

Migration and Rural Communities

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Transcript – Migration and Rural Communities

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The speeches of the first two specialists are mainly focused on macro-level issues. Now I'd like to give you a briefing on my research on rural communities. These are also recent research findings. Your comments are very welcome. My topic is migration and rural communities. In my understanding, the impact of migration on rural communities is mainly reflected in the impact on people in these communities. In the context of large-scale migration, the population that has remained in rural areas is often referred to as the "left-behind population. Therefore, I have added a sub-title to my speech, namely, "population migration and the left-behind".

(PPT)We all know that rural labor force migration started in China in the 1980's, and that it has made a great contribution to national economic development. China's rural labor migration has some special characteristics. One of them is "mobility without (permanent) transfer." The second is that "people are in urban areas but their roots are in the rural areas". This has resulted in a constant flow back and forth flow between urban and rural areas. The statistical data in the chart shows that 120 million migrant workers went to urban areas in 2005. In 2007, the Institute of National Population Strategic Development Research set a target that, in the next 20 years, 300 million rural people will transfer to urban areas. Because of this population mobility, three large groups of people are being created in rural areas. One is the rural left-behind children, another is the rural left-behind women, and the third is the rural left-behind elderly.. They are popularly referred to as the "386199" people.

These people face a lot of difficulties in their lives. For example, because of their parents' out-migration, left-behind children cannot get adequate care. On the contrary, they have to take part in labor, and share family pressures at an early age, and this is a threat to their growth and a hidden threat to their safety. When the husband of a family leaves, the woman who is left-behind has to independently shoulder the responsibility for agricultural production, raising the children and supporting the elderly. They are therefore weighed down with the double pressures of additional work and psychological burdens. For the elderly, the migration of their children has disrupted the support system in rural families, and brought a series of problems, such as inadequate care for the left-behind elderly, spiritual loneliness, and an increase in potential security risks and the burden of labor, etc.

I believe these problems will have a lasting influence on the social structure and social development of rural communities. We know that the past 30-years of reform and opening-up have actually also been 30 years of population mobility, and also 30 years of people being left-behind. In terms of numbers, one figure published by the All-China Women Federation shows that in 2008, the total number of left-behind children was 58 million and the number of left-behind women was 47 million. Prof. Bai of Renmin University has estimated the number of left-behind elderly at 45 million. In fact, there is no clear definition of the concept of the left-behind population in China. When should elderly people, women and children who are left-behind be counted as part of the left-behind population? What is the time limit for migration? There is no specific definition. Therefore, we put a number of definitions for these things in our survey. For example, “left-behind children” refers to children having one or both parents migrate for work for a period of over six months in the course of one year. The children who are left behind at home and cared for by others are defined as left-behind children. Left-behind women are defined as those whose husbands have migrated for work for a period of over six months, and left-behind elderly are defined as having one or more children migrate for work for a period of over six months. In addition to these numbers, we often also hear a figure of 19.82 million for left-behind children. This figure was from the 2000 census, as was the figure of 17.93 million left-behind elderly.

As early as 2004-2005, we conducted a number of research programs in rural areas in the mid-west of China, including Ningxia, Shaanxi and Hebei, on 162 left-behind children, 140 non-left-behind children and other related groups. In 2007, we carried out case studies on care programs targeted at left-behind children in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hubei, Chongqing and Sichuan. From 2006-2008, we conducted research in provinces with the most concentrated out-migration, including Henan, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan and Sichuan. We conducted research on 400 left-behind children, 400 left-behind women and 400 left-behind elders, respectively. Meanwhile, a comparison was made with 200 non-left-behind people from each group. We also conducted a study of 100 urban workers and other related groups in Beijing. Recently, in the last two weeks there are quite a lot news reports in the newspapers about our research on left-behind populations, and we have published three books. The first is titled “A Different Childhood—China’s Rural Left-behind Children”, the second “Dancing Alone—China’s Rural Left-behind Women” and the third “Quiet Sunset—China’s Rural Left-behind Elderly”.

