total rural population in 2015 was 604 million (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2015).
- ³ Findings of this research were published in Ye and He (2008), Ye and Pan (2008), and Ye and Wu (2008) and some are incorporated in this paper.
- ⁴ Findings of this research were published in Ye et al. (2014) and some are incorporated in this paper.
- ⁵ All materials about Ge Village in this paper were collected as part of the research for this paper.
- ⁶ The surveyed villages and interviewees are all pseudonyms.
- ⁷ This is the socially recognised categorisation in China.
- ⁸ The number of stayers is simply calculated by deducting the number of migrant workers from the total population size.
- ⁹ Numbers in the table are mostly estimations and some were from different years, so the table only provides a general picture.
- ¹⁰ 1 US\$ = 6.87 yuan (approximately) in 2017.
- ¹¹ Village cadres refer to administrative personnel in village committees and village Communist Party branches. They are not registered as government officials but do receive monthly allowances from local governments or village collectives.
- ¹² 1 ha = 15 mu.

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