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How Far are the Left-Behind Left Behind? A Preliminary Study in Rural China

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ABSTRACT

While the linkage between migration and development has attracted much academic and policy attention, a key aspect of the linkage, namely those left behind in the community of origin, remains under-researched. As one of the first academic attempts to provide a systematic overview of this group in China, this paper describes the basic problems faced by it, discusses the institutional causes of the problems, and explores long-term and short-term solutions. The paper first establishes the fact that, while it seems that individuals decide who migrates and who stays back, there are fundamental institutional constraints on such decisions. The paper then shows that the three main left-behind groups, namely wives, the elderly and children, encounter various problems, but in general their situation is not much worse than that of those living with all family members. Their problems cannot just be attributed to being left-behind individuals; instead, the fundamental cause is that many rural communities as a whole have been left behind economically and socially. Although migration exacerbates the hardship, preventing migration is certainly not a solution. The paper instead calls for measures to redress the urban–rural divide and to improve the provision of public goods in rural communities. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Thirty-six-year-old Zheng Xihua was on the verge of tears when our conversation turned to her three children: a 15-year-old daughter and 11-year-old twin sons. Hailing from the countryside of the northern part of Liaoning province, northeast China, she works in a car park during the day and in a beauty salon at night in Shenyang, the capital city of Liaoning. Her husband started migrating to cities to work more than ten years ago. The further away he went, the less often he visited home, and the less money he sent back. Zheng said 'he is not her man anymore'; however, divorce is not an option for either of them. To meet the ever-increasing family expenditure with the growth of their children, Zheng went to south China to work three years ago. When she returned home for Chinese New Year after being away for one and a half years, she was dismayed to find that her daughter refused to call her 'mother' and insisted on dropping out from high school to go to work in the city. Her two sons were rude to their elderly neighbour, and one had a long knife scar on his face, 'turning his movie-star looks to those of a gangster'. She did not have the time to check her sons' examination scores (when she asked for the annual reports from the school, the sons answered that they had thrown them away), but her father-in-law told her that the teacher had visited to say that one of her sons would be expelled if he continued to fight with his schoolmates and failed to turn up for classes. Since early 2004, she had decided to work in Shenyang

from where she could go home more frequently. Zheng said:

> 'Where my own life is concerned, it's over . . . [but] I can take it. All I am doing now is for the children. But when you are away earning money for them, they learn all the bad things. [But] if I stay home, who is going to earn the money? You don't know if you should slap them or slap yourself . . . I have thought it over now! It is up to them. If they learn the rules one day, they grow up properly; otherwise they will just end up as useless as their father or they will have a bitter fate (*kuming*) like me!'[1]

Millions of Chinese are facing the same hardships and dilemmas as Zheng – as left-behind wives coping single-handedly with the children or as migrant parents leaving their children behind in the care of others. According to the latest national population census (2000) and other surveys in Beijing and Shanghai, there are 106 million rural–urban migrants in China (National Statistics Bureau of China, 2001).[2] Although no data are available on the total number who are left behind, the magnitude is surely substantial. The left-behind constitute the major part of the rural population in many places, and the countryside is thus said to be occupied by the '38-61-99 Army': '38' for the left-behind wives (March 8, Women's Day), '61' for children (June 1, Children's Day), and '99' for old people (September 9, the day honouring the elderly in China). The problems faced by the left-behind have also surfaced, as encapsulated by the 'fake milk formula' incident in the Fuyang municipality of Anhui province, southern China, that came to light in 2004. In the space of less than a year (from May 2003 to late April 2004), 171 infants in the municipality suffered from serious malnutrition (locally known as 'big-head disease' because of the symptom of swelling heads) and 13 died because they were fed extremely low-quality formula milk.[3] Similarly low-quality formula was later found across China, but babies in Fuyang suffered the most primarily because as a major migrant-sending region (with 1.7 million people working in other places in early 2004; see *Hefei Evening News*, 2004), Fuyang had a large number of left-behind babies who were relying on formula milk. The fake formula was cheap, thus appealing to poor migrants' families. In most cases, the babies were looked after by poorly-educated grandparents, left-behind population themselves, who were unable to assess the quality of formula and were also slow in bringing the babies to hospitals, alerting the public and going to court, even after the problem became clear. Recognising the linkage between the damage by the fake formula and out-migration, the Shanghai municipality made special efforts to block similar products from being sold in places with high levels of out-migration (*XinhuaNet*, 2004).