The provinces shown in this drawing are the areas of our past few years’ research on rural left-behind populations. I think that although migration has made a great contribution to China’s economic development, it has also

had impacts on the rural left-behind population. Some of these impacts are negative and some are positive. In my opinion, the negative impacts can be regarded as the costs of migration.

(PPT) Next, I'd like to discuss the impact on left-behind children, left-behind women and left-behind elders. Due to the limited time, I will only touch on the main findings.

First, let's take a look at left-behind children. We have a number of major findings. The first is that the basic livelihood of most left-behind children is secure, but their inner emotional world is often neglected. Lack of family love makes it hard for them to feel satisfied emotionally. We found in our survey that the long-term separation, lack of daily communication and short time reunions with their parents made it hard for left-behind children to enjoy love and care from their migrant parents. The children and their parents become emotionally distant, resulting in alienation between family members.

For example, we discovered that left-behind children generally feel lonely and helpless, and are under greater psychological pressure. We found that 37% of the left-behind children do not feel like talking to anyone, and 30% of them often feel lonely. Lack of family love has brought about negative impacts on children's personality and development.

The second finding was that left-behind girls often endure a heavy burden of work as well as psychological pressures that make them more likely to become a vulnerable group among the left-behind children. The heavy burden of work includes housework and caring for their elderly guardians. 47% of girls said that they need to do housework on a regular basis and 53% of them that they need to often or sometimes take care of their guardians.

In addition, we found that after the parents migrated, the inner emotional world of female children was more likely to be affected. Meanwhile, due to the gender bias in rural families and the impact of other factors, male left-behind children were more likely to receive various kinds of help and support from within the family and beyond. Support from society to female left-behind children is relatively minimal and they are often neglected by family members and other groups.

The third finding is that the parents of left-behind children have not been sufficiently attentive to their children's development. They usually pay more attention to material compensation for the children rather than to giving affection and love. In families of left-behind children, parents' migration has resulted in their absence and the disruption of their involvement in their children's development. This is a particular problem in China, where,

traditionally, family education plays an important role. We discovered that 73% of parents were working outside for over 10 months per year, In over 72.3% of cases, both parents were away, and 80% were working in another province. 34% of parents left home before the child was three years old and in 49% of cases, one parent, either the father or the mother, stayed away for over seven years.

Such a long-term and long distance separation between parents and children results in the absence of the parents during the course of children's development. Migrant parents are concerned about the children's study at school but do not understand much about their inner emotions and experiences. For example, we found that telephone calls are the major form of communication between left-behind children and their migrant parents. But we found that 71.5% of the calls are one-way communications from the migrant parents, which is obviously unilateral. We also found that 95.4% of phone calls between migrant parents and children involve enquiries about the children's study but rarely is there any emotional exchange with the children. 61.5% of let-behind children said they do not want share their worries with their parents. Most of the parents working outside expressed that they are not in a position to provide much help to their children's development and so the only thing they can do is to compensate them with money and material goods.

Our fourth finding was that the certain social trends in rural areas, including gambling, internet bars and keeping up with the neighbors, are affecting children's development. There is an urgent need to build a healthy cultural environment in the new countryside. We also found that the rural community is an important component of the living environment of left-behind children. Certain bad habits and traditions in rural communities, such as gambling, seeking personal favors, etc. are having a negative effect on the way children spend their leisure time and on their moral development. .

As nobody is supervising them, some left-behind children get involved in *majiang* games and gambling as after-school leisure activities. We found that 4.5% of left-behind children go on the internet after school, and 6.3% go and play *majiang*. In addition a few left-behind children exhibit negative behaviors, such as internet addiction, which have a significant impact on their academic study and physical and mental health. We also found that 45% of farmers believe that the most important thing that needs to be rectified is bad habits such as gambling. In addition, because of the shortage of healthy cultural products in rural communities, such as books and magazines, is hard to satisfy the children's need for knowledge. In some areas, neglect for education has made children uninterested in learning and they leave school early. The deterioration of the cultural environment in rural

communities has a direct impact on the development of left-behind children.

