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## Internal migration and left-behind populations in China

Jingzhong Ye, Chunyu Wang, Huifang Wu, Congzhi He and Juan Liu

The astonishing scale of internal migration in China since 1980s can be compared to only a few cases in world history. The migration gave birth to a vast number of peasant workers with their family members left behind in rural communities. Dominant studies on migration address mainly the following questions: why people migrate, what impacts migration has brought about, and how to cope with such positive or negative influences. This review paper builds on this rich body of literature and engages with critical agrarian studies. A better understanding of rural-urban migration in China from a critical agrarian studies perspective can be better achieved in the context of the historical emergence of a new (semi-) proletariat class and the biopolitics of their migration. Based on this and the aforementioned discussion, we will point to potential future studies as a conclusion.

**Keywords:** internal migration; left-behind population; impact studies; political economy; bio-politics

### Introduction

Unlike displaced peasants who gradually became proletarian workers in the land enclosure movement in Britain, a majority of Chinese peasants have turned out to be ‘peasant workers’ (*nong min gong*) in the process of industrialization and urbanization from the early 1980s onwards. The number of peasant workers is huge, and their contribution to the national economy is considerable. It is estimated that there were around 230 million peasant workers in 2009 (Liu 2010), meaning that one third of the Chinese peasantry is on the road. With an average annual payment of around 8000 Yuan, one peasant worker creates a surplus value of 17,000 Yuan a year (Cao 2005).

This internal migration in China has brought about more than economic benefits (here let’s put aside the questions of who get these benefits and what they do with what they get). The very term ‘peasant worker’ implies a semi-proletariat situation (Meng 2011, Liu 2012). Peasant workers have not been completely deprived of possessions but are still forced to sell their labor in the capitalist market. This creates numerous split families – approximately 58 million children (Li 2009a), 47 million wives (Cai 2011) and 45 million elderly have been left behind in rural communities by their migrant family members (Xinhua News Agency 2011).

Such a phenomenon, however, is regarded as a necessary step towards modernization in mainstream economics. It concerns a typical economic issue of how to transform a

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traditional, agricultural economy into a modernized one. Under the assumption of *Homo economicus*, peasants are believed to be able to weigh costs and benefits of working on the farm and in the factory, and choose the latter instead of the former because it is more remunerative. In this sense, movements from traditional agriculture to modern industry are encouraged by the wage differentials between the two sectors. The implicit message here is that migration is a free re-allocation of labor in the market and conducive to the national economy.

There are many relevant research studies showing that impacts of migration have gone beyond the economic sphere at the national level. In the sending areas, questionable impacts of migration cover education, health, daily care, gender roles, agricultural production and rural development. Most of the findings are contradictory – both negative and/or positive impacts can be found. Some corresponding countermeasures and policy suggestions are thereby put forward. However, the problem is, if we are satisfied with the conclusion that migration has different impacts in different contexts, we may be trapped in a complicated and diversified micro-world, ending up with either claiming ‘it depends’, or proposing a few generalized principles of judging what impacts might occur under what conditions. Such findings in previous literatures, although important, need to be complemented by a macro-level analysis in order to involve a broader social, economic and political context and present a clearer picture of this phenomenon.

It is in this light that we deem it necessary to emphasize a political economy perspective in the context of critical agrarian studies in the study of migration, so that the power structure, government policies and economic relations can be brought into analysis. For this purpose, this paper is divided into seven sections. Besides the introduction and the methodology, the third and fourth parts of the paper review previous literatures that analyze causes and impacts of migration, with a particular focus on studies in China. The fifth section is a short summary of actions and strategies combating negative influences of migration on left-behind populations. This is followed by a reflection on the above problem-solution logic in the sixth part. The reflection moves upwards to the macro level, involving biopolitics of migration and politics of social care. In the end, a rethinking of migration and left-behind populations points out what can be further explored in this area.

## Methodology

In China, we pioneered the first comprehensive research on left-behind children in 2004, and have expanded the research to left-behind women and left-behind elderly since 2006. Our research has always been community-based, and has covered 20 villages in nine provinces in China. We have now published four papers in leading international academic journals and 25 in top national journals. In addition, we have published five books in Chinese.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of our 10 years of empirical research on internal migration and left-behind populations in China, we have collected altogether over 500 papers from multiple academic databases, with around 300 originally in Chinese and the rest in English. Thus, this paper is built partly upon our own empirical work in China and partly upon a literature

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<sup>1</sup>There are in total 26 researchers on the team. The team’s research on left-behind populations is of leading significance within the Chinese academic community. There has been in-depth media coverage of the team’s research on left-behind populations. The team’s research on left-behind populations won the highest prize for social sciences research in China in 2013.

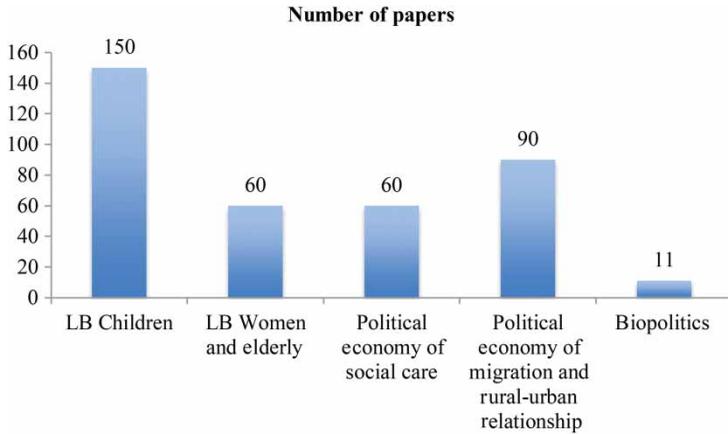


Figure 1. Literatures collected (in Chinese) by themes. LB, left behind.

survey. Considering the literature review is to provide a foundation for the discussion of internal migration and left-behind populations in China, we included literature published from 1985 to 2012 when migration studies became increasingly prevalent (the advent of the literature on left-behind populations was much later, in about 2000s). Because we were concerned about why migration occurred and what effects it had on the sending areas, we paid special attention to literature in this regard and identified three perspectives and four aspects of impacts that are most frequently adopted or discussed (see the next two sections for details). We used some key words to locate articles, such as ‘migration’, ‘social care’, ‘left-behind children’, ‘left-behind women’, ‘left-behind elderly’, ‘left-behind population’ and ‘biopolitics’. Then we screened the literature based on frequencies of being cited. More articles and some books were searched out later according to references from journal articles previously read. Figures 1 and 2 below show the breakdown of literature collection Figures 1 and 2.

We do realize that it is impossible to cover the entire body of literature on migration in a single paper; thus, we narrow down the scope of our review to internal migration.

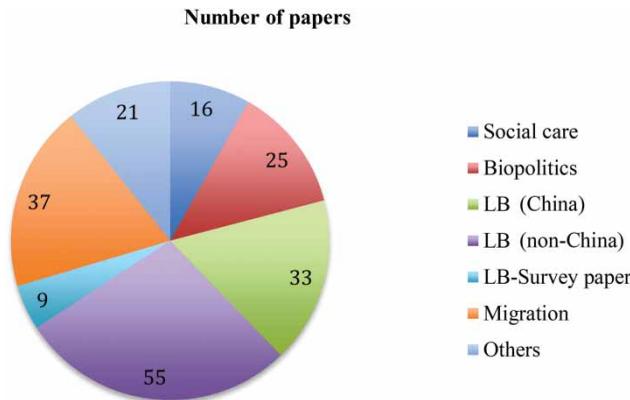


Figure 2. Literatures collected (in English) by themes. LB, left behind.

