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*SSRC Migration & Development Conference Paper No. 21*

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“Migration and Development:  
Future Directions for Research and Policy”  
28 February – 1 March 2008 | New York, NY

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# Left-behind Families in the Context of Rural Labor Migration in China

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The large movement of surplus laborers from rural China to cities started in the 1980s, along with the initiation of economic reform and the relaxation of the household registration (*hukou*) system. During that period, the process of industrialization accelerated, and demand for labor in the secondary and tertiary industries in urban areas grew rapidly. Meanwhile, the amount of land per capita was shrinking as a result of population growth and the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses. This resulted in growing unemployment and underemployment in rural areas and many former agricultural laborers headed into cities, seeking better employment opportunities and sources of income. Gradually they came to constitute a large social group. According to statistics based on the 1% population sample in 2005, the temporary worker population nationwide amounted to 0.147 billion, or 2.05%<sup>1</sup> more than in 2000. With accelerated urbanization, this trend will continue. Indeed, the National Demographic Development Strategy Report, issued in early 2007, predicted that 0.3 billion more rural people will move to cities and towns in the next twenty years.

It should be noted that the movement of rural laborers to cities in China is distinctly different from what is happening in other countries. Generally speaking, the number of temporary urban workers in China is high, but the permanent “migrant” population is low. Very few of the laborers coming to cities for work can become permanent urban residents. For most of them, urban areas are merely potential workplaces, not homes, largely because rural and urban areas have long been segregated, with separate economic and social structures. Individuals are registered as either rural or urban residents, and as a result have access to different social security systems. Therefore, temporary migrants flow to and from the urban and rural areas seasonally and are often compared to migratory birds. Most of them move from rural areas to big or medium-sized cities, and from provinces in central and west China where income levels are low (for instance, Henan, Sichuan, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, and Hubei) to relatively developed areas, particularly the coastal areas in the southeast (including Guangdong, Beijing, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Fujian). Forty percent of them work in secondary industries, mainly in manufacturing, construction, and mining; while 60% of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Chen Jiansheng, *From Floating Population to Migrated laborers*, China Youth Research, 2007, Vol. 10.

them work in tertiary industries, mainly in services.<sup>2</sup>

The arrival of “peasant workers” (*nongmingong*) is a response to the demands of the labor market and an inevitable outcome of the development of the market economy. Migrant workers play an indispensable role in the development of urban and rural areas, and of society as a whole. Their migration to work in cities increases their family income, promotes the economic and social development of the rural areas from which they migrate, and contributes substantially to the country’s overall economic and social development. According to the reports of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the National People’s Congress (NPC), in 2004 the proportion of peasant workers in the workforce reached 25% in the highly-developed Pearl River Delta. The National Statistics Bureau revealed that in 2003 China’s GDP was 11,669.4 billion RMB. In other words, the value created by migrant workers would be 2,333.8 billion RMB even if they contributed on only 20% of GDP in that year. Further, the migration of rural laborers has accelerated the adjustment of the industrial structure in cities, challenged the planned welfare system, and fueled the growth of labor markets. With an adequate supply of cheap labor, labor-intensive industries are able to develop and the influx of the migrant workers has also increased the mobility of the urban labor force and promoted the rational allocation and effective utilization of labor resources. All these changes have made an enormous contribution to the development of a national labor market.

In spite of their enormous contribution to urban and rural development and general prosperity, migrant workers usually cannot move their families to the cities. This is due to the segregation between rural and urban areas, which have separate social welfare systems, as well as to their own economic constraints. The symbol of the separation between rural and urban areas – the strict residential registration system—appeared in 1958. Its purpose was to support rapid and centralized industrialization at the expense of the development of the countryside. At that time, the residency system was characterized by the rigid control of population flows into cities.<sup>3</sup> People who were registered as having agricultural residence had to be approved by the relevant city agencies if they wanted to settle in the city.

Since 1979, reform of the household registration system has been driven by the market forces and by institutional reforms aimed at promoting

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<sup>2</sup> Topic-Based Groups in Research Office of the State Council, *China Migrant Rural Laborers Report*, China YanShi Publishing Co., April, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Hao Guangyi, *Study of Contemporary Residency System of China: Social impact Achievement, Difficulty and Developing Path*, Journal of Zhanjing Normal College, Oct 2007, Vol.28 No.5. pp 1-8.

development. The clearest progress toward breaking up the urban-rural divide can be seen in reforms at the township level. Transferring between the countryside and towns is now open but migration to medium-sized and large cities is still limited for most of the population, although it is possible in some cases.<sup>4</sup> While the household registration system has changed for the better in the last twenty years, its socio-political meaning remains; it stands as a rampart between city and countryside, impeding interregional population flows.