The fifth of our findings is that under the influence of social trends, it is easy for left behind children to become confused or misdirected in terms of their ethical and moral development and the formation of values and behavioral norms. For example, in the socialization of left-behind children, the role of family and school is fading out, while social culture and mass media are becoming leading factors in shaping children's ethical and moral development, behavioral norms and values. We found that left-behind children are very closed off in their leisure activities. 83% of left-behind children would stay at home watching TV after school hours, and 45% spend most of their leisure time watching TV. But the mass media, of which TV is the leading representative, place very limited demands on their audience in terms of reading and writing skills. And this, combined with the lack of supervision from guardians, means that left-behind children are likely to be more influenced by it, and negatively affected.

(PPT) For example if we look at the formation of sexual ethics during adolescence. Due to the absence of the personal example and teaching of parents and family members, 41.4% of left-behind children have to gain information about the process of adolescence through reading and TV programs. But 52.9% of left behind boys over 12 years old and 39.5% of girls do not have any access to information about adolescent reproductive health. Therefore, they are more likely to be influenced by improper content from the mass media.

In terms of developing values and ideals in life, left behind children are seriously affected by the currently prevailing social opportunism, and the faddish entertainment culture with its artificially created personalities. Over 90% of left-behind children said that their ideal life would have no connection with manual labor, and another 50% of left-behind children said they wished they could become some kind of superstar in the future. Of course we can't say that this is really wrong, but this sort of influence was very clear, especially in Hunan.

That's all I will say about the issue of left-behind children. Next, I'd like talk about our studies on left-behind women, in terms of five aspects.

First, income from migrant husbands is the major source of income for left-behind women. But most of the left-behind women still continue agricultural production and in doing so they face are a lack of labor and technical problems. The major source of income for left-behind women comes from their migrant husbands, accounting for 91.7%. After husbands migrate, left-behind women become the main force in agricultural production – this is the so-

called feminization of agriculture that is reported in the media. 92.4% of left-behind women families continue agricultural production, shouldering all housework and agricultural production alone. (PPT) The major difficulties they face are a shortage of labor and technical problems. We discovered that the former division of labor in rural families where “men take care of external affairs while women handle the domestic sphere” has been replaced by a new pattern of “men working outside while women farm”.

The second finding: (PPT) The heavy burden of manual labor and psychological pressure on left-behind women has increased the incidence of illness and deteriorating health. Inadequate medical care and conditions in rural areas cannot meet these women’s needs. They shoulder over 85% of the family burden in terms of agricultural production and housework. Since their husbands migrated, 55% of left-behind women have to spend more time on agricultural work, and 50% of them have to spend more time on housework. In terms of their physical condition, 31.3% of left-behind women are in relatively poor shape. They have illnesses and gynecological diseases as the result of prolonged manual work and are often troubled by poor nutrition. It is also quite common to see gynecological diseases among left-behind women, which are mainly linked with poor sanitation conditions in rural areas and the sanitation habits of rural women, as well to the broader problem of medical care for rural women. Currently, periodical physical checkups are performed under the family planning system, but due to limited, run-down and out of date, other kinds of checkups may not be performed.

The third finding: (PPT) Prolonged separation makes it difficult for marriage to provide emotional satisfaction, which has also led to feelings of profound loneliness and other negative emotions among left-behind women. For example, the husbands of 76.5% of left-behind women work in other provinces, mainly in construction, processing and manufacturing, commerce and services, 76.5% of their husbands work outside for 9-12 months a year, 44.3% of their husbands return home once a year, and 52.9% of them work outside for over 10 years.

In addition, telephone communication is the main source of communication for them, but 22.5% of left-behind women on average have less than three minutes for each call with their husbands. A few left-behind women have even lost contact with their husbands entirely. Telephone contact between the couples has to some extent helped weaken the sense of distance between separated couples, but this kind of contact is still far from being enough to satisfy the emotional needs of left-behind women and their husbands.

In addition, due to difficulties in transportation, costs and living conditions at the place of work, most left-behind women have never visited their husbands.

Since their husbands went out for work, loneliness is the strongest emotion among such left-behind women. 63.2% of left-behind women often feel lonely and 42.1% said that they often weep. In fact, such loneliness does not only reveal a kind of bitterness at being left behind, but also the loneliness of bearing family responsibilities and pressures alone.