Transnational migration is not the focus here. To keep down the length of the paper and reduce redundancy, not all literature sources we collected are listed as references.

### Causes of migration

This section is intended to review how three main branches of social sciences (specifically, neo-liberalists, neo-Marxists and anthropologists) have interpreted causes of migration differently. For us, migration is triggered by multiple factors at household-individual levels and in social-political spheres, with some factors more overwhelming in certain areas and at particular times.

#### *Three perspectives on interpreting migration*

Economic factors are usually regarded as the main reason for migration. It seems to be nothing new – population movements occurred in the past and continue at present in the hope for better living conditions. That is why people move from rural to urban, rural to rural, urban to rural, and from one country to another. In this economic perspective, there are three essential theories to be mentioned – Lewis's unlimited supply of labor, Todaro's expected income and Stark's relative deprivation.

The three theories have one commonality. They all suppose that income disparity is the main reason for migration, though the disparity exists in different spheres. Lewis (1958), for example, believes the income difference between urban and rural will inspire rural surplus labor to transfer from agriculture to industry, and such a movement will not stop until the surplus labor has been entirely absorbed by the advanced industrial sector. Todaro (1981) points out that it is not necessarily the actual income that would encourage a laborer to migrate. The anticipated higher income would also push him or her to move to cities even when the urban unemployment rate might be high in some periods. Stark and Taylor (1991) focuses on the income gap within the rural community and argues that the more a laborer feels deprived in the village, the more likely it is that he or she would choose to migrate.

Although powerful and fitting with some everyday observations, the aforementioned theories cannot explain the following phenomena. Firstly, not the poorest areas have the highest migration rates (Connell *et al.* 1976, Mallee 1995/96). For instance, the widest income gap in China is that between the western inland and the eastern coastal areas. However, the largest number of migrants does not originate from the western provinces, but from middle China. Six provinces (Jiangxi, Hunan, Anhui, Hubei, Henan and Guangxi) contain 32 percent of the total rural population and 59 percent of the peasant workers, and none of the provinces are in the western areas of China (Yang 2005). Secondly, the poorest peasants are not the most likely to migrate. Even though they feel the most 'deprived', the poorest do not have the highest motivation to seek work elsewhere (Du 2000). When examining those who migrate, de Haas notices that migration is 'a socially stratified process in which particular families, ethnic groups or classes participate in and monopolise specific forms of migration' (de Haas 2010, 1601). That is, rural communities and societies are often highly differentiated and migration 'opportunities' are not open to all (*ibid.*). In some extreme cases, some peasants are simply too poor/unhealthy/bounded by family responsibilities to migrate. Thirdly, migrant workers, in many cases, are forced to migrate, not for more income, but for survival. Migration implies a historical fact that capital and labor are looking for each other, but not all aspirant laborers were able to find capital (Li 2009b). In the colonial period, the dispossessed population could not all

be absorbed by plantations, mines and other industries in the local area (Breman 1990). Rather, the capitalists prefer to take the trouble to recruit hands from places far away such that the employees are separated from their origins by long distances of land and sea, which makes them easier to manipulate and discipline (Li 2009b). In short, the economic perspective draws up a perfect market in which rural laborers migrate out of their own volition and after a careful calculation of costs and benefits. However, in reality, rural-urban migration does not happen mostly in the poorest areas, or among the poorest peasants. It is often not a voluntary 'individual' choice, and not a household's strategy to diversify or specialize their livelihoods. There might be other influencing factors apart from economic incentives.

Anthropologists and sociologists prefer to seek social and cultural reasons behind migration. For instance, in some areas, it is a cultural norm to invest in the first-born boy in the hope that his migration (and later the migration of other family members) might change the fate of the family (Oucho 1996). Unlike those who see migration as a rupture of everyday life, De Haan (1999) disputes this sedentarism and argues that migration should be interpreted as an integral part of societies, and as the norm rather than the exception. Besides, a culture of migration in the community may spur young men to migrate out for work, because otherwise they will be depicted as being unambitious and therefore unqualified as future husbands (Kandel *et al.* 2002). Migration is then associated with success. With various celebrations of migration in the media, 'people learn to migrate and they learn to desire to migrate' (Ali 2007, 39), as in the case of Guangxi province where modernized ways of consumption and mounting demands have changed the Yao nationality and driven them to migrate (Yang 2012b). In general, according to this perspective, migration could be a demographic response to poverty, but it is never a pure reaction to pushing and pulling factors in simple economic terms.

Admittedly, the migrant population is influenced largely by an individual's social network, previous migration experiences and some other social institutions (De Haan 1999), or migration would usually lead to more migration (de Haas 2010). This social network theory could explain quite well why migration usually happens in certain regions or among certain groups of peasants, apart from economic reasons such as higher income. However, this theory is more plausible when explaining subsequent or repeat migration. It does not work so well when explaining why migration occurs in the first place.

The third perspective, neo-Marxism, strives to take a broader economic and political context into account in explaining the advent of initial migration (see Safa 1982, Breman 1985, Standing 1985). In this perspective, migration in the contemporary capitalist world is often not a 'choice' for poor inhabitants in rural areas, but the only option for survival under the dull compulsion of economic forces, because their means of subsistence have been largely commercialized (Bernstein 2010). In the global capitalist production chain, migration reflects how labor is channeled to the industrial heartlands of developed countries, as in the case of Mexico (Rubenstein 1992). In this sense, depoliticized economic perspectives cannot explain the forces of migration in the primitive capital accumulation periods, or the more recent migration of peasants who have been deeply absorbed into the capitalist market. In view of this, it is essential to incorporate power and structure into the analysis of migration.

This perspective has a complex interpretation of migration. On the one hand, it laments the social costs that the working classes have to bear during the whole migration process. On the other hand, it respects the necessity of transferring labor from agriculture to industry for the sake of efficiency, productivity and modernization (cf. 'the last peasant' in Yang 2005).

### *Three perspectives in the Chinese context*

Zooming in on the Chinese context, we can find a significant literature explaining migration since the open and reform policy periods, from various perspectives as well. For instance, it is argued that in the 1980s and 1990s in China, rural laborers migrated out for work because of agricultural involution with the increasing population (Song 1982). A study of 34 villages in Hubei province suggests that the 'pull' factors (mainly urban-rural income differences) mattered more in attracting rural labor to migrate than 'labor surplus' (Wu 1992). Another study on eight villages in four provinces draws a different conclusion that the relative low returns from agricultural production pushed the peasants out (Huang and Clare 1998). Research at that time focused on how rural labor can be better transferred from rural to urban, and from agriculture to industry.

Meanwhile, social network theory had been introduced into the Chinese academe. Scholars began to notice the role that cultural elements have played in migration. For example, Li (1996) analyses the social network and social status of peasant workers, pointing out that they rely on family ethics and blood ties for information and communication, in career seeking and job hopping.