The effects of the household registration system, especially for the agricultural labor force, can be characterized as follows: (1) The absence of fair labor and economic rights: migrant workers are treated differently from urban citizens in terms of salary, work time, and work load, and their economic rights to labor contracts, fair treatment, and reasonable pay are often violated to varying degrees. (2) The absence of rights to education and welfare services: if they do not have an urban *hukou*, the school-age children of migrant laborers are not admitted free to public schools in cities but are either rejected or required to pay an extra charge. Migrant households are excluded from social welfare services in urban area as well. (3) The absence of political rights: despite their large numbers, migrant workers are not legally organized and lack formal channels to express their interests. (4) The absence of civil rights: the basic civil right to move freely and find housing is elusive for migrant workers, and a direct reason for their flow between urban and rural areas.

The absence or curtailment of these rights—in other words, the absence of “citizenship”—shapes the circumstances of migrant workers and 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 formed in rural areas.

In April 2007, the study group on the rural left-behind population at China Agricultural University chose five provinces where labor outflow has been significant— Anhui, Henan, Hunan, Jiangxi and Sichuang—as research sites. One county was chosen in every province, and two towns or townships were chosen in each county; finally, one administrative village was chosen in each town or township. Altogether, ten administrative villages were designated as the research communities. The study group designed questionnaires which were administered to all the left-behind population

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<sup>4</sup> Xue Xuandeng, The Analysis of the Harmony Development between Peasant Workers and City from the Absence of Citizenship Treatment, *Urban Society*, March 2006, pp 102-106.

groups (children, women, and elders): a total of 400 in all.<sup>5</sup> Another 200 questionnaires were distributed to non-left-behind children, women, and elders living in the same village. The questions focused on the educational experiences, daily life, workload, and emotions of the left-behind children; on the emotional life, workload, and living and economic situation of the left-behind women; and on the workload, emotional lives, economic burdens, and daily care of the left-behind elders. The study sought to reveal the changes brought about as a result of the migration of rural laborers, and the impact of migration on rural families, rural communities and society as a whole.

### **The Family Decision-Making Process**

Generally, the husband and the wife decided jointly whether they should migrate for work. The elders usually did not participate in the decision-making process. Only when both of the spouses chose to migrate, and when they were given custody of their grandchildren, did elders take part in the decision-making process. And even then their role was more to provide suggestions than to be a decision-maker. The low level of participation of elders in the decision-making process was mainly a function of their economic status in the family. Once they are unable to work, the economic status of the elderly decreases and they became highly dependent on their children. The decision-making power therefore transfers gradually from the elders to the younger generation.

When rural young people decide to migrate, in some cases only one of the spouses leaves, while in other cases both do. It was more common for the husband to leave than the wife, mainly because of the division of labor between the genders, which is still strong in rural China. When a family needs more income, the preferred choice is for the male to migrate. In the eyes of left-behind women, the migration of females was both inconsistent with their social values and economically disadvantageous, since males could earn more in the cities while the cost of leaving was the same for men and women.

In addition,, women were considered more suited to stay in the villages than

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<sup>5</sup> In this survey, a prerequisite for the concept of “left-behind” is that the migrant workers should spend at least six months working outside for these recent years. The migration of rural labor forces can be characterized as a long period in the cities and a low frequency of returning home. Take the group of left-behind children, for example: according to the survey reported in this paper, 70% of their migrant parents worked outside for more than ten months a year. Before this survey was conducted, 80% of migrant parents had been outside for more than three years, 70% for more than five years, and 45% for more than seven years. In reality, the migrant working life of rural laborers lasts much longer than that. A large portion of migrant workers began to leave before their marriage.

the men. First, women are needed to take care of the children because leaving them in the custody of grandparents is often problematic. Secondly, the elderly, especially those who are sick or senile, often need to be tended by their children, and, again, females were considered more suited for this responsibility. Finally, rural women are less educated than the men and may feel less able to deal with the difficulties involved in migration. As a result they are less likely to migrate out for work.

### **The Impact of Migration on Agricultural Production**

The migration of rural workers has brought about changes in the ways that families organize production. Agricultural production, which was originally the responsibility primarily of men, has shifted to women and the elderly as men have left to work in the cities, increasing their workload. As a result, families have had to change the family production structure in order to reduce the burden on those remaining on the land.

The alteration of the production structure is mainly reflected in changes in planting and breeding. Women and the elderly have reduced the amount or changed the genres of the crops they plant to lessen their workload. For instance, instead of planting a double harvest of rice, they plant one harvest of rice or wheat, or only vegetables. They also choose to produce crops or other commodities that are more valuable but less labor-intensive, such as cotton, watermelon, ginkgo, sugarcane, fruit trees, or fish. Some have increased the acreage of fruit trees and reduced the planting of rice, or switched to silk production in order to better manage their time. Many of them have started to use mechanical devices to plant seedlings instead of transplanting rice seedlings manually, which significantly reduces the time involved. In livestock rearing, the most common way to reduce the workload is to breed fewer animals, because the breeding period is relatively short and can breeding can easily be controlled. For instance, many families have reduced the number of cattle, pigs, chickens, and ducks they raise. One of the left-behind women mentioned in an interview, “I used to feed four pigs, but I am too weary after my husband migrated out to work. Now I only keep one.”