As one of the first academic attempts to provide a systematic overview of the left-behind in rural China, this paper describes the basic problems faced by them, discusses the institutional causes of the problems, and explores long-term and short-term solutions. The paper will first establish the fact that, although who migrates and who stays back seems to be a decision made by individuals, there are fundamental institutional constraints on such decisions. For instance, children and the elderly are left behind partly because they are denied access to basic welfare in the city as a result of the household registration system and the place-based public finance system. The paper then shows that all three left-behind groups, namely wives, the elderly and children, do encounter various problems, but existing comparative studies show that in general their situation is not much worse than that of those living with other family members in the same community. Thus, the problems cannot be solely attributed to being left behind; rather, the fundamental point is that many rural communities as a whole have been left behind economically and socially, and the communities are no longer able to provide any support for those left behind there. Although migration exacerbates the hardship, preventing migration is not a solution. Instead, the institutions that maintain the urban–rural divide should be modified to enable more migrants to settle down in cities with families. At the same time, the provision of public goods in the rural communities must be substantially improved. In this regard, this paper also calls attention to the limitation of migration as a developmental tool.

This paper is primarily based on a documentary study of highly dispersed Chinese information sources, including academic publications,

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news reports and public commentaries. As a supplement, I conducted in-depth interviews with eight migrants and left-behind members of their families in Liaoning province from November 2004 to February 2005. I have also drawn information from my earlier long-term research on migrants in China throughout the major part of the 1990s, particularly from my work on communities with large numbers of out-migrants in Wenzhou area of Zhejiang province, southeastern China (Xiang, 2005).

WHY ARE THE LEFT-BEHIND LEFT BEHIND?

Although it appears that practical considerations lead migrants to leave some family members at home, and indeed their decision is often conceptualised as a rational 'household strategy' in academic literature, the left-behind population in China is to a large extent an outcome of institutional processes. China established a special household registration system (known as *hukou*) in the 1950s in order to prevent the rural population from spontaneously moving to cities and to keep the price of grain low enough to support a high rate of industrialisation (particularly in heavy industries) in cities. Under the *hukou* system, people born in urban areas are officially registered as 'residents' (*jumin*) and those in rural areas as 'peasants' (*nongmin*). 'Residents' and 'peasants' are thus two distinct categories of social status that entail different rights (for example, 'residents' are, in theory, guaranteed waged employment but 'peasants' are not), and 'peasants' cannot obtain urban *hukou* status unless mandated by the state.[4] The fact that migrants are supposed to return to the countryside eventually is also reflected in the Chinese narrative of migration. Migrants are normally called 'peasant workers' (*nongmingong* or *mingong*) to highlight their legal status, and the standard term for the left-behind is '*liushou zhe*', literally meaning 'those who stay and hold the fort'. While the English phrase 'left-behind' is oriented towards those who move (migrants), with the connotation that the left-behind could have been brought along during migration, '*liushou*' is exactly the opposite and implies that '*liushou zhe*' are waiting for migrants to return.

Without the status of full urban citizenship, migrants often have to work in the informal sector without secure wages, let alone social benefits. According to a large survey conducted by the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development, Ministry of Labour and Social Security and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions in nine provinces and municipalities in 2004, only between 10 and 37.5% of the migrant workers in the construction industry signed contracts, varying from province to province (*Zhongguo Jianshe Bao*, 2004). Jobs are unstable and migrants often have to keep moving in search of new opportunities. Spontaneous migrants thus become a special social category, the 'floating population', in both physical and institutional terms. Without basic economic security, migrants to urban areas have to be particularly cautious about bringing family members with them.

Corresponding to the *hukou* system, the distribution of political power and responsibility within the Chinese state is strictly defined along lines of place (particularly at the province level). Government departments have no responsibility for the non-*hukou* residents in their jurisdiction. For example, in many towns along China's coast and particularly in the Pearl River delta, migrants outnumber the local population by large margins, but they are very rarely mentioned in local government development plans and reports. All social and economic development indicators, such as the school enrolment rate and number of hospitals for every thousand persons, are calculated on the basis of the size of the permanent population. So is the evaluation of government performance (Xiang, 1995). This situation is worsened by the current public finance system. For example, as part of the wider agenda of decentralising its public finance management, China reformed its educational system in 1985 such that different levels of government would be responsible for the provision, supervision and financing of education. Budget allocation is based strictly on the assumption that public education is for the *hukou* population only. Although it is self-evident that migrant parents are contributing to the local revenue, the local government could argue that serving migrants would violate budget regulations.