Due to the prolonged separation between left-behind women and their husbands their sexual needs also cannot be fulfilled, and this can be a threat to the marriage. Left-behind women are in a constant state of sexual repression, and this also leads to negative emotions. For example, 69.8% of left-behind women complain that they often feel restless, 50.6% of left-behind women often feel worried, 39% of left-behind women often feel depressed, and 8.3% of left-behind women have experienced crises and even breakdown in marriage. Besides, 6.3% of left-behind women and their husbands admit that their marital relationship has deteriorated since the husbands migrated. In our survey of migrant workers we were surprised to find that 17.0% of male workers have engaged in extramarital sexual behavior at their place of work in order to solve the problem of sexual repression, while 42.5% of male workers had an ambivalent attitude toward this.

The fourth finding: (PPT) The situation of left-behind women who are nursing babies reflects the neglect of their legitimate rights. This is a rather special group, accounting for 12.8% of the total. 84.3% of them used to work outside. They are relatively young and 64.7% of them plan to leave to their children to grandparents so that they may go out to work again. This phenomenon also reflects the problem of gender inequality in labor force participation, since the young women who migrate have to break off work because of pregnancy and return home. They will not get childbirth and healthcare services or job assurance in urban areas, and this creates the special phenomenon of left-behind women who are nursing.

The fifth finding: (PPT) In some areas, left-behind women display a relatively strong religious faith, which has a strong element of superstition. 7.3% of the left-behind women demonstrate clear religious faith. In Henan province, 22.5% of left-behind women have religious beliefs. This due to their lacking a sense of safety and stability, the fact that there is no guarantee of family income, and illness. In this helpless situation, left-behind women seek comfort and spiritual help from divinities, Buddha or God. Nevertheless, the religious faith of left-behind women has obvious superstitious elements, especially reflecting their desire to cure illness.

That is all I will present about our findings on left-behind women. Finally, I'd like give you a briefing on the left-behind elderly.

Our first finding is that (PPT) the living conditions of most left-behind elderly have not been clearly improved just because their children have migrated. Rather they are only able to maintain a basic standard of living, with adequate food and shelter. Poverty is very common. We discovered that 80.9% of left-behind elders still have to work and rely on income from agricultural production or sideline activities to support themselves. But usually the income is barely enough to meet their basic needs.

We conducted a survey of per capita economic support given by migrant children to the left-behind elderly based on 2006 samples. We discovered that in the whole of 2006, migrant children only gave elders an average of 408.3 Yuan each. Among those left-behind elderly who received support from their children, 76% of them received less than 500 Yuan, and another 18% of them received no economic support from their children at all. Currently, the social security system coverage for left-behind elders is still limited. Only 7.5% of left-behind elderly received material or cash support from the state or village committee, and only 0.8% have a pension.

The left-behind elders' families also face economic pressures more generally as the result of expenses for medical care, inputs for agricultural production and personal favors etc. At the same time, the left-behind elderly have to take over the responsibilities of their migrant children for agricultural production, looking after grandchildren and exchanging personal favors. This increases their economic burden. These various expenses make it difficult for some low-income left-behind elderly to make ends meet, and their living standards are generally very low. Most of the left-behind elderly can only maintain a basic existence, with adequate food and clothing. Quite a number of the left-behind elderly who have little or no capacity to work live in an impoverished state because they do not have sufficient economic support from their children. In our survey on their present living conditions, we discovered that 69.8% of the left-behind elderly believe their life is just so-so, while 9.8% of the left-behind elders think their life is not good at all.