### **The Impact on Family Size and Composition**

Traditional families in China were mainly composed of united families<sup>6</sup> and

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<sup>6</sup> United families consist of parents, two or more children, and the children’s spouses, with or without grandchildren. They can also refer to families in which two or more brothers or sisters live together with their spouses and children.

trunk families.<sup>7</sup> However, the size of families in rural areas has shrunk dramatically as the result of rural-urban migration, especially when both of the spouses left. Families composed of grandparents and grandchildren, or of the left-behind wife, elders, and children, have become most common types of family unit in rural areas.

Take the residence situation of the elders, for instance: The migration of their children led to the increase of families with skipped generations and or lone elderly. The survey found that 26.0% of the families were composed of a husband and wife, and 32% were trunk families before young couples left to work. However, after their migration, the proportion of husband-and-wife families and trunk families was reduced sharply, while families with skipped-generation and lone elderly greatly increased: to 49.8% and 48.5%, respectively.

### **The Impact of Migration on the Distribution of Resources**

After the migration of their husbands, left-behind women have to make more decisions, to some extent independently, about family affairs. This gives them considerable freedom to make choices about family finances and agricultural production activities, such as breeding and planting.

With respect to family finances, 71.4% of the left-behind women surveyed handled the family finances after their husbands left, while only 18.1% of non-left-behind women did so. Although these left-behind women usually discussed financial decisions with their husbands via telephone or waited until they came back home to make decisions, in many cases they made decisions independently. When they faced difficulties, like a lack of money (possibly because their husband did not send remittances), they usually borrowed money from others, applying for loans from Country Credit Organizations, or temporarily buying goods on credit. They consulted their husbands for approval only when the amount of money needed was large.

- (1) Borrowing money: Women usually borrowed money from family members. They said their strategy was to “borrow from anybody who is likely to lend, borrow to pay for the debts nearly due, emphasize that their husbands are earning money outside, and pay back in time so that borrowing again from the same person is not difficult.” When the amount of money needed was large, the women borrowed from a lot of people. This strategy made the lender feel less pressured, and the debtor was able to manage the debts with more flexibility when she

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<sup>7</sup> Trunk families consist of parents, one of their children and the child’s spouses, with or without grandchildren.

- needed to pay the money back.
- (2) Applying for loans: Loans were more common in the south. Women applied for loans when the amount of money needed was large, so they usually did so after consulting their husbands.
  - (3) Buying on credit: This strategy was employed when women needed money contingently, for instance, when they needed to purchase materials for production, such as seeds, fertilizer, or pesticides; or when they needed to visit a doctor. They paid off the debts when their husbands sent funds or came back with money.

In terms of agricultural production, especially breeding, it was mainly the women who decided how many and what type of animals to raise, as well as when to sell them. They returned decision-making power to their husbands only when the family was purchasing a huge piece of furniture or electrical appliances, building houses, or doing business. Therefore, to a great extent, the women were empowered to make decisions on some family affairs. However, it should be noted that although left-behind women had more decision-making power, they wielded it rather passively, handing the power back when their husbands came home.

### **Provision of Funds for the Elders**

The survey found that the migration of children not only improved the economic situation of the elderly, but also changed traditional ways of supporting them: from providing food and material goods to providing money. In traditional rural communities, sons usually supplied their parents directly with food and other goods, with some money as a supplement. However, as an increasing number of young rural laborers have left the country for the city and left agriculture for non-agricultural industries, the foundation of the traditional way of supporting the elders has been undermined. According to the field research, “the children at home give grains, and the children out to work provide money.” The elders still obtained food stuffs and other items from their children who remained at home, but the trend of providing money increased among those who migrated to work and the most frequent economic exchange between generations became currency.

### **The Changed Family Living Situation**

Generally, the living situation of women and elders depends on whether the family has already been broken up. If the young couple and their parents previously lived apart, the left-behind women and elders continue to reside separately after the husband migrated. But in a few cases women asked left-behind elders to move back and live with them because their workload had greatly increased: the women had to manage agricultural production and do

housework, while at the same time taking care of their children. The elders therefore moved back to assist the women with the chores, and at the same time it was easier for the women to care for them. In addition, some left-behind elders returned to their children's homes because they were needed to take care of the house and grandchildren when both spouses left for work.

The departure of one or both spouses re-integrated small families that had originally been independent, illustrating the strategy adopted by the left-behind population of dealing with difficulties collectively, and rearranging and redistributing family resources. For example, the elders were contributing (looking after grandchildren, doing housework, assisting in agricultural production) and also gaining (being cared for by their children), and they were sharing some family resources with left-behind women.

### **The Changed Distribution of Land Resources**

Land has to be cultivated by the family members who are left behind, which adds to their workload. Left-behind women have to undertake onerous agricultural production, shoulder tedious chores, and often also take care of children or elderly parents. In addition to changing what they planted and the number of animals they raised, reducing the acreage they planted became one of the most effective ways to lighten their burden. According to the survey, they used three different approaches to reduce the areas to be planted: (1) they temporarily transferred part of the land to others without demanding any land rent (here "others" usually refers to relatives, such as parents-in-law or brothers and sisters); (2) they leased the land to others for a relatively low rent (or for grain instead of cash); and (3) they just left the land fallow, a last resort when the migration was prevalent and suitable persons to cultivate the land could not be found.