In response to the lack of access to formal education, migrants in some big cities have set up their own schools since the early 1990s. But until very recently, urban authorities refused to grant them licences and even closed down the schools and expelled the students. One of the earliest

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primary schools of this kind in Beijing opened by a migrant, Mr Yi Benyao, is the Xingzhi School (with which I was involved during the early stages of its development); it had to change its location three times in the first three months of 1997 due to police crackdowns (for accounts of migrants' schools, see Lu and Zhang, 2001; Han, 2003). Why are local governments against these schools, which are in fact delivering services on the government's behalf at their own cost? The reason is that under the place-based governance system, while the local authorities are not responsible for migrants' welfare, they would be blamed for any accident that occurs in their 'territory', such as the collapse of buildings or food poisoning in the migrants' schools. In the mid-1990s, the central government recommended the principle of 'regulation based on location' (*shudi guanli*) that gave local authorities in the destination place the final say in any incidents involving migrants. Aimed primarily at preventing accidents in order to ensure social stability rather than providing services, this principle has created an even more hostile policy environment for migrants, and particularly their dependents. With a few exceptions, the only way for migrant children to be admitted to public schools under the current system is for them to pay extra fees, often in the name of 'sponsorship' (*zanzhu fei*). This is normally more than RMB 1000 (US$125) for the first year, decreasing in subsequent years. Even when a child manages to enter a school in the city, he/she has to return to his/her place of origin (as defined by *hukou*) to pass the examination for entry to a higher level of education (e.g. from junior to senior secondary). This is because the entire school enrolment system is also place-based. This also leads to discrepancies between what migrant students have studied in the place of destination and the examinations that they take in the place of origin.

For married women, an unusual policy that deters them from migrating is the mandatory pregnancy check, which is part of the family planning policy. In order to prevent 'unplanned births', the family planning authorities in China require all married women to have four pregnancy checks a year. In some places such as Anhui province in south China, test results from destination places are not recognised and migrant women have to return to their place of origin for the checks (see Lou, 2004: 118–19).

China established the *hukou* system in conjunction with the command economy which, although appearing to be highly centralised, was in fact managed by cadres at different levels in different jurisdictions. Market-oriented reform which started at the end of the 1970s has dramatically transformed China's economy, even as the governance structure has remained very much the same. Thus, the mismatch between a unified market and a fragmented system for the management of population, welfare and other social issues stands out as a fundamental characteristic of Chinese society. While citizens can move elsewhere to search for jobs as labourers and they can purchase basic subsistence products as consumers, they cannot settle down as they wish as social and political subjects. Thus, only those who expect to find jobs and earn money immediately can afford to migrate; family members who need care have to stay behind. Apart from policy obstacles, cultural norms and other structural factors are also responsible for the creation of the left-behind groups, as will be discussed below in the case of left-behind wives.

LEFT-BEHIND WIVES: FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE OR 'AGRICULTURALISATION OF FEMALES'?

Although the proportion of female migrants is increasing, migration in China remains a male-dominated phenomenon (more than 60% being male). Some economists and sociologists have theorised that this is a rational choice of division of labour which is conducive to the growth of household wealth as a whole (Du and Bai, 1997: 40–56; Cai, 2000: 152–9; 2001: 103). Meng (1993, 1995) argued that men's out-migration makes women's labour contribution to the household more visible and therefore more appreciated, thus increasing their status. Li Jie (2003) suggested that the out-migration of men led to a redistribution of agricultural resources along gender lines, and brought about 'rare and valuable' opportunities for the 'independent development' of women.

However, it can be argued that a division of labour where women migrate and work in factories while men take up the more labour-demanding agricultural activities is equally if not more 'rational'. Feminist scholars argue that it is

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in fact the deeply ingrained unequal gender relations and patriarchal ideology that keep women behind. For example, it is well documented that men's migration is almost independent of marriage, while for women, marriage proves to be a determinant. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of female migrants are unmarried (Du and Bai, 1997; Research team on Female Rural Migrant Labor, Institute of Sociology of CASS, 2000; see also Tang Mengjun, 2004: 200). One informant explained to me why this was the case:

> 'Before the girls are married, they have nothing to do at home, so they go cities to work. After marriage, they have to do the housework for the in-laws. They can't go anymore.'