From a class perspective, Ye (2011b) emphasizes that the urban-biased development model in contemporary China has made migration a 'must' instead of an 'option'. Rural areas are increasingly becoming a place where human and other resources have been siphoned off. Pun *et al.* (2012) pay attention to the migrant workers themselves. They depict the miserable situation that peasant workers are in through studies of construction sites in Peking. Their stories are not alone if compared to Pun's earlier study on women workers in the factory (Pun 2005). For a long time in history, migrant workers have provided an ideal labor force for the capitalist production system: cheap (because their reproduction can be partly complemented by the production in their home villages), easy to control (rootless, without much support from local communities) and able to be used to weaken the bargaining power of local labor (Bernstein 2010). But the peasant workers in China are under even harsher exploitative relations because of their double identities (Yang 2005). They are excluded from the social welfare system because they are peasants. They do not rebel easily when fired or unpaid because they still have the last resort of their land. They do not organize themselves because they are family-oriented peasants, not a working class with clear class awareness yet. In addition, this class is also differentiating. A very small proportion become capitalists with relatively larger amounts of capital and hired laborers, and some become self-employed individuals while the majority sell their own labor (Li 1996). For this situation, both Pun and Yang believe that a proletariat class is in the making, but is hindered by the power structure in China (Yang 2005, Pun *et al.* 2012). After all, the capitalists prefer to keep workers in a semi-proletariat condition instead of a proletarianized one since it is more conducive to capital accumulation (Wallerstein 1983). In general, the research on migration and left-behind populations in China has gone through shifts in perspectives over time, from neo-classical to neo-Marxist, with social and cultural considerations in between. The recent popularity of class analysis in migration studies implies that we are confronted with an increasingly conflictual society in which classes are highly differentiated.

In short, it seems that economic, social and cultural factors co-occur in a migration decision for most rural households before migration. Some causal factors are dominant and others peripheral, and vary greatly with different age groups of migrants and diverse households in specific regions or particular times.<sup>2</sup> As noted in contemporary Chinese

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<sup>2</sup>We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

history, young men migrated out to work in the first wave in 1980s, followed by middle-aged men and then young women. Finally, the tide of migration involved almost all capable laborers in rural communities. As some peasants put it, 'all those who can go out to work have gone'.<sup>3</sup> This large-scale and long-lasting trend undoubtedly needs to be examined with both micro, meso and macro factors taken into account.

### Impacts of migration

Impacts of migration on left-behind populations are another important component to be studied. This is not an easy job because of the endogeneity problem (Antman 2012). First of all, the boundary of left-behind populations is unclear. For instance, to be called 'left-behind children', should the children be under 16 or 18, or even under 21 years old? How long should peasant workers migrate out before their children, spouses and parents are counted as being 'left behind' – three months or six months or even one year? Meanwhile, at the epistemological level, some scholars believe that the problem of being left behind is a problem in which the entire population in the countryside has been left behind socially and economically (Xiang 2007). Or, as in India, 'the root of the problems of male outmigration and female suffering lies in the structural inadequacy of the rural society' (Jetley 1987, WS-53). In this sense, left-behind populations have at least three meanings: (1) the people whose family members have migrated out for work; (2) households that have no family members working out but are left behind compared to those who have; (3) the entire rural population in many developing countries who have been left behind in the transition to the capitalist system. Differing definitions of the very basic term may make it difficult, if not impossible, to compare the results of different studies.

Second, the migrant and non-migrant families may be in different social-economic situations in the same research, and a comparative study between them may reflect such differences instead of the actual impacts of migration. Third, the longitudinal comparison before and after migration is also questionable since the influencing factors on the living conditions of a left-behind family may involve far more than migration, especially when it covers a long span of time. As Rigg (2007) argues,

Migration ... may narrow inequalities in source communities, or widen them; it may tighten bonds of reciprocity between migrants and their natal households, or it may serve to loosen or break these bonds; it may help to support agricultural production, or it may be a means to break away from farming altogether. (163)

The following section is drawn from context-specific literature concerning impacts of migration. Generally speaking, impact studies can be classified into two groups: those taking individuals and households as units of analysis and those focusing more widely on the rural community as a whole.

#### *At the household/individual level*

Based on frequencies of research contents, we would select four aspects to discuss here – education, marriage and gender roles, emotional and psychological aspects, and physical health and daily care.

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<sup>3</sup>Our research team conducted another study on left-behind populations at the request of the World Bank in 2013. This quoted description was repeatedly heard during the research.

*On education*

Impacts of migration (and desire for migration) influence the education patterns, performance and duration, for both sexes in the sending area. For instance, in India, a girl's chances of being educated are reported to be lower when fathers migrate out because they have to take on more domestic duties (Srivastava and Sasikumar 2003). Similar findings are recorded in China (Meyerhoefer and Chen 2011). However, remittance sent back home in El Salvador (Acosta 2011) results in a decrease of child labor and an increase in girls' schooling. In Mexico, a father's migration leads to a reduction of expenditure on boys' education compared with girls (Antman 2010). When considering the gender of migrant workers, a mother's migration seems to be more detrimental to her children's education than the father's, as shown by studies in the Philippines (Battistella and Conaco 1998, Cortes 2010) and Thailand (Jampaklay 2006). However, Louise Elizabeth Tokarsky-Unda (2005) finds that in Mexico, if mothers migrate with their husbands, it is more likely they invest in children's education than when fathers migrate alone. Also in China, fathers' migration would influence negatively the children's school performance because men are usually better educated than women and can help children with their study (Ye and Pan 2011). In Albania and Swaziland, the parental or fathers' migration leads often to poor school attendance and performance (Zoller Booth 1995, Giannelli and Mangiavacchi 2010).

Pertaining to regions, researchers in Mexico report more negative aspects of migration on children's education. Boucher *et al.* (2005) find no significant impact of international migration on education investments in Mexico. What's worse, there is one study on the reduced flow of remittances due to the financial crisis of 2007–2008 that found that remittance reduction is highly related to increases in child labor and reduction in school attendance (Alcaraz *et al.* 2012). Kandel and Kao (2000), Dreby (2007) and McKenzie and Rapoport (2011) point out that in Mexico, parents' migration might result in children's poor performance at school, reduction in school attendance or drop-outs due to the following: parents' detachment and gang involvement and more housework for girls and migration desires for boys; and financial benefits of migration discourage above-average schooling. Migration as an alternative to education has also been reported in a research study in Thailand (Curran *et al.* 2004). In China, a negative relationship between internal migration opportunities and high school enrollment has been found (de Brauw and Giles 2006). But for the study interests and cognition of their own school performance, there might not be much difference before and after parents migrate (Wu 2004). Likewise, Yeoh and Lam (2006) find that left-behind children are performing poorly in the Philippines, although remittances sent back have been used for children's education, such as sending them to expensive private schools (Adi 2003, Yang 2008). By contrast, in Cape Verde, the possibility of migration encourages people to complete at least intermediate secondary school (Batista *et al.* 2007). Similarly, children in Bangladesh enjoy more educational opportunities since remittances reduce the amount of household and non-household child labor (Kuhn 2005). The above findings are summarized as in Table 1 below.