Hence, although the migration of the rural population did not change the nature of land tenure, it changed the utilization of land resources remarkably. When the area of the land was larger than the women or elders could cultivate, they rearranged the land use rights to create a new structure through unofficial channels, with the land tenure remaining untouched.

### **Strengthening Cooperation among Women and the Elderly**

Women and the elderly have combined forces to manage the heavy workload in production and daily life resulting from migration. They have spontaneously adopted various approaches to expand the scope of mutual assistance and maintain cooperation. However, the form and content of cooperation among the women differed from those of the elders.

The cooperation and assistance among the women lay mainly in agricultural production, which was undertaken by men and women together before the men left and women became the main force in agricultural production. They could manage to deal with daily field work by themselves, but were incapable of doing all the harvesting and seeding in busy farming seasons on their own. Therefore, the women cooperated, and were able to assist each other efficiently in accomplishing agricultural production because they shared similar life experiences and perceptions. In addition, women also collaborated in taking care of housework and providing economic assistance.

The elderly adopted different strategies for dealing with various difficulties in their daily lives, including the sudden increase in workload, the absence of daily care, and loneliness in their twilight years. Their strategies mainly consisted of the exchange of labor, visiting and chatting, borrowing money, helping to look after grandchildren, and exchanging information. But compared with the women, the number of persons assisted by the elderly was quite small: mainly peers of the same age.

### **Changes in the Responsibilities of Family Members**

The trunk and united families that were the main family forms in traditional China encourage the support of the elderly, bring the different generations closer, and foster mutual assistance among family members. Indeed, in rural China the elderly used to be supported mainly by their families. But with the heavy flow of labor from rural to urban areas, traditional family patterns have been replaced by lone parents whose children have left and families with skipped generations. This change has prevented families from functioning normally to support the elderly, especially when they are left entirely alone.

To compensate for the absence of daily care and emotional support, and to express appreciation to their parents for nurturing their children, many young migrants provide more economic support. According to the survey data, 65.4% of the left-behind elders reported that the money provided by their children would be reduced if they did not migrate to work, with 46.1% indicating that the amount of money would be “greatly reduced.” Further, 58.0% mentioned that their living conditions would decline. The data showed that the increase in economic support and improvement in living conditions could, to a large extent, provide the elders with emotional comfort, and compensate for the loss of daily care and emotional support.

In relatively isolated traditional rural communities, giving gifts to family members used to be quite uncommon, especially between children and parents. Economic support from children took the form of agricultural

produce. However, gifts became more common as a resource for elders when their children migrated: the survey showed that 75.9% of the elders received gifts from their migrant children. They mainly comprised: (1) clothing, such as clothes, socks and shoes; (2) items to nurture their health, such as ginseng, melatonin, oatmeal, and soy milk powder; (3) non-staple food items, such as cigarettes, alcohol, meat, fruits, biscuits, and milk; and (4) electric appliances—the least common—such as rice cookers, electric blankets, and DVD players.

The presents sent by the children were an economic resource for the elders and another kind of compensation for the absence of daily care and emotional support and for the elders' care of their grandchildren. They also provided an emotional link between the children who left and the elders.

### **Grandparents' Responsibility for the Care of their Grandchildren**

Because of the segregation between urban and rural areas, the dual economic and social structure, and the related household registration and social security systems, most rural laborers cannot take their children with them when they go to work in the cities. When both parents leave, they often give custody of their children to their grandparents, a relatively common practice in rural areas: the survey showed that 52.6% of the left-behind elders needed to look after grandchildren.

This skipped-generation custody had both a positive and negative effect on the elders. On the one hand, the grandchildren were company for them and dispelled their loneliness while their children were away. It brought the elders and their migrant children emotionally closer and improved the relationship between generations. At the same time, assuming custody of the grandchildren was a way for the elders to get material support.

However, the task of taking care of grandchildren increased the workload and mental stress for the elderly. The survey showed that the increase in workload was the most direct and evident negative impact of skipped-generation custody on elders. This impact was more severe for lone grandparents, aged widows and widowers, and those who had more than two grandchildren to look after. The survey also showed that of the elders who needed to care for grandchildren, 84.1% still engaged in agricultural production and 48.7% felt that they had an extremely heavy housework burden. In addition, the elders felt some psychological pressure when taking care of their grandchildren, including concerns about the children's safety, health, and education. Further, the economic burden was heavier for a few elders who had to pay for part of their grandchildren's tuition and other expenses.

### **Expectations of Children**

Parents' migration changes the family structure and forces left-behind children to undertake a larger workload at an earlier age. But the stereotyped and distinct social expectations for girls and boys in rural families result in different workloads for each gender. Regardless of how the family structure changed, parents and guardians expected that girls would undertake some housework and look after their younger brothers and sisters. Therefore, the parents' migration created more housework for their daughters. Also, because they had to handle more chores, they had to endure heavier psychological pressures from other family members.