Married women do migrate, leaving husbands behind, but they do so normally on special occasions, often creating incredible social pressure for the husbands (Lou, 2004: 115). For most women, being left behind may not be a voluntary choice at all and some had supported their husbands' out-migration precisely because their relationships were already in trouble (Lou, 2004). While the distinction between voluntary versus forced migration has been a central theme in migration studies, a similar distinction for the left-behind should also be recognised.

Feminist researchers have further pointed out that left-behind women become more active in agriculture simply because agriculture has become a marginal economic sector, rather than because women have become more powerful (Jin, 1990; Fei, 1994; Gao, 1994). Gao (1994), for example, has argued that it is more accurate to talk about the 'agriculturalisation of females' than the 'feminisation of agriculture'. Jin (1990) suggested that rural women function as a 'secondary reservoir' for the economic development of China. While rural labour as a whole serves as a reservoir for urban-driven economic growth, rural women contribute to maintaining the rural reservoir (although in many cases such as in the Pearl River delta, women of course also constitute the first reservoir for the export-oriented economic growth). Based on a review of the literature, Feng (1996) described a process of 'handing down' economic activities from men to women when the activities become undervalued in the market. This argument is confirmed by the quantitative analysis of the Research Team on Migration and Rural Women's Development which found that 69.1% of left-behind women work in agriculture. While most left-behind wives face various difficulties – agricultural production being the primary source of the hardship – their annual income makes up 27.8% of the total household income (Tang Mengjun, 2004: 204). An earlier survey by Zheng (2001) concluded that husbands' out-migration has no significant impact on the wives' social attitudes towards traditional gender roles. Migrants and the left-behind often cite the notion of 'men in charge of external affairs, women in charge of internal affairs' (*nan zhuwai, nü zhunei*) to justify why wives are left behind. The notion, which used to confine women to the household while men work outside, now confines women to the rural community and agricultural production while men seek urban-based or industrial work (see also Jacka, 1997: 141–2). While the scale has changed, the essence remains the same.

THE ELDERLY: CHALLENGES TO THE HOUSEHOLD-BASED CARE SYSTEM

More than 10% of the Chinese population were above 60 years of age by 2004, and more than 70% of them now live in the countryside. Compared with wives and children, elderly parents are the least studied. A survey of 252 elderly people in three villages in Anhui province (Zhang and Wu, 2003; Zhang, 2003), one of the very few studies on this group, reported that the left-behind elderly feel more lonely but are more satisfied with their lives in general. Of those whose sons had all migrated, 87.5% reported feeling lonely 'often' or 'sometimes' compared with 31.4% of those whose sons were working in the home village (Zhang, 2003: 20). At the same time, 73.5% of the elderly whose sons were away asserted that they were 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with their life, compared with 65.7% of those who had all their sons working in the home village (Zhang, 2003: 20). In order to make sense of this seemingly contradictory phenomenon and to appreciate its policy implications, we should examine the social setting of the life of the rural elderly.

The out-migration of adult children has not brought about crises for the elderly, first of all because most of the elderly in rural China have the minimum life security, namely access to land.

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Table 1. Average value of sons' contributions to the elderly in kind and cash (RMB).

	Grain	Fuel	Cooking oil	Gifts	Medical care	Cash	Total
Households with all sons around	230.00	31.43	13.46	98.86	333.71	224.57	932.06
Households with all sons migrated	153.46	14.59	7.44	136.52	470.23	649.9	1427.30

Source: Zhang and Wu (2003: 32).

A large survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2003, of 1400 households in Jiangsu, Guangdong, Jilin, Hebei and Gansu provinces, indicated that 93.9% of the elderly are allocated land, which can produce enough grain for their own consumption and, in most cases, even a surplus (*Chinese Academy of Social Sciences News*, 2004). Thus, the rural elderly need very limited additional resource for subsistence – RMB 800 (less than US$ 100) a year in total according to a small-scale survey in southeastern China (Gao and Pu, 2003: 35). Precisely because what the rural elderly have forms only very minimal security, even a marginal increase in cash contributions from the children can lead to great monetary security and thus more emotional satisfaction. Zhang and Wu's (2003) survey itemised the contributions from migrant and non-migrant sons to their households (Table 1).