The table above shows how difficult it is to generalize the impacts of migration on children's education based on previous research. Although we could say that migration might be more likely to produce negative influences in more countries, we cannot deduce why this is the case. For instance, remittance sent back may help with education fees, but migration also creates an environment unfavorable for study at home (more workload, feelings of being abandoned, less supervision and guidance, etc.). Experiences and ideas brought back by parents may encourage children to study harder, but are also likely to lure them

Table 1. Impacts of migration on children's education.

	Mothers' migration	Fathers' migration	Parental migration
Impacts on boys	\	Negative (in Mexico)	\
Impacts on girls	\	Negative (in India and China)	\
Impacts on children	More detrimental (in the Philippines and Thailand)	Less detrimental (in the Philippines and Thailand) More detrimental (in China)	Negative (in Mexico, Albania, Swaziland, Thailand, China, the Philippines) Positive (in Cape Verde, El Salvador and Bangladesh) No influence (in Mexico and China)

to drop out and migrate as their parents did. As in the case of China, the influence of migration on children's education might be negative, or there may be no significant differences before and after parents migrate.

#### *On physical health and daily care*

It has been argued that the health of 'left-behind' people has been in general improved because they may have better food habits, higher nutritional status and more health-seeking behaviors under the influence or support of the migrated family members (Hadi 1999b). Besides, the sanitation and health facilities in the sending communities may also be improved with remittances (Taylor 1999). However, the impacts on health in different regions and for different groups vary greatly.

With the figures for weight-for-height and weight-for-age, Anton (2010) reports a positive relationship between remittances and short-term and middle-term nutritional status of left-behind children in Ecuador. Kanaiaupuni and Donato's research points out that infant survival rates may increase in the longer term as a result of remittances sent back home and the institutionalization of migration from Mexico to America, although the infant mortality rate may rise at the beginning (Kanaiaupuni and Donato 1999). Based on evidence from a 2003 Children and Families Survey conducted in the Philippines, Yeoh and Lam noticed that children being left behind 'were generally taller, heavier and fell ill less frequently than children whose parents were still with them' (Yeoh and Lam 2006, 127). When differentiating by gender, the non-labor income that Brazilian women obtain has improved the health of the girls, but not the boys (Duncan 1994). However, the health of left-behind children (especially girls) in China is negatively influenced because they have to undertake more housework, and sometimes even farm work. Their diet is poorer because their guardians have less time to take care of them (Ye and Murray 2010).

Migration of a close family member (without much remittance) generally has negative impacts on the health of the left-behind, with women more vulnerable than men (Duncan 1994). In Nepal and Pakistan, left-behind women who did not receive much in the form of remittances had less money to obtain health care and food, but instead had a heavier workload (Smith-Estelle and Gruskin 2003, Siegmann 2010). This is the same in China, where left-behind women suffer from a higher workload, heavier psychological pressure and loneliness (Ye and Wu 2008). Moreover, various impacts on left-behind women may be observed even in the same country. For instance, a recent study in India suggests

that left-behind women experience higher stress and reproductive morbidity due to transsexual diseases from their migrant husbands (Burazeri *et al.* 2007). Some Indian and South African women were even infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Kahn *et al.* 2003, Archana and Parveen 2005). This finding is supported by Massey's research (2009) in rural West Bengal, India and northern Bangladesh. But another study 10 years earlier reflects that the absence of husbands for a long time may reduce the number of baby deliveries and improve women's health in India (Roy and Nangia 2005).

The long-distance care relations – the quality and accessibility of care – between migrant children and left-behind elderly may vary because of migration stages, historical contexts and family life cycles (King and Vullnetari 2006). Migration accounts for the disruption of traditional kinship systems and care structures (Gulati 1993), as reflected especially in the case of Albanian elderly whose illegal migrant children cannot come and go freely when the old parents are ill (de Haas 2010). They lead a near-starvation life, making soup out of grass and weeds because their migrant children could not (or would not) send back remittances (Vullnetari and King 2008). The Chinese elderly in some areas have been in a miserable situation due to the unwillingness of migrant children to support them and weakened social controls to punish these children (Baldassar 2007a). Around 80 percent of the left-behind elderly have to do farm work, in comparison to about 56 percent of non-left-behind elderly (Ye and He 2008). Their health has been damaged due to greater workloads after their children migrate (Cui 2007). However, senior citizens in Thailand and Cambodia enjoy a relatively better-off life, co-residing with or living adjacent to one grown child (Ikels and Beall 1993), and as already pointed out by Linda, co-resident members usually provide important emotional and material resources (Linda 1989). The above findings are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2 reveals that children's physical health might be improved because of remittances sent back in some regions, except in China. Two reports on improved health for left-behind women in India and left-behind elderly in Thailand and Cambodia are not relevant in China, because they are attributed to fewer babies (husbands not at home) and other response strategies (co-residential arrangement in multiple-children families).

#### *On emotional and psychological aspects*

The emotional suffering of left-behind populations has been deeply discussed in comparison to the economic gains (Zimmer *et al.* 2007). On the one hand, there are optimistic arguments on the maintenance of emotional support and provision of distant care based on the frequent use of modern communication technologies and means of transport, as evidence from Thailand (Mazzucato and Schans 2011) and Italy (Knodel and Saengtienchai 2007) shows. On the other hand, some material benefits, in the form of various gifts, seek to replace parental presence and convey both love and guilt during parents' migration.

Table 2. Impacts of migration on physical health and daily care of left-behind populations.

	Positive	Negative
Impacts on children	In Ecuador, Mexico, the Philippines, and Brazil	In China
Impacts on women	In India (fewer babies)	In India, Nepal, China and Pakistan
Impacts on elderly	In Thailand and Cambodia (co-residence)	In Albania and China

However, although such an idealized childhood acts as justification for parental migration, it may be in conflict with their children's own vision of an ideal childhood (Baldassar 2007b). Left-behind children generally exhibit greater anxiety and loneliness, and mothers' migration produces a greater impact than fathers' in this regard (Battistella and Conaco 1998). The feelings of being abandoned will linger on and often develop into an estranged relationship with parents (Ye 2011a). Loneliness, insecurity, worry and helplessness are frequently reported among left-behind women in China (Ye and Wu 2008). But the traumatic feelings of being left behind may be fewer in societies where migration is widely accepted and practiced (Suarez-Orozco *et al.* 2002).

The left-behind elderly suffer similar emotional and psychological shocks on many occasions. Some find that adult children's migration is closely related to the poor mental health of their parents, although their physical health might not necessarily be negatively influenced (Adhikari *et al.* 2011). Depression occurs because of unmet needs for hands-on care, financial support and/or emotional connections, especially in areas where expectations for intergenerational support are high (Krause 2001, Ye and He 2008). Depressive symptoms may be relieved when the left-behind elderly can get support from their daughters-in-law, but are increased when such support comes from their sons, as studies in China show (Zhen 2008). In Bangladesh, however, the old peasants left behind are reported to be less depressed (Hadi 1999a). Some research also finds that Chinese left-behind elderly may feel satisfied about their lives in general, although they are more lonely, because remittance sent back can provide medical care, which is most needed by the elderly, and also because these elderly are relatively young (below 69) (Zhang 2003).

Again, the findings are puzzling. Although most reports claim that the psychological health of left-behind populations may be impacted unfavorably by the migration of family members, there is some evidence to show that a culture of migration and remittance dependency somehow offsets these pains.