The proportion of girls who frequently did housework was distinctly higher than boys: 47.2% and 25.1%, respectively. This disparity was especially great in terms of fetching water and cutting firewood. These kinds of heavy manual work were usually undertaken by fathers or boys before the parents' migration, but girls increasingly took on that physically demanding work after their parents' migration.

It is reasonable for children, as family members, to take on some light work that is within their capabilities, but work should not occupy their entire life. In the guardians' eyes, however, doing housework became the children's—especially the girls'—fulltime responsibility, because as the number of workers in the family decreased the workload for those who were left increased proportionately. If the children complained about their workload, they were viewed as being disobedient or badly behaved. Sometimes their complaints invited blame or a spanking.

### **The Reversal of Care**

Children should be looked after and protected in a family, but some guardians in the left-behind families were unable to provide children with basic care because they themselves were aged or in poor health. Instead, the traditional parenting arrangement was reversed, and in families with skipped generations care for children and elders was mutual and two-directional. The elders took over the parents' responsibility to bring up the grandchildren, but the children needed to take care of the elders as if they, the children, were the parents. This reversed custody by the grandchildren—nurturing their grandparents—was a fundamental component of family ethics. More specifically, it was a sort of compensation for the absence of support from their parents due to migration, and an indication of their devotion. Here, too, there was a gender difference in the provision of care to grandparents: 12.3% of girls were often required to take care of their guardians, while only 5.9% of boys were required to do so.

### **The Impact of migration on Left-Behind Women's capacity building**

Women spent more time on production and housework after their husbands' migration, which led to the reduction of their leisure time. This was most prevalent among women under age 25 but it also applied to some 45- to 55-year-old women. In fact they were often only partly at leisure because they need to take care of children at the same time.

Women's leisure activities mainly included watching television and visiting and chatting with neighbors or relatives. The women also played cards or Mahjong and went to rural markets. While there were few entertainment choices for rural women, they sought out information in many areas. Influenced by their husbands' migration, the women were more interested in news about safeguarding the rights and interests of peasant workers than were other rural women. In general, women with a lower level of education were less interested in seeking out information and, in some cases, the heavy workload meant that they had little time to pay attention to the news.

The women cared most about their children's education: the survey showed that it was the top concern for 56.6% of left-behind women. The majority of women did not have any sort of training themselves, but they had a strong desire for it, particularly for education about planting and breeding techniques, and about public health. They were also somewhat eager for training that would enable them to work outside the home. More than half of the left-behind women wished to join organizations or associations of various kinds, especially those providing production services and those that provided entertainment organizations or associations. However, they were rarely able to do so because most of their time was occupied with work.

### **A Reconsideration of Rest Homes for the Elderly**

The rural elderly used to have a very negative attitude toward rest homes, believing that only aged widows or widowers and those abandoned by their children would go to one. Elderly people with adult children who lived in rest homes were regarded as "having lost face," and were whispered about. This attitude stemmed largely from the fact that rest homes in rural areas were mostly relief institutions set up by the government, and they served a unique local function. Conversely, most of the rest homes spawned by the market or welfare systems were located in cities and towns.

Families' ability to care for their elderly was weakened with the large flow of rural labor into cities and the left-behind elderly faced many problems: a lack of daily care, an increase in their workload, and loneliness. Although other family members (such as their spouses, non-migrant children, and other relatives) might partially replace the children who left and meet some of the

elders' needs, the assistance provided by them largely depended on their where they lived. The further away these family members resided, the less likely they were to be able to provide support to the elderly. Meanwhile, support from rural communities was limited: there were no professional social workers to provide services for the elderly and communities had finite resources to provide them with entertainment and places to spend leisure time.

When it was impossible to gain support from rural communities, left-behind elders had to reconsider the function of rest homes. The survey showed that 45.8% of the elders wished for there to be rest homes, places for outdoor activities, common rooms, entertainment facilities, and sport facilities for the elderly in the village. In fact, 14.5% of the elders put rest homes first place on the list. Evidently, elders' original beliefs about rest homes have changed, and they now have a relatively strong desire for them.

### **The Influence of Religious Beliefs**

The survey showed that quite a few left-behind women and elders (mainly women) believed in a religion, either the local Buddhist and Taoist religions, or various "imported" denominations of Christianity. Religious participation became an important way for the women and elders to dispel loneliness, seek comfort, alleviate their sadness, and pray for blessings from those in heaven. It became an indispensable part of their daily life.

There was no distinct difference between left-behind women and non-left-behind women in terms of religious beliefs. The longitudinal data before and after their husband's migration indicated that the percentage of women with religious beliefs increased by just 2.5% after the migration, but it is undeniable that religious beliefs played a positive role in the life of the left-behind women. The left-behind women with religious beliefs went to the church or temple when they were in a bad mood; although religion could not directly solve their problems, it played an essential role in helping them release negative emotions, and it comforted them. Further, people with the same religious belief felt a sense of belonging, since their religion advocated mutual assistance among believers, which created an especially social network among disciples. Religion was a place for the women to seek help and support.