Parents whose sons were all away received RMB 500 more a year than those whose sons were all in the home village. Migrant sons contributed considerably less in subsistence (e.g. grain and fuel) but much more in gifts, medical care and cash, which are items most needed by the elderly. Another reason for the comparatively minor problems faced by the left-behind elderly is that they are relatively young: most are below 69 years (Zhang, 2003).

Although out-migration has not brought about serious problems, it presents potential challenges to the current household-based rural elderly care system. The Chinese government had experimented with various measures to provide more 'socialized' security (i.e. beyond household) to the rural elderly. However, from the very beginning the government had established the principle that rural elderly care should be 'based on individual contribution, supplemented by collective [community] fund, supported by government policies', which clearly frees the government from any financial commitment.[5] The State Council approved the Basic Design of County-level Insurance Scheme for Rural Elderly in 1992. Under this scheme, peasants deposit cash every year and receive a pension from the age of 60. A pilot scheme along these lines was carried out in Yantai municipality of Shandong province. Peasants there paid RMB 48 a year in 1991 (which was increased to RMB 135 in 2002) to the county-level pension fund; this was sometimes matched by village funds. But the experiment was not successful, mainly due to the lack of matching funds from communities. Participants in the scheme are now receiving an average of RMB 90 a year as pension, far less than the amount that is sufficient for security (Li *et al*., 2004). In Kunming municipality of Yunnan province, similar schemes were put in place in the 1990s. But since deposits are small and the bank interest rate has been decreasing over the last few years, elderly peasants are now receiving as little as RMB 2.2 a month (Tang Zhilan, 2003: 85). Nationwide, the number of participants in the rural pension scheme dropped from 80.2 million at its peak in 1998 to 54.6 million in 2002 (Yang and Li, 2003; Li *et al*., 2004). By the end of 2003, only 19.8 million rural elderly had received insurance (State Council Press Office, 2004), out of more than 800 million rural residents.

An alternative measure to social insurance lies with elderly care centres. But government- or community-run care centres (*jinglaoyuan*)[6] are normally in very bad shape due to a serious lack of funds. At the same time, self-financing care centres have turned out to be too expensive for most peasants. For example, a care centre in Sichuan province, southwestern China, charges RMB 3600 a year for accommodation and another 3000 for food. The Jiu'an Apartment for the Elderly in Zhejiang provides free accommodation, but only after one pays a deposit of RMB 60,000–80,000 and an additional RMB 3000 for food per year (Gao and Pu, 2003: 36). They are far too costly, given that the per capita income of

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peasants was merely RMB 2936 in 2004, after a 6.8% increase from the previous year.

Acknowledging these difficulties, the central government has basically given up on establishing a universal pension system for the rural elderly. In 1999, the central government decided not to expand the rural elderly insurance scheme (Gao and Pu, 2003: 36), and in 2002 it emphasised again that households should take primary responsibility for rural elderly care. To reinforce the household-based elderly care practice, the government has encouraged practices that are novel elsewhere but are common across China, such as selecting 'model families' (*wuhao* family literally meaning 'five-good' family) in villages and, more importantly, encouraging adult children and the parents to sign formal agreements as the legal basis for care provision. With the agreements, the parents can sue children for negligence. But by no means does this constitute an effective solution given the long-term absence of migrant adult children on a large scale. Migrants and left-behind elderly themselves have come up with some measures to address their problems, particularly by seeking 'commodified socialised services' in the village. For instance, it has become increasingly common for the left-behind elderly to hire fellow villagers to provide services either on an *ad hoc* or on a regular basis by using remittances from their adult children. Although one can expect neighbours to lend a hand for free, the elderly prefer paying them to avoid accumulating excessive social obligations (Zhang, 2003). A common arrangement for elderly care in China has been the rotation of the elderly among different sons. For instance, if an old couple has three sons, they would stay with each son for four months a year. In the case of migration, the migrant son would pay a certain amount of money, normally RMB 500–1000 a month according to my field research in northeastern and southeastern China, to the brothers who stay back home, to 'buy out' their duty. In rural places close to towns, groceries would be delivered for free as long as one has a telephone. The development of commodified socialised services has also been facilitated by rural–rural migration. In the villages where I did my fieldwork in southeast China, peasants from nearby mountainous and poorer areas constitute the majority of the agricultural labourers and also care-givers to the elderly.