### *On marriage and gender roles*

The separation between husbands and wives due to migration may lead to marital instability and family break-up in some families (Horton 2008), whereas it can also lead to the establishment of stronger emotional affection between spouses in some other families if the separation is not too long (Zheng and Xie 2004, Hugo 2005). For instance, in Mexico, both males migrated out and females left behind were more likely to have affairs due to male out-migration, and this often resulted in the collapse of marriage (McEvoy 2008). Marriages might be endangered by different living environments of husbands and wives (Xiang 2006), psychological pressure and sexual suppression (Wang 2007). While a growing number of women have been absorbed into the labor market, endangering masculinity in some areas (Waters 2002, Chee 2003, Huang and Yeoh 2005), in other areas, women's migration sustains the traditional gender roles instead of fundamentally altering them (Cleaver 2002). For instance, in Indonesia, the migration of young women has produced a rupture of traditional gender roles and aroused the unexpected and threatening reactions of young males who seek to defend their masculinity (Resurreccion and Khanh 2007). However, in the Red River Delta of Thailand, the change of gender roles is not evident (Elmhirst 2007). It is argued that gender roles have been continuously reconstructed in the negotiation process when various cultural resources and discourses have been employed to 'make claims on each other's labor and time' (*ibid.*, 213).

As for the change of gender roles, some argue that male migration can lead to a reallocation of agricultural resources and therefore create a valuable space for rural women in

China to develop ‘independently’ (Li 2003). However, one could argue that women are allowed to share agricultural resources only because agriculture is already a marginalized sector and undervalued in the market (Gao 1994b). Females left behind in rural villages are not likely to be much empowered if they are still relying on males for resources and information (Elson 1992). Even if their status has been improved, it is more due to general social and cultural change, and migration only helps to accelerate this process (de Haas and van Rooij 2010). This is echoed in Rodenburg’s research, which shows that women seek to improve their own power with or without husbands’ migration (Rodenburg 2000). The women’s secondary role in the family may not be altered much in China since husbands stay in control through cell phones and other communication tools (Zhou 2006). The disadvantaged position of Chinese rural women is maintained through gender discourses, institutions and practices after husbands’ migration (Jacka 2012).

In this sense, findings about impacts of migration on marriage and gender roles are not only complicated and conflicting, but also difficult to identify. The emotional relations and power structure within the family are influenced by more factors than migration alone.

### *At the community level*

Does the migration of rural laborers promote or worsen the development of the rural community? Some optimists argue that South-North migration might result in greater equality in the long run and therefore should be encouraged (Martin and Taylor 2001). The ‘balanced-growth’ tradition predicts that the remittances and skills brought back by returned migrants may improve employment opportunities at home and eventually make migration unnecessary (Ghosh 1992).

Some believe that there is a discrepancy between individual households and the rural community in terms of impacts of migration. In other words, migration might be conducive to the development of households, but detrimental to that of the community, especially in the North (de Haas 2010). Situations in the South might be quite different, where the ties between those migrating and those left behind are much stronger. Backflows of resources are more guaranteed (ibid.). This is echoed in a developmental mantra, emphasizing the flow of remittances, skills and able-bodied workers back to the area of origin in a longitudinal perspective (Wise and Covarrubias 2008). For instance, significant remittance might be used for agricultural production (Oberai and Singh 1980). In this way, ‘migration process and remittances modernize the rural sector, both directly and indirectly, through their impact on the production-increasing technological and institutional changes in the agricultural sector’ (Lakshmansamy 1990, 479).

However, the disparity in regional developments, as some scholars found in India, may not be narrowed due to remittances from migrant workers (Cashin and Sahay 1996). For instance, studies in Passore Province of Burkina Faso and Malawi show that females have already been overburdened in farming and remittances sent back are inadequate to hire labor after the migration of males (David 1995, Findley 1997). Although migration contributes to poverty alleviation in many instances, the differentiation of migrants also occurs and inequality among them increases (De Haan 1999). For example, land could become concentrated in the hands of some returned migrants (Islam 1991).

More often than not, those better educated, with skills and in good health are much more likely to migrate out. This has already led to a brain drain and brain gain discussion (Batista *et al.* 2007). The selectivity of migration in many ways leads to a drain-off of the local stock of human capital. As a study in China shows, those left behind in rural communities are

more likely to be women, children and elderly, and their average educational level is comparatively low (Gou 2011).

In addition, exposure to modernized lifestyles and the comparative wealth of the returnees results in changes in rural tastes (Lipton 1980), which in turn increases the demand for goods from outside and locally produced goods become less desirable. As de Haas (2010) also notices, the local economy will be undermined due to the decline of demands and their dependence on the outside world will be increased. Thus, migration may only lead to the 'development of underdevelopment' (Frank 1966).

Another branch of literature discusses impacts of migration on agriculture. There is a noticeable trend of feminization of agriculture and grey-hair agriculture. This phenomenon is prevalent in many countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa (see de Brauw 2003, Chiriboga *et al.* 2006, Lastarria-Cornhiel 2006). A study in China reports that women were allowed to share agricultural resources because it is a marginalized sector with low returns (Gao 1994a). There is no agreement reached as to whether agriculture has been degraded or not as a result of out-migration of the rural labor force (Fan 2003).

The previous literature exhibits complicated and conflicting pictures about impacts of migration. These complexities result partly from different social, economic and demographic situations of each individual household. Much of the available literature therefore seeks to propose corresponding suggestions in order to compensate for social costs caused by migration. Here we especially focus on the case of China and try to point out later what is missing in this problem-solution logic.

### **'Love' and 'care' for left-behind populations in China**

In China, particular social actions have been suggested in order to share the social costs of migration since the issue of left-behind populations gained attention in the mid-2000s. Generally speaking, there are efforts to promote the physical and psychological health of left-behind populations, to strengthen the connection between left-behind children and their parents, to maintain the connection between school and migrant parents, and to build up the relationship between urban and rural families.

#### ***Social care for left-behind children***

In 2006, the Working Team for Left-behind Children was established under the guidance of the Agriculture and Industry Office in the State Department of China. This team is led by the National Women's Federation, composed of members from 13 different agencies, such as the Ministries of Education, Public Security, and Civil Affairs, the Department of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Agriculture, etc. The main objective of the Working Team is to motivate resources and personnel from these agencies to assist left-behind children in terms of education, security, health and so forth. For instance, local governments and Women's Federation in Shaanxi, Shanghai and Sichuan provinces have paid particular attention to the psychological health of left-behind children. They have organized regular sessions of psychological education and established consultancy rooms in some schools (Ye and Yang 2008). Free lunch has been provided to left-behind children in Hubei, Chongqing and Jiangxi provinces, from the government, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private enterprises (Liang 2011, Jiangxi Charity Federation 2012, Wang 2012b).

Phone booths or phone credit cards are provided in Yunnan, Shandong and Sichuan provinces by local governments so that left-behind children can communicate with their

parents more easily. In some schools and administrative villages of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, records of left-behind children have been set up in order to maintain necessary contacts with migrant parents when some unexpected incidents happen (Xinhua News Agency 2006). In Sichuan, Henan and Anhui provinces, activity centers for left-behind children, parental schools and seminars on how to communicate with left-behind children have been set up or organized for left-behind families (Ye and Yang 2008). There are also efforts to connect families and children in urban areas with left-behind families and children in rural communities, for instance, acting parents and hand-in-hand activities in Chongqing, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Hubei, Sichuan, Anhui and Guangxi provinces have been encouraged and undertaken (ibid.).