There are four additional reasons why the left-behind women believed in religion: (1) A low sense of security, which was prevalent after their husbands migrated out to work: the women needed to be assured of their family members' safety. (2) Illnesses: They could either be the women's own or their family members' incurable illnesses, or they needed money to pay for medical

services. (3) The attraction of the tenets of religions: The left-behind women believed that “God is educating people to be good and to do good deeds,” “It is a blessing to believe in God,” and “As long as you believe in God, He will bless you.” (4) The influence of other family members sparked their involvement with religion.

The motivation for left-behind elders to believe in religion was quite strong. They became believers because they wanted to pray for safety, good health, and the avoidance of disasters. In addition, some elders believed in religion because they had to undertake a heavier workload, and endure loneliness or their children’s lack of love and care, and they had no other way to escape from reality. Religion thus became an effective tool in helping them to alleviate sadness and release their negative emotions.

As with the women, religion played a positive role in the life of the elders. They faced a “cruel” and unchangeable reality, but with comfort from religion, they asked less from life, and their desire for material goods lessened, which helped them feel less pressured, become peaceful, and find emotional support; overall, they felt safer and surer about life. Furthermore, some regained their values through religion. With the sense of belonging that religion gave them, they felt less lonely and bored. They also could obtain various types of assistance from other believers since the provision of mutual aid was common among members was of the same religious group.

### **Coping Strategies**

While the flow of rural labor into cities significantly influenced the life of the children, women, and elders in left-behind families, the family members did not passively endure the difficulties. Instead, they fully utilized the resources at hand, exerted their agency, and adopted coping strategies in order to offset the negative impacts of being left behind.

Almost half of the left-behind children told other people of their worries, but almost a third of them were unwilling to confide in others. The children only revealed their feelings when they were worried about their studies or experienced violent emotional swings. They most often sought out peers for emotional support, but also turned to the guardians and classmates for help when they had difficulties. Most of them sought help from teachers or classmates when they had difficulties with their studies. It was not uncommon for the children to be teased in daily life and in school, and when they were bullied they had three coping strategies: (1) Passively enduring other people’s beating, scolding, or deprecating looks. (2) Seeking help from teachers, peers, or elders at home. (3) Actively fighting back.

The coping strategies adopted by the left-behind women can also be classified as either active or passive. With respect to agricultural production and housework, they asked for help from parents-in-law and relatives, or solved the problem through inviting helpers, exchanging labor, or hiring a worker. As for family finances—given that husbands were usually in charge of the larger portion of the savings while wives were in charge of the smaller portion, because husbands earned more than wives—the women “spent money on the most important things, saving as much as possible.” They used various strategies to reduce family expenses.

The women felt linked to their husbands and trusted and understood them. They installed a telephone or bought a cell phone to keep in contact with them, and when they spoke, they “talked more about good events, less about misfortunes,” to make their husbands worry less. They usually appealed to their husbands to remain loyal to them by making jokes. When their husbands did have an affair, the women tried to bring them back by “affecting their husbands with kind behavior,” “begging them with gentleness,” “asking them to think more about their children,” and “requesting them to consider their own reputation and face.”

The women usually encouraged their children to study hard through their own example and experience. They contacted teachers in order to learn about their children’s performance at school and daily life. They made efforts to be on good terms with neighbors, mothers-in-law, and husbands. When they were not in a good mood, they released their negative emotions through watching television, calling their husbands, visiting others, playing cards, chatting, or weeping. As noted, the women sometimes turned to religion.

The women also had passive coping strategies. When their husbands had an affair, they submitted to the humiliation for the sake of their families and children. When they experienced sexual harassment, most of them lacked the consciousness to defend themselves through the law. Instead, they were constrained by tradition and did not tell their husbands, since it might arouse their suspicions. They dared not call the police either, since it might generate gossip in the village.

The left-behind elders reduced their burdens mainly through three strategies: hiring a worker, exchanging labor, and adjusting the methods and structure of planting. The last strategy included reducing the area for planting and changing the types of crops planted or animals bred. The elders usually sought help from their children who were at home or neighbors. In order to prevent accidents, the elders were cautious, strengthened safeguards and watched over each other.

The elders tried to avoid financial problems by finding a way to support themselves or lowering their standard of living. When they did experience a financial problem, they managed to survive it by buying on credit, borrowing money or turning to their children for help. The elders sought comfort and emotional support by confiding in others, phoning their children, engaging in leisure activities, turning to religion, requesting to take care of grandchildren, or keeping a pet.

The three left behind groups never existed independently because they emerged from a common social context, and many families included two or even three of them. They all faced the same difficulties from their common family member's migration, but it affected them in different ways. Usually the elders, women, and children took care of each other, providing mutual support, and managing to sustain a temporarily disunited family together. This ensured that every family member would obtain the care that they deserved, and the family livelihood would be sustained. Ultimately, with respect to both the material and the spiritual, the groups supported each other and also their family members' migration by acting together.

### **The Daily Lives of Left-Behind Family Members**

Left-behind children are neglected despite the rhetoric of their being the sole focus of the family. All the family arrangements and activities - the parents' migration, and other family members' hard work – were said to be in order that the children could have a better life. But we drew an entirely opposite conclusion when closely observing the children's lives. Children were indeed the center of family objectives, but not the center of their concerns. While they were very important in the arrangement of the family's, overall goals, they were usually neglected in actual daily life, although families did not recognize that fact.