THE CHILDREN: LEFT BEHIND BY WHOM?

A news report in a prominent Chinese national daily stated that a 'conservative' estimate of at least 10 million children are either looked after by their mothers alone or by grandparents as a result of their parents' migration (Li Chenxu, 2003). According to estimates by local officials in a major out-migration county of Anhui province, every 1000 migrants leave around 125–250 children behind (Li Lijin, 2004: 18). If this estimate is valid and applicable nationwide, there would be 13–26 million children left behind. A survey (Qian, 2004) of a primary school in Tian Chang city, Anhui province, found that 58.5% of the students had at least one parent who was away from home, and 37.2% had parents who were both away. Left-behind children have attracted the most public attention. News reports about young girls being raped and children dying in accidents while their parents are away have raised public concern. The discourse of familism, which has been popularised recently with the growth of the middle class and as a reaction to the dramatic social transformation in urban China, tends to construe leaving one's children behind as a sin. A researcher at the Mother Education Institute, East China Communications University, declared that: '. . . mother's smile forms the best environment for the growth of children. Thus mothers have no excuse whatsoever to leave children behind . . . otherwise [the regret] would be a millstone around your neck all your life' (cited in Wang and Wu, 2003: 9) (one wonders why fathers' necks are not similarly weighed down). While it is easy to impose moral millstones on mothers, what we need is a careful assessment of the situation in reality.

Surveys of the left-behind children have portrayed a fairly grim picture. For example, a study of 250 junior high school students who had experienced being left behind for more than six months in Jichun county, Hubei province, found that more than half of them had difficulties adapting to the left-behind life, 16.6% felt abandoned, 12.3% had problems expressing difficulties or obtaining help, and 6.5% felt 'anguished' about being left behind (Liang, 2004: 26). The Sichuan Agricultural Survey Team investigated 1184 left-behind children in Da county in 2003, and found that 47% of the students performed poorly in their studies, 41% were in the medium

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to low range and only 12% performed better than average (Zhao, 2004). A survey by the Women's Federation of Meishan city, Sichuan province, in 2004 (probably one of the largest of its kind to date) sampled nearly 12,000 students, of which 51.2% were left-behind children, from 21 rural schools. The report suggested that the left-behind children have high drop-out rates, poor academic performance, and problems in socialisation and psychological development, although the concepts in the paper are poorly defined and the descriptions are unclear (Women's Federation of Meishan municipality, Sichuan province and Office of the Committee for the Work of Women and Children of Meishan municipality, Sichuan province, 2004).

Qualitative observations consistently suggest that left-behind children often develop behaviour at two extremes: either they are withdrawn or excessively aggressive (Li Lijin, 2004: 18; Qian, 2004; Zhao, 2004). This is commonly attributed to the fact that the grandparents who are looking after the children either spoil the children or fail to give them enough emotional care (e.g. Qian, 2004; Zhao, 2004). According to Li Quanmian's (2004: 34) survey of six villages in Jiangxi province in 2003, 85% of the elderly reported difficulties in looking after grandchildren, mainly due to their physical weakness and low education levels.

But the above research tended to focus only on the left-behind children, without comparing them with those who live with their parents. Comparative studies have found that the differences between the two groups are marginal. According to a highly technical psychological study, left-behind children are less healthy than other children, but only very marginally (Huang, 2004: 351, 353). The research conducted by Zhu *et al*. (2002) in Jiangxi, Hunan and Henan provinces on the educational achievement of left-behind children and those whose parents have not migrated found no significant difference between the two groups' school behaviours (e.g. school attendance) or outcomes (primarily measured by examination scores). The authors attributed this to the general negligence of most rural parents towards their children's education, regardless of whether they are home or away. Another survey done by Jiang and Fen (2002, cited in Wang, 2003) also suggested that, despite the general impression that left-behind children are more likely to drop out from school, parents' migration does not appear to be a factor – at least not an independent one – in affecting school-children's withdrawal.