Pu Wei (2008) categorises all the supports to left-behind children into four types: (1) sporadic, short-term social support, such as hand-in-hand activities between urban and rural children, usually provided by individual sponsors and NGOs; (2) systematic, long-term social support, such as training for guardians of children, usually provided by local governments; (3) self-care, such as educating left-behind children to be independent and strong minded, usually provided by the schools, and (4) the empowerment model, training left-behind children to be capable of expressing their needs and organizing themselves, usually provided by local governments and schools. According to Pu wei, these models should complement each other, instead of applying one type of activities to all left-behind children. Wen (2006) believes that the root of the left-behind children problem is the limited farmland and the urban-rural dual structure, which cannot be solved in a short period of time. He therefore argues for more inputs in rural communities, more actions to provide care to left-behind children while the institutional limits are being removed.

### *Social care for left-behind women and the elderly*

Local governments in Qin Yang County, Gansu Province (Yang 2012a) have organized village leaders, women communist party members and women elites to sign long-term agreements with left-behind women, helping the latter with their production and self-development. Some experts in education, health, law and technology have been teamed up to provide free training to left-behind women. Psychological consultancy has also been provided to them in order to relieve some of their mental stress.

Apart from these, some special training sessions have been held in order to assist left-behind women to obtain some skills and techniques such as embroidery, so that they can have additional incomes. Some entertainment activities have also been organized in festivals. A 'women's home' has been established, in which left-behind women can read books, chat with husbands online, and play badminton or chess. Activities such as handcraft exhibitions, cooking arts exhibitions and the like have greatly promoted their enthusiasm and broadened their social networks (ibid.).

In Jiangxi Province (Lin 2011), micro-finances have been provided to left-behind women to establish their own small businesses under the support of the Women's Federation. Mutual help teams have also been set up so that left-behind women can exchange labor in busy farming seasons.

As for left-behind elderly, the focus of social support is on their daily care. For instance, the communist party in Hunan province (Xiao 2006) launched community activities in Chestnut Tree Township, in which every communist party member was required to help two households in which there were left-behind elderly. In River Mouth Town, communist party members help the left-behind elderly to deal with various complicated documents and

certificates. In Anhui province, some daily consumer goods have been given to the left-behind elderly (Wang 2012a).

In general, these efforts are supposed to share some of the social costs brought about by migration in the Chinese context. However, they are either temporary or limited by scale, with questionable sustainability and effects. More importantly, these actions see the issue of left-behind children or left-behind elderly as a moral one. That is, this is a way of showing ‘love’, ‘care’ and ‘charity’. They tend to accept the present institutions and policies that create a care dualism, instead of challenging them. The issue of left-behind populations is seen as ‘a problem’ on its own and the deeper political economic reasons behind it are left untagged. We feel that instead of seeing this issue as an unfortunate problem and trying to find ‘solutions’, it is necessary to ask what causes this problem and how peasants are responding to it. We are therefore particularly interested in the levels beyond individuals and households.<sup>4</sup> For this, the biopolitics of migration and the politics of social care need to be closely examined.

### **Biopolitics of migration and politics of social care**

Biopolitics of migration and politics of social care are two essential aspects related to how the government regulates the population and how social care has been transferred between different classes and across borders. Biopolitics is a term that can be traced back to Nietzsche. It was later defined as the state-led management of life, death and biological being by Foucault – a form of politics that places human life at the very center of its calculations (Foucault 1980, 2003, 2007). It is concerned ‘with the family, with housing, living and working conditions, with what we call “lifestyle”, with public health issues, *patterns of migration*, levels of economic growth and the standards of living’ (Dean 2010, 119, emphasis added). Migration, left-behind populations and related issues of social care in this sense have become legitimate objects for state manipulation and control.

### ***Biopolitics of migration***

Biopolitics falls between liberalism and interventionism (Mo 2011). It arose after the triumph of bourgeois revolutions and developed throughout the eighteenth century in modern European society. It gradually ‘assumes control over life and, through discipline and regulation technologies, and spreads its control over the simple human body up to the entire population’ (Gorski and Beiras 2007, 2), and this comes into being in the name of setting the population free from the sovereign power, or the absolute power to take life. In this sense, instead of viewing migration as a threat to social stability, policies should be geared towards *regulating to facilitate migration* – reducing discrimination against migrants and red tape that hinders the free flow of labor (see also Skeldon 1997, Khan 1998), and it should be accepted that migration is part of life, or ‘an essential element in livelihood strategies’ (De Haan 1999, 7). For liberalism, ‘government is not

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<sup>4</sup>As Bronfenbrenner’s theory of social ecological system points out, micro and macro gaps could somehow be bridged in five systems, namely, the microsystem (the direct environment we live in), the mesosystem (relationships between the microsystems), the exosystem (links between settings with active and inactive participations), the macrosystem (the actual culture) and the chronosystem (transitions and shifts in lifespans) (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

about “the art of leading men”, but about observing those natural and economic laws that provide security and subsistence and beyond this, leaving men free’ (Dean 2010, 118).

However, the flow of population has never been really free. A study on the movement of Madeirans from the nineteenth century onwards shows that the Portuguese government sponsored ‘engineered migration’ of Madeirans in order to colonize the southern Angola plateau. Unable to attract farmers from the mainland to the plateau and afraid of losing the land to the neighboring German, Boer and British groups, the Portuguese government pathologized the mobile population and forbade them to leave the plateau. This is, as the author claims, ‘an example of biopolitics of population in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (Bastos 2008, 27). This indeed reflects how political actions penetrate, invade and define the whole life. Biopolitics is supposed to be an orientation to intervene in populations to enhance their health and wellbeing (Li 2009b). But Bastos’ study above reveals that not all subsets of groups have been taken good care of. ‘Leaving men free’ in many cases means ‘let die’ (Li 2009b). In the international environment, the prevalence of neo-liberalism since the 1980s has ‘deliberately exposed rural populations of the global South to the full blast of market discipline, while withdrawing social protection’ from the state (Davis 2006, 174). For instance, immigrant African women in Italy have been confined to domestic domains and exploited deeply due to international boundaries. This enables Italian women (from both the north and the south) to benefit, although previously the Italian women from the south were the denigrated ones (Merrill 2011). The study of the Burmese migrant laborer reflects as well how their precarious status has been evoked and strengthened by racialized governance practices and biopolitical arrangements (Arnold and Pickles 2011). The underdeveloped region has been compared to a ‘necropolis’ with resources taken away by the developed region (or ‘biopolis’), which reflects the geographical fluidity of accumulation and mandated differences among groups of people (Nast 2011). In certain contexts, the competition between migrant and local labor might not be fierce since the former usually take the dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs that local workers shun (Rigg 2007), although in some other contexts, local laid-off workers are competing with migrant workers for employment opportunities (Knight *et al.* 1999). Biopolitics of migration could therefore move between encouraging and regulating the movement of migrants, just as can be observed in the Chinese context.