The second finding: (PPT) Children migrating for work has led to a severe lack of personal care, particularly when left-behind elderly are sick, This is a threat to their personal safety and to their property, Because for these elderly people, the three most important aspects of life are economic support, personal care and spiritual life. So personal care is one of the most important things for them. When their children migrate this disrupts the traditional family care giving structure, and rapidly increases the number of "empty-nest" families. Now, the percentage of left-behind elderly in an "empty-nest" with all children gone has reached 48.5%, while in 88.9% of families the women who used to be mainly responsible for caring duties have migrated. The proportion of elders in the local community without any female children

left behind has reached as high as 55.2%. After children migrate, the left-behind elderly face greater difficulties in agricultural production because of old age and lack of assistance. When they are sick or get injured, they cannot receive timely medical treatment and good care. On top of that, they are likely to encounter some unsafe situations. We discovered that 33.6% of left-behind elders have had various kinds of accidents in the recent past two years, 9% of left-behind elders are afraid of having unpredictable accidents while their children are away from home. There is a severe crisis of care for left-behind elders who cannot look after themselves, particularly those who have lost their spouses. Some left-behind elderly even died as a result of the lack of care and timely medical treatment.

The third finding: We discovered that the support migrant children give to left-behind elderly is more focused on material than emotional help. As a result, it is hard for left behind elderly to satisfy their emotional needs within or outside the family. We found in our survey that the emotional comfort left-behind elderly derive from migrant children coming back home to visit or making telephone calls is very limited. The absence of inter-generational emotional exchange has limited the ability of parents and children to understand each other's inner worlds. We found that it is almost impossible to satisfy these emotional needs through telephone calls. And, besides, 10% of left-behind elders have no communication at all with their outgoing children, so inter-generational emotional contact is cut off completely. Children's migration has also brought a number of negative psychological impacts for left-behind elderly. For example, 43.9% of left-behind elders said that they have experienced a certain degree of psychological pressure after their children migrated, 17.5% claimed that they feel enormous psychological pressure. 36.3% of left-behind elderly say that they often feel lonely, and 35.8% of them often feel anxiety, restlessness and depression. In addition, because of the shortage of cultural facilities in rural areas, the dull spiritual life of left-behind elderly has intensified their loneliness and made it difficult for them to release this psychological pressure, intensifying their unhappiness.

The fourth finding: (PPT) The large out-migration of rural labor force has led to the aging of the agricultural workforce and increased the burden of work on left-behind elderly. This may possibly become a major problem for agricultural development. The out-migration of young and middle-aged rural laborers has left an ageing population as the mainstay of agricultural production. We found that 80.6% of left-behind elderly still have to work in the fields, including many people of advanced aged. In addition, many aged people have to cultivate their migrant children's farmland. Some of them have to take care of as much as 10 *mu* of farmland. But without assistance from their children, the burden of work becomes extremely heavy for many

left-behind elders. 47.3% of left-behind elderly feel their labor burden is very heavy, and as much as 18.3% of them said they can hardly bear the burden. This problem may also lead to insufficient inputs into agricultural development and affect the promotion and distribution of agricultural technology, industrial structural adjustment and the rational transfer of land, thus making it impossible to maintain the momentum of agricultural development.

The last finding: (PPT) In rural areas, we found a serious problem of gambling and the exchange of personal favors, the decline of traditional ethics and morality, and frequent violations of the interests and rights of left-behind elderly. As a result of deep-rooted traditional ideas and the absence of relevant policies, the issue of left-behind elderly has become a family matter, and it is very difficult for left-behind elders to get social support from outside the family. The first problem I mentioned already, about rural problems such as gambling. Now let's look at the second one. We found that the majority of left-behind elders have to take on their migrant children's obligations in terms of exchanging personal favors. In 11.1% of the left-behind elders' families, the biggest expenditure is these personal favors, particularly in areas like Hunan and Jiangxi. In addition, traditional ethical norms such as honoring and showing respect to the aged, filial piety, etc. have been weakened. Now incidents of disrespect and lack of support for the old, paying more attention to the young than to the aged, etc. are becoming increasingly common in rural areas. As a result, the interests and rights of many left-behind elderly are violated.

Currently, China has not introduced policy measures for the left-behind elderly. The absence of systemic support and the constraints imposed by some cultural concepts, such as "bringing up children for the purpose of being looked after in old age", the importance of "face", "exchanging favors" and "not making family scandals public", etc. have constrained the desire and capacity of local government and communities to support left-behind elders. For example, the traditional concept of "not making family scandals public" means that people don't want others know anything about their family affairs, or want any help from others, in case their children are considered unfilial.