Thus, similar to the situation of the elderly, left-behind children face various problems, but they are not evidently worse off than those who live with their parents. Research on the social development of children in different parts of Shandong province, eastern China, indicates that the percentage of children with psychological and behavioural problems in the city, county seat and countryside are 8.11%, 7.18% and 19.18% respectively (cited in Yang and Wang, 2004: 29). In other words, rural children are more than twice as likely to have psychological and behavioural problems as their urban counterparts. The rural–urban divide is thus far more significant than the differences between the left-behind and the accompanied.

The fact that rural children as a whole are left behind again has roots in the institutional set-up, and a key to it is the problematic relationship between the individual, community (represented by villagers' committees) and state in the provision of basic education. As mentioned in the earlier part of the paper, basic education in China has been mainly the responsibility of the government below the provincial level. In the countryside, villagers' committees, townships and county governments are responsible for the primary, junior-secondary (12–14) and senior-secondary (15–18) education, respectively. The township is the major investor in education, but its very limited financial capacity has led to the perennial under-funding of schools. The situation has become worse since 1994 when China introduced a new taxation system with the objective of enlarging revenue at the central level. The new financial framework is characterised by upwards concentration of revenue, and places the township at a level that has the least income. A widely cited figure is that by the end of the 1990s, about 80% of townships in China could not pay the salaries of school teachers on time. In some townships, the total government revenue was less than a third of all the teachers' salaries. Recognising this reality, from June 2001 the central government ordered the county government to be responsible for guaranteeing the funding of basic education. This partially solved such problems as teachers' back wages (in many places even the county government cannot

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guarantee the teachers' salaries), but it has certainly not brought about substantial improvement in rural education.

As a result of this institutional arrangement, rural education is particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of migration. Firstly, at the macro-level, since basic rural education is financed by the rural community and local government, and educated farmers are more likely to migrate to cities, rural investment in education has become a subsidy to the urban sector. Secondly, the job insecurity and low pay of rural school-teachers – an inevitable outcome of the dependence on community funds – have in fact turned many rural teachers into migrants, with the latest wave in 2003. In order to relieve the peasants' financial burden, the central government ordered a dramatic cut of peasants' levies in early 2003, including that originally intended for basic education. Although the reduction of levy is supposed to be compensated for by the government budget, in reality it is often unmet, and teachers' salaries in some places were cut by a third or half. In Jichun county of Hubei province, for example, as many as 800 teachers quit their jobs due to a reduction of pay in early 2003. Among them, 77 were from village primary schools, nearly a third of the total (Jiang, 2003). Finally, the out-migration of the most educated and capable members of the rural community – the 'brain drain' – has further weakened the capacity of the villages to mobilise resources for education.[7] In sum, the left-behind children are left behind not only by parents, but also by teachers, by other capable community members, and ultimately by the basic policy design.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Unlike what is usually assumed, being left behind in China is not only a family matter of practical consideration for the migrants and their family members, but is also related to fundamental institutional arrangements and unequal social relations. These institutional arrangements also explain the problems faced by the left-behind, and the marginal difference in welfare status between them and those accompanied by family members in rural communities. This paper has demonstrated that, far more important than being physically left behind by migrants, rural communities as a whole have been left behind economically and socially. Since migration is not the real cause of the problems faced by the left-behind, discouraging migration would not help. Indeed, less migration may only make things worse, since for many rural residents, migration is vital to sustaining basic needs in education and medical care. As one left-behind mother and wife (both her husband and son migrated) in rural Shenyang commented, 'It is better to be apart to earn more money than to stay together to be poor.'

What should and can we do? First of all, more peasants and their families must be allowed to settle in cities with equal entitlements as other urban residents, if rural family members, particularly children, are not to be left behind on a long-term basis. Despite gradual and partial relaxation, the *hukou* system remains a formidable obstacle for the overwhelming majority of migrants who want to live with their families in the city. Without urban *hukou* status, migrants are denied access to government-subsidised housing and public education for their children, and have minimal living security. There are other obstacles apart from the *hukou* system. For example, although migrants can join the medical care system, the medical fund is now coordinated at the county level and a nationwide unified risk-pooling system has not been established. A migrant's medical care account will have to be cancelled in one county and reinstated in another if he/she changes jobs across counties. This is part of the reason why a very small proportion of migrants have joined medical care, making family migration more difficult (see Xiang, 2003). The current place-based system for public resource redistribution and administration may also impede the local urban government from providing migrants with full entitlements, even when they have obtained their nominal urban *hukou* status. Thus the entire administrative paradigm must be modified (Xiang, 2005).