In China, the examination of the history of rural labor movements from the 1980s onwards exhibits clearly how rural laborers have been regulated by various means in accordance with different requirements of capital and state. In the early 1980s, the migration of rural labor was strictly controlled through the *Hukou* registration system. It is argued that with regard to the high unemployment rate in the city at that time, the government gave priority to urban youngsters who just returned to the city and waited for the allocation of a job. Peasants were discouraged from coming and those who came were sent back to their home villages, with only a few exceptions in certain industries, like in ports and mines (Shang 1984). Peasants were not allowed to move to cities until 1984, when the government issued permission to peasants. They were required to bring food with them when looking for jobs in urban areas. Peasant workers who managed to work in the city usually undertook dangerous and low-paid jobs, in short-term and informal contracts. They were encouraged to ‘leave the land but not the hometown’ (*litu bulixiang*), i.e., to do non-farm jobs in the township or in village enterprises. This ‘administrative-legal’ exclusion put migrant workers in ‘the state of exception’.

The massive bankruptcy of township and village enterprises in the late 1980s cast peasant workers back onto the market and massive scales of migrant workers started to form. In the early 1990s, the number of migrant workers reached 50 to 60 million, and

was still growing rapidly. Such a large-scale population movement is depicted as a threat to social stability and is related to rising crime rates, labor disputes and more pressures on the social infrastructure and other services (Tong 1995). Although the development of labor-intensive industries in the coastal areas created a huge demand for workers, the state didn't loosen the control of labor flows. Temporary residence certificates (to collect personal information) and government camps<sup>5</sup> (to intake those without jobs, village introduction letters and/or temporary residence certificates) were invented to regulate the migrants in the city. The controls became more severe in the 1990s when state-owned enterprises released a large number of laid-off workers (Cai *et al.* 2005). The social status of migrant workers was deliberately suppressed and access to better jobs turned out to be increasingly difficult. For almost a decade, the salaries of migrant workers seldom increased. In spite of all these discouragements, the sending areas still took various measures to encourage the outflow of local inhabitants for possible remittances to be sent back home, such as providing them with various types of training (Politics Study Office in Communist Party Committee of An Hui Province 1994, Xu 2003). Yang (2005) believes that this *de facto* situation is unfavorable for the working class because, for one thing, the training provided by the sending area ensures the employers that they do not need to include the education fee in the salary. For another, the government training is not guaranteed and sustainable. The peasant workers may not get the training they need. All these government policies and measures collectively create a genre of biopolitics where migrant workers are heavily deprived (doing dangerous, dirty, insecure work with low payments and negligible social care), but allowing the producers and investors to benefit from the low cost of labor. This is what Agamben called 'inclusion by means of exclusion' (Agamben 1998, 216) – recognizing them as workers but denying them a great number of other rights as human beings.

The most recent decade witnessed the return of the first generation of migrant workers. Most come back with aged, injured and unhealthy bodies. Biopolitics is supposed to increase 'utility and docility' of populations through tools of welfare – bodies, health, subsistence and habitation (Foucault 1980). But more often than not, the manipulation of population has led to inclusion of some and exclusion of others. Peasant workers have been left out of the welfare system as a result of the selective inclusion of biopolitics.

During the whole process (1984 to present), poems, television programs, advertisements and novels about migrant workers and left-behind populations have formed part of the subtle exercise of power. They represent an art of balance through which the contribution of peasant workers is eulogized on the one hand, while the association of urban crimes and peasant workers is established on the other. The image of peasant workers has been framed in such a way that senses of both tolerance and rejection are nurtured.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, we have observed policies that encourage migrant workers to stay in the city (providing more slots of schooling to migrant workers' children), and to go back home

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<sup>5</sup>The government camp system empowered the urban government to capture 'tramps' and keep them in custody without legal trials. These people had no idea how long they would be confined or what treatment they would get. This system has long been challenged and criticized, especially when a graduate student, Sun Zhigang, was accidentally locked up as a homeless and jobless person and died in the cell after 48 hours. The system was finally terminated in 2003. The government camp is an extreme form of biopolitics in China. See Agamben (1998).

<sup>6</sup>A good example of rejection feeling is the famous doctor Zhong Nanshan who made a great contribution in the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) period. He angrily called for the recovery of the government camp system after being robbed in the street of Guangdong City in broad daylight.

(subsidies and favorable taxation for those who return to rural communities and set up a business there). In both cases, peasant workers are ‘foreigners’ who do not fit into the normal standard of norms and values, and need to be treated ‘specially’. With carrots and sticks, certain types of population are about to be produced – regulated, docile and harmless to the ‘equilibrium’ of society.

As power is everywhere, so is resistance. Even though the chances of winning are quite slim, there exists a protective biopolitics in unions, social movements, left-leaning political parties and the ‘left hand’ of the state apparatus (Li 2009b). In China, what can be witnessed is the rise of the second or third generation of migrant workers in the 2000s who are much more active politically in contrast to the first generation. These groups of rural labor force have different ways to migrate compared to their fathers who rely more on social networks for job opportunities. They are better educated, but usually have no experience in farming. They are unwilling to go back to rural communities, but unable to be accepted in the urban environment (Wang 2001). Unlike their father-generations who endure the unfair social care systems, undesirable working and living conditions, these new generations of peasant workers will be more likely to rise to their feet against expropriation and unfairness – for their unpaid salaries (Cheng 2006) and for human rights (Fu 2006). Some organized strikes have even occurred for fairness and better payments in recent years (Pun *et al.* 2009, Chan 2010). These resistances and struggles reflect that they are no longer on the passive receiving end of biopolitics of migration.

In short, biopolitics, as a new subtle way of exercising power, is widely observed in ‘État de population’ in recent centuries. It is inseparable from sovereignty of the state, but more indirect, gentle and hidden beautifully behind everyday political actions and discourses. It is a power that ‘through the implementation of discipline and regulation technologies, is able to cause destruction, exclusion, violence and death among the population’ (Gorski and Beiras 2007, 2). Peasants’ migration history in contemporary China is interwoven with biopolitics of various forms. The biopolitics of migration determines whether, in which places and for how long they could migrate.

This careful control and policing of population movement has been conducted against the backdrop that migration becomes a must under the dull compulsion of economic forces. Peasant workers become ‘foreigners’ in their own country, in the state of exception and with many rights dismissed. In this context, only a few peasant workers could move up the class ladder, while the majority are stuck in the same identity in their whole life. It seems difficult for the second or even third generation of migrant workers to crack down the vicious circle without fundamental changes of economic, social and political factors at the macro level.

### *Politics of social care*

The social care that these migrant workers are fighting for has three distinctive features, all of which make it difficult to analyze with traditional economic thinking (Himmelweit 2005): (1) care is inseparable from the person who delivers it because it comes originally along with certain family relationships; (2) resources to provide care are not equally distributed in society and the person who has the responsibility to provide care may not have access to necessary resources, and (3) care is highly culturally embedded, and cultural norms determine who needs care, who should fulfill the needs for care and how (*ibid.*). For instance, in India, South Africa, Korea and Tanzania, the public discourse preaches ideologies in which care is a female responsibility; mothers, wives and daughters are ‘natural’ care providers (Lund and Budlender 2009, Meena 2010, Palriwala and Neetha

2010, Peng 2010). Even moving the care work out of the family does not reduce its feminization (Franzoni and Voorend 2011) as most professional caregivers are women.