The absence of family support and the lack of community and government policies have limited social support for left-behind elders from outside the family. A trend for left behind elders to become marginalized in both families and communities is emerging.

These are five ways in which migration affects left-behind elders. I'd like to add a little explanation here. (PPT) As I mentioned earlier, migration has

both negative and positive impacts on rural communities. We need to pay more attention to these negative impacts in our policy making. We believe that the phenomenon of the left-behind population will be a long-term and complicated social problem that requires social action from people in all walks of life.

My first point is that the problem is long term and complex. The emergence of the left-behind population problem is affected by social development, the family environment and the policy system. At the same time, it is intertwined with and influenced by other rural social issues. The rural left-behind population group will continue to existence over a certain period of social development.

The problem of the left-behind population can only be thoroughly solved through one of two channels, local employment for the rural labor force, or people who are currently left-behind moving along with the migrants. However, under the current social conditions, it is very difficult for either of these to come about. So we need to change our approach to the left-behind population from one of “solving” the problem to one of “responding” to the problem. Various types of action can be undertaken in various social sectors from central government to the local government. These activities are related to multiple entities, including families, schools, communities, government, public media and enterprises, etc.

Based on this, we have put forward a number of suggestions with regard to policy making. Of course, our suggestions are made from the researcher’s point of view, and may not necessarily be suitable.

Policy considerations: (PPT) From the government side: the government should set up programs for disseminating agricultural technology and training for rural women and elders, encouraging the development of agricultural industries suitable for women, such as raising livestock. It should improve the rural social security system, including the rural pension system and minimum living guarantee system, etc. so as to bring impoverished left-behind elders into the social safety net. The government should also expand the coverage of social security to left-behind elders, and continue to reform and improve the new rural cooperative medical system. Efforts should be made to support the development of social service agencies, such as rural rest homes and welfare homes, and to encourage the elderly who need these services to use them. Also, capital investment is required in infrastructure for the construction of rural roads, water supply and irrigation systems, etc. in order to alleviate the difficulties that left-behind people experience in daily life.

Schools: (PPT) Schools and relevant departments should strengthen their role in leading the education and of left-behind children, improve the running of schools and the quality of teaching and the morals of teachers so that they can provide care and psychological guidance for left-behind children. School and relevant departments should organize school-camp activities to enrich the life of students, and strengthen the student-oriented and caring nature of education. At the same time, schools should do their best to conduct education and training targeted at the parents and guardians of left-behind children, in order to promote correct approaches to family education and strengthen the contact and communication between schools and parents.

Rural communities: (PPT) We suggest that communities try to build a healthy social environment to deepen the cultural construction of the socialist new countryside, enrich community cultural activities and emphasize building rural civilization. Also, they need to support the healthy development of left-behind children with support from the Committee for the Elderly and the Women's Committee, and address the loneliness and negative emotions of left-behind elders and women by organizing cultural activities. Village committees should actively draw on their role as organizers to set up community-based mutual-aid groups and teams of people who can provide help to each other in order to boost agricultural production, provide mutual assistance, and alleviate the agricultural burden of left-behind people. Community-based home-care services for the aged can be introduced. Volunteers and other private and corporate groups can be encouraged to provide care and support for strengthening community security, so that left behind people will have a safe community environment. Practical measures should be taken to clean up social morals in rural areas and strengthen traditional virtues, family values and education about laws and regulations. The legitimate interests and rights of left-behind elders should be protected to create a pleasant and harmonious environment for them to pass their later years. Rational guidance should be given to farmers regarding religious faith in order to guard against religious faith becoming reliance on myths and superstitions.

Finally, enterprises and urban employers. (PPT) The transportation and telecommunication sectors should show a sense of social responsibility and make communication and visiting more convenient for migrants and the left-behind. There should be a social system for safeguarding the safety and health of migrant workers in order to protect the legitimate interests and rights of female migrant workers so that they may receive normal reproductive health care services at their place of work.

The above are some of the policy considerations that arise from our study, and an introduction to the three groups. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Thank you.