For example, many parents migrated in order to be able to afford their children's education. But many of them did not call home for several months. Further, grandparents worked hard to take care of the children but in busy farming seasons the children had no food for an after-school snack. Sometimes they had to wait until past nine o'clock for dinner. When a child was bitten by a dog or hurt in another type of accident, nobody brought them to a hospital or showed concern. When the children were forced by family members to do fieldwork, nobody considered that they are too young for this type of work or that they might be unwilling to do it. When they felt sad or wept because they missed their parents, nobody understood their feelings. Grandparents believed that "little children have no worries."

Constrained by the bad health, economic conditions, and ideology, many left-

behind elders could not adequately take care of their grandchildren. Some were unable to meet even the children's basic needs. With the elders shouldering a heavy workload, some older grandchildren had to share the burdens. Many children therefore had limited time to study, play, and communicate with peers. Elders were also often unable to manage the children's lives and education; their main way of educating their grandchildren was scolding and they could not communicate on an emotional level with them. They were unable to help them study, and provided inadequate supervision. They paid more attention to feeding the children than to other ways of nurturing them, attaching importance to the children's basic needs and security while neglecting the development of their personality, creativity, and moral values, and their emotional needs. They were also likely to spoil their grandchildren, making them selfish, capricious, and unsociable. Another frequent result of skipped-generation care was the distancing of the children from their parents who left.

The migration of parents, while improving the economic condition of the family, brought sharp changes to the circumstances in which their children lived and developed which caused them to face more risks compared with non-left-behind children. These risks not only included physical threats (such as traffic accidents, drowning, assaults, and food poisoning), but also feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and discrimination; and delinquency due to out-of-control of behavior, such as fighting, early sexual activity, and gambling. Thus, the development of the children was fraught with frustration and risk, which needed the efforts of their families and the community to alleviate.

Left-behind women felt heavily pressured, especially by the family economic situation, and also by their children. The women wept more often after their husbands left, and it was the chief channel, and an effective way, for them to release their pain and sadness. The women did not want their husbands to know that they were weeping or to worry about them, so they never cried when they are talking to their husband on the telephone.

The women felt insecure, and some emergencies—seemingly more frequent after their husband left—exacerbated that feeling: thefts, bad weather, illnesses of the elders, and their children's crying and or strange behavior that might indicate illness. The company of their children and parents-in-law, good relationships with neighbors, and a nice community environment could to some extent enhance their sense of security, and also take the place of their husband in terms of safeguarding them and providing comfort. Their husbands' migration led to the women's being thought of as disadvantaged, and, therefore, when they were in conflict with others they were more likely to be bullied. Some women also experienced sexual harassment from men in the community, which contributed to their feelings of their insecurity and

potentially threatened their marriage.

The women experienced many sorts of negative feelings, some of them were extreme; loneliness was most evident. In addition, their marriage was in potential danger because the women were living separately from their husbands and their sexual demands could not be met within the marriage.

The women's burden of nurturing their children was extraordinarily heavy. The main problems they encountered were an inability to help the children with their studies, to control their behavior, and to find a helper to take care of the children; and a lack of time for their parental responsibilities. The women mainly used in three approaches to help educate their children: persuasion, scolding, and corporal punishment. Sometimes they beat or scolded their children to release their inner pressure, pains, or physical weariness, which adversely affected the children's personality. Because their husbands were away, mothers became the parent who their children turned to for help or confided in, but they had such heavy burdens physically and spiritually that their communication with the children was effected.

Within the context of rural labor migration in an aging society, elders left behind in rural areas were facing double pressures: their aging and their status as a left-behind family member. They needed to deal with a lot of challenges for survival.

After their children migrated out, most elders took over agricultural production and the care of their grandchildren, which were originally their children's responsibilities. Meanwhile the support that they had been obtaining from their family was greatly reduced although their workload increased. According to the survey, the proportion of left-behind elders who were engaged in agricultural production was as high as 80%, and many of the elders needed to manage and plant the land left by more than one child who migrated out. They had to deal with the difficulties of agricultural production, which mainly included a lack of labor and energy, and the insufficiency of agricultural inputs., and many elders felt the heavy workload was beyond their capabilities.

Some elders reported in the survey that they were unsatisfied with the daily care and material support they received from their children, who traditionally constituted their primary source of support. Sick or senile elders, widows and widowers, and empty nesters had the lowest level of satisfaction about the care and support they received, largely because they were either in poor health or unable to live independently and therefore were highly dependent on others. It was difficult for them to acquire support and resources from other channels after their children's migration, and their

needs were likely to go unmet.

It is commonly recognized that family members were the main source of elders' spiritual comfort, with their children undertaking the responsibility for providing emotional support. The large-scale migration of rural laborers severely limited the provision of such support, however, hampering communication and interaction between the generations and creating a separation between the two generations. The elders' cultural life became quite monotonous, and their children's migration left an emotional gap that could not be filled. The elders felt psychological pressure, loneliness, and suffered from a lack of security and sense of happiness, which had a direct and negative impact on the quality of their life and health status.