Migration, split families and modernized ways of working and living create an upsurge in the care market in which the cost of providing care is increasingly shifted from the care purchaser to the care providers, who also have the responsibility to take care of family members, but may have to leave them behind. Hochschild (2000) proposes a global care chain to explain the phenomenon that women as care providers are also consuming other women's care labor (both paid and unpaid). This chain is forged in global inequality, and is also strengthened by transferring the care resources from poorer regions to the richer ones for consumption (ibid.). Such a globalization of the care 'business' is promoted by both care-labor production in developing countries and by the active recruitment of overseas care labor in developed economies to address the unfolding 'care deficit' (Razavi 2007) or 'care crisis' (Yeates 2010). When importing skilled nurses and domestic workers from poorer countries, the care crisis was exported out (ibid.). This process reproduces class inequality among women and children (Faur 2011). Some might be able to retain family caregiving and supplement it with paid care, while some cannot afford either of them (Palriwala and Neetha 2011). While some better-off people enjoy costly care services provided by the private sector, others are poorly served by an inadequate public sector (Budlender and Lund 2011). It is the same in China (Yan 2010). According to Yan's study, intellectual families hire baby-sitters from rural areas, which reflects a special re-conceptualization of intellectual and manual labor, urban and rural, men and women. Care work needs to be understood as transnational biopolitics, in which 'transactions between care workers and their clients are embedded in local, regional and global orders of inequality and difference' (Mackie 2013, 15). We could say, due to its special gender-sensitive nature, social care of and by migrant workers and that of their left-behind families reflects the exploitation not only between classes and across regions, but also between genders.

Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003) use the term 'welfare triangle' to summarize institutional arrangements of social care in contemporary societies in which inputs from the state, the market and the family compose a welfare package. However, the state has increasingly become less reliable in this regard. Some portions of social care originally carried out by the state have gradually been outsourced to non-state entities (Razavi and Staab 2010). For instance, the decentralization and privatization of state-owned enterprises in China have destroyed some charitable mechanisms that could have internalized the reproduction cost. Women have to balance domestic responsibilities and occupational requirements, which have the most impacts on females in socially and economically disadvantaged groups (Cook and Dong 2011). Yeates (2011) proposes a model of producer-based care networks, which changes the focus of discussion from the care recipients to givers – mostly (transnational) migrant workers. Their far-away work locations and the remittances sent back could be conceptualized as 'distant care', with monetary and emotional contributions to the population left-behind at home (ibid.). But the effectiveness of this materialized compensation and caregiving far from home awaits discussion. Therefore, with the retreat of the state and the migration of family members, left-behind populations are increasingly dependent on the market for the provision of daily care. The market, however, has been questioned in terms of the provision of good quality care and decent work conditions (Faur 2011). Such a segregation of the market and differentiated social care access increases their disadvantaged status. The politics of social care in this sense exhibits who is providing for whom and who is losing with diminishing compensation.

From the above discussion, the actions and suggestions proposed by the local government, the enterprises, NGOs and society seem to be doubtful. The peasant workers and their

left-behind families in rural China have been deprived structurally of family care, parenting and nuptial affection, and forced to enter into deeply exploitative work relations. Capital, the state and the society who have benefited from such exploitation then seek to ‘help’ the peasant workers through all these activities to provide ‘love’ and ‘care’. The logic goes bankrupt here (‘peasants migrating for a better life – creating some concomitant social problems – taking measures to solve the problems’).

### **Rethinking internal migration and left-behind populations in China**

Previous studies on the left-behind populations in rural China focused mainly on the impacts of migration on the left-behind populations and the strategies they utilized in response to such a change in their lives, as well as corresponding social actions. We have also been engaged in similar impact studies in dozens of villages located sparsely nationwide, with influential research findings and important social actions following. It may be important to see the phenomenon of migration and left-behind populations in context-contingent ways. But we become increasingly unsatisfied with a mere description of miserable situations of migrant workers and their left-behind family members attached with some recommendations in the end. We cannot help asking, why do the majority of peasants have to suffer? Why do they have to migrate and why could migration not bring them wealth instead of aged, injured and unhealthy bodies? We heard frequently during the field-work from the investigated peasants that ‘we will be better off when our children grow up’. However, when we looked back into the history and looked forward, what we observed was migration as rite of passage – generations of migration without radical changes in households and rural communities. We start to sit back and try to go deeper, striving to explain how such institutional arrangements come into being in the first place and what politics are behind them.

A literature review in Sections 3 and 4 in this paper testifies to what we have believed. Impact studies do matter, but depend heavily on contexts. Comparisons between left-behind and non-left-behind populations as well as comparisons before and after migration can be problematic. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to rule out intervening factors and isolate migration as an independent variable. Anyway, what are such comparisons trying to achieve? They may add some cases to the discussion on the issue of migration and left-behind populations, but not to the analysis of its essence. Even if we could overcome the endogeneity problem, would that matter much if we found that there were 40 percent of left-behind children injured psychologically instead of 45 percent in certain areas? We increasingly realize that migration studies need to go back to the very fundamental questions of ‘who wins, who loses?’ and what factors are playing a role in this process, and most importantly, how to change it? In an urban-biased and capital-favored macro environment, migration in China would produce some unbearable social costs for left-behind populations compared to the meager material compensations. Some social actions and strategies from various actors may contribute to the softening of certain negative effects, but not by much, not on a sustainable level, and not to the point.

It is in this sense that we brought the conception of biopolitics into the analysis. This conception has already been popularly utilized in the studies of transnational migration, especially in terms of racism, gender, health, refugees and aid. By applying it to the internal migration in the history of contemporary China, we notice that biopolitics exerts powerful control over and manipulation of the movement of population, through the Hukou registration system, welfare systems, propaganda, discourses, government camps and so forth. Peasant workers in China are therefore in the state of exception, with their rights

compromised or dismissed. This could greatly complement findings at the micro levels of individuals and households.

We have to point out that this paper does not want to argue for a romantic rural countryside in which local people enjoy family union more than migration for better incomes. Actually, we have been working for a long time with people who are eager to get rid of the identity of peasants, just as those in other countries who want to struggle out of subsistence production and lead a life with better food, housing, education and health care (Faur 2011). The problem is that, in reality, their wishes are turned down when biopolitics in favor of capitalist production regulates their movement. They sell labor in a socially isolated environment, being expropriated routinely while witnessing other people prospering because of such expropriation. There are numerous others who even do not have the chance to be expropriated and dispossessed – the ‘surplus population’ in Tania Li’s terms and the left-behind populations in this context. In this sense, this paper would argue for a right to move for peasants (*which implies also a right not to move, and to lead a life they cherish*).<sup>7</sup>

The aim of development is not capital accumulation, but the development of human beings, which includes peasants who should not be merely regarded as a surplus resource to be ‘absorbed’ into the industrial sector. The research on migration and left-behind populations then needs to bring impact studies and the political economy together. In view of this, studies on care dualism and biopolitics of migration in China might assist us to find out how an organized working class can be formed out of the present cocoon of the semi-proletariat, so it can change the current power structure and exploitative relations and, like the wings of a butterfly, bring about the wildest storm.

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