At the rural end, three aspects can be explored. Firstly, community-based markets for services driven by migrant remittances and the demands of the left-behind can be further developed. Apart from elderly care, it has also become increasingly common for migrants to leave their children with other community members, particularly school-teachers, on a commercial basis. For example, in the Wenzhou area of southeastern China, which is well-known for its out-migrant

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traders, the practice of teachers taking care of left-behind children is well-established and is commonly referred to as 'raising piggies'. Secondly, 'social capital' can be enriched among the left-behind. For example, left-behind wives in some communities have formed mutual-aid groups during the agricultural high season. For the left-behind elderly, socialising with peer groups is the primary means to address emotional loneliness (Zhang, 2003). As a socialist country, China has done fairly well in establishing semi-official organisations for women and the elderly (in every village there is a female cadre in the villagers' committee in charge of women's affairs, and an association of the elderly under the leadership of the township Committee for the Elderly), and they can provide support for the left-behind groups.

Finally, we must recognise that the fundamental solution lies in the state finance system. Migrants' remittances have gained much prominence in academic and policy-making circles recently, but the experiences in most parts of China show that remittances alone fall short in terms of generating substantial development and increasing the welfare of the left-behind. Most of the value created by migrant labourers remains in the urban sector. It is thus out of the question to use migrants' remittances to redress urban–rural inequality. Furthermore, as this paper illustrates, the lack of provision of rural public goods constitutes the immediate cause of the various problems of the left-behind and others, and the funding system for national welfare is responsible for this. Without substantially reformulating the overall finance system, the vicious cycle – whereby migration drains resources away from the rural community and the left-behind are left further behind – will not be reversed. We want people to stay at home or to migrate because they choose to, rather than because they have to. We want a situation where staying back and migrating are both conducive to the development of the community of origin. This can be achieved only when a rural-friendly institutional setting attentive to the needs of the poorest communities is put in place.

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NOTES

(1) Interview took place in Shenyang, Liaoning province, on 13 December 2004.

(2) The census reported 121.07 million internal migrants as of the year 2000, and among them 88.4 million were rural–urban migrants. The census defines 'migrants' as those who lived in a township or district (in big cities) different from where they had registered their permanent residence for more than half a year. Other surveys conducted in Shanghai and Beijing found that about 20% of migrants in cities stayed less than half a year. Our estimate of 106 million rural–urban migrants was reached on the basis of these figures.

(3) This was widely reported by the media in China; for example, *Anhui Daily*, 21 April 2004.

(4) For literature on the *hukou* system, see Christiansen (1990); Cheng and Selden (1994); Mallee (1995); Chan and Zhang (1998).

(5) An exception to this is a pilot scheme that grants no less than RMB 600 a month to an elderly person who has only one child or two daughters from the date when he/she reaches the age of 60 from 2004. This is aimed at encouraging low birth rates in rural communities. The fund is shared by the central government and local government.

(6) Another community-based elderly care practice is the 'five guarantees households' (*wubao hu*) scheme which guarantees a living with accommodation, food, clothing, medical care and funeral or education (for orphan minors) to rural elderly or minors who have lost the ability to work and have no other source of support. The scheme covers only a very small part of the rural population. In the survey conducted by Zhang, about 5% of the migrants had cut their connections with the parents both economically and socially, and some of the elderly have applied to join the *wubao hu* scheme (Zhang, 2003: 21).

(7) Out-migration has turned a great number of villages in China into 'shell villages' (*kongke cun*) which now have little productive public assets and few able labourers. For example, Jianli county of Hubei province has more than 200,000 labourers working elsewhere. As a result, more than 400,000 *mu* (65,880 acres) of land, or 24.2% of the total, are

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left uncultivated. Due to low productivity, the village could not pay the agricultural tax and other levies and had to take out loans to fulfil duties. Another village in Hubei province, where half of its population work as migrants, was in debt to the tune of more than RMB 2 million in the early 2000s, for which the village had to pay RMB 180,000 as interest every year. Without a proper institutional set-up that is friendly to the overall development of rural communities, migration will leave the entire countryside further behind.

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