### **Policy Issues**

The interregional population flow of rural laborers to cities was closely linked to urbanization as a structural initiative. For a long time, development of cities in China was based on the deprivation and depression of rural areas. By the 1980s, however, conflicts within the urban-rural dual system began to attract attention from policymakers as well as scholars.<sup>8</sup> The goal of urbanization, namely integration of the previously separated socioeconomic structures of the city and countryside and the promotion of a modern lifestyle for the whole population, could not be achieved overnight in a country with a deeply rooted dual social system. Considering the deficiency of the cities in absorbing the rural population with respect to employment and residence and the reality of the urban-rural dual system, China adopted a practical strategy for urbanization and social development: balanced development for both urban and rural areas. At the end of 2005, the national policy of New Countryside Construction was instituted as a landmark for this overall development strategy.<sup>9</sup> This policy not only emphasized rural development in a process that previously focused on the modernization of cities, but also had great significance in the context of large-scale labor force migration. Most of the rural migrated workers could not integrate into city life in terms of their identity and life style and returned to their rural community after working in a city. Although urbanization to some extent implies the sacrifice of rural areas as their labor force is encouraged to come to the cities for work, social scientists had hoped that the returning workers and their rural communities would eventually prosper. In practice, however, New Countryside Construction has encountered problems related to migration. Rural

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<sup>8</sup> Wen Tiejun, Wen Li, *Township-zations in China and the Lessons from the Urbanization in Developing Countries*, China Soft Science, 2007 No.7, pp. 23-29.

<sup>9</sup>Ye Jingzhong, *Construction of the New Countryside: Farmers' Perspectives*, China: Social Science Academic Press, November 2006.

communities, where only women and the elderly remain because the men migrated out, lack of human capital for agricultural production, infrastructure construction, and fair social organization, and the left-behind groups, especially women and the elderly, are facing many types of difficulties, most especially increased workloads.

Serious attention is need to the education and care giving of children in migrant households, regardless of whether they are left behind or come with their parents to the city. Some concern has already been shown about the education of migrant children in cities, with a focus on how to improve access to public schools and encourage the building and improvement of private schools to meet these children's education needs.

Parents bring their children with them to the cities to eliminate the impact of a split family on the children's growth and to enable them to enjoy more care and love in a whole family environment. However, education in cities for these children is not unproblematic. Migrant parents often have low-paid, high-intensity jobs and find it hard to maintain a decent standing of living. Tough living conditions affect children's development both physically and psychologically. It is also common for migrant laborers to move between different cities and regions frequently, and interrupted education and interregional difference in schools and courses are disruptive to children's lives.<sup>10</sup> Coordinating different textbooks and teaching methods when they move to a new school in a different region makes it very difficult for the children to complete their education.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, children from rural areas often face discrimination and social exclusion when they attend public schools in the city.<sup>12</sup> Making education accessible to children who migrate to the city can involve structural changes, including reforming the educational financial system, coordinating interregional government agencies and revising related policies.<sup>13</sup>

Moving the entire family to the city, and providing an education for the children, is not affordable for many families, and therefore most parents who migrate leave their children in their rural community. Different ways to care for left-behind children include boarding school, foster parents, and

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<sup>10</sup>Wang Fang, *Report on the Compulsory Education for Floating Children*, Contemporary Youth Research, No.1 2004.

<sup>11</sup>Research Program on *Compulsory Education of Rural Migrant Children*, Central Education Research Institute, Journal of Huazhong Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences), March 2007, Vol.46 No.2.

<sup>12</sup>Wu Xinhui, Liu Chengbin, Inclusion or Exclusion: the Social Space of Rural migrant Children's Integration in City, China Youth Study, July 2007, pp. 13-16.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Ming, New Consideration over Migrant Children and Left-behind Children, People's Education, September 2007, pp. 5-8.

community-based caring centers. Strengthening the primary education system and social infrastructure construction in rural areas for the children, as well as their left-behind families, requires a public investment. Unfortunately, the pressures of a split family have been reflected in the children's school performance and emotional development, but a solid community with effective social supports could offset the negative effect of a of split family situation to a great extent.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The research presented here was focused at the family level, concentrating on the lives of the three groups left behind as a consequence of the outflow of rural labor to the cities—the children, women, and elders—and identifying the various impacts of migration on them. It did not consider the impact on communities as a whole, such as their economy and cultural and political activities, and future research should provide such an analysis.

Additional study is also needed of the individuals affected by migration, including these three type of studies:

- (1) The heterogeneity of the left-behind families: Within the left-behind families, the members experience different impacts from the migration of family members. Thus, future research should address, for example, the differences among left-behind children by sex, age, and type of guardianship.
- (2) Different perspectives of different actors: Future research should analyze the various left-behind groups from the perspective of members of a different group. For instance, research should investigate the perspective of migrant husbands with respect to their wife, children, the elderly, and other individuals in the community and government agencies.
- (3) The relationship and communication between the migrated individuals and those left behind including family members as well as other members of the rural community.