

An Analysis of the Issue of Rural Left-Behind Elderly From the Perspective of Sociology

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Abstract

A large number of young labor forces in rural areas migrate to China's South-East coastal areas and large and medium-sized cities to seek to work, which causes a lot of rural elderly left behind at home. Rural left-behind elderly shoulder heavy burden, yet with low income, and even have no means of living. They are unlikely to get good care and concern both in living and mentally. The society and the academia should pay more attention to the survival condition of such families. This paper analyzes problems existing in rural left-behind children and the reasons for these problems at the cultural and institutional level. Finally, the paper proposes some suggestions to resolve these problems.

Key words: Rural left-behind elderly; Economic income; Psychological need; Pension mechanism

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INTRODUCTION

With crowding in of "the overflow of migrant laborers", currently, most media and public opinions, governmental

officials and scholars are focusing on the hard and marginal living condition of migrant laborers, while rare attention is paid to the larger number of the family members of the migrant laborers who are left behind at home in rural areas, such as, left-behind elderly. Compared with non left-behind elderly, the left-behind elderly encounter more difficulties in terms of life. Although the current living level and medical level of human kind are obviously improved, still the situation is not optimistic to left-behind elderly in rural areas. The economic support capacity of their children who migrate to urban cities to work should not be overestimated. Thus, more attention should be paid to the left-behind elderly.

Staying behind is mainly the situation that a major member of a family leaves the original place of domicile for the reason of work or study, while other members of the family stay at home, and the outgoer and the one staying at home live at different places. The left-behind elderly in rural areas that this paper is going to study are the parents staying at home whose child(ren) (all the children) leave the place of domicile for long (usually more than half a year) and migrate to urban cities to work or do business or engage in other production and operation activities. Flow of an outgoing population is usually from rural areas to urban cities and from agriculture to non-agriculture, but there is also a part of the population that flows from economically underdeveloped rural areas to economically developed rural areas who are still engaged in agricultural production and operation activities. However, no matter which pattern of life they live and wherever they go, their parents are all called left-behind elderly so long as they live apart from their parents, often over half a year.

1. PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY LEFT-BEHIND ELDERLY IN RURAL AREAS

1.1 More and More Heavy Burden, Much Low Economic Income and No Means of Living

Since a large part of rural left-behind elderly have child(ren), neither are they the object of elderly five-guarantees, nor they have such social insurance as retirement pension and endowment insurance. Therefore, their primary economic income comes from their own labor and the allowance their child (ren) given to them. However, this kind of allowance is not stable and the standard of allowance is often too low. The concept of filial piety in the actual life in rural areas is becoming more and more diluted; some children of left-behind elderly have a great pressure making a living outside in urban areas; the children of a left-behind elderly compare unrealistically and pass the buck on the issue of supporting for the elderly; the mechanism of social provision for the aged in rural areas is incomplete. All the above facts result in pitifully small economic income of the left-behind elderly who are even trapped in the dilemma of having no means of living.

1.2 Unsatisfied Psychological Need and Spiritual Consolation of the Left-Behind Elderly

The left-behind elderly behave more and more clumsy when getting older, and, accordingly, they get less contact with the outside world. Furthermore, quite a large part of their children who migrate to seek to work leave the home at the beginning of the year and return at the end of the year. They get along with the left-behind elderly for only one month or so within a year. Without the children around them, the elderly feel more alone. A large majority of these empty-nest elderly live a lonely life of locking one lock when getting outside and opening a lamb when coming inside.

1.3 Bad Health Condition and Living Condition of the Left-Behind Elderly

When getting older, the physical condition of the elderly falls into a decline and the prevalence rate is on a gradual increase. Nevertheless, once they suffer from a serious illness, the left-behind elderly in rural areas have no child to take care of them and their acquisition of medical resources and care resources are far from being up to expectations. The grass-root organizations in rural areas and the neighbors can only offer quite limited care and help. As their adult children have to migrate, the left-behind elderly in rural areas have to burden both burdensome farm work and household duties and shoulder the heavy task of attending to their grandchildren.

2. THE REASONS FOR THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY LEFT-BEHIND ELDERLY IN RURAL AREAS

2.1 Fault in the Inheritance of the Culture of Filial Piety and the Principle of the Traditional Filial Piety Ignored

2.1.1 Ignorance of the Traditional Filial Piety

Ever since on May 4th Movement, the traditional morality has suffered from violent criticism as it was deemed as the dross of the feudal society. Moreover, as the top of the feudal ethical code, the filial piety stands in the breach. After the New People's Republic of China was founded, the entire society was engaged in some constructive discussion on the criticism and inheritance of the traditional filial piety. However, subsequently, the Ten-year Catastrophe occurred, and negation on the traditional culture again reached its peak. As a result, the excellent moral principles which had been deposited in the Chinese nation for several thousand years suffered from unprecedented infringement and devastation. Under this backdrop, the Chinese people were in a chaos of thoughts and the concept of filial piety became fragile and even distorted, the foundation of which was shaken.

2.1.2 Absence of the Authoritative Position of the Elderly

Fei Hsiao-Tung says in his book entitled "Earthbound China",

In China where changes are rarely taking place, culture is stable and new problems seldom arise. The life is a set of traditional methods. If we image a social life that is totally under control of the tradition, this society can be said to be without politics and what it has to be indoctrination. In such a stable society, the socialization process of each one in it is almost identical and the problems they encounter are almost the same.

He adds,

Culture is a chart of life. We can look back according to the nature of problems. The one who is older than us must have encountered the problems which are occurring to us at present and he can be our teacher. Every older man holds the power to enforce indoctrination of a younger man. Whenever a younger man comes across an older man, he has to respect and obey this kind of power.

This is the so-called elder governing. In such a society, the elderly hold absolute power and adequate authority. Nevertheless, with development of the society, the structure of earthbound society also gradually collapses. In economic production, promotion and application of new agriculture and new technology push the traditional agricultural production mode to gradually die out, as the experience which has been accumulated in the times of the traditional agriculture is far from coping with development of the new agriculture. The authority of

the elderly in rural areas begins to wither away as they become a fish out of the water in the face of development of the new agriculture. Especially, with the emergence of the tide of migrant workers, income of migrating to work has become the primary economic income in the rural areas and the elderly occupy a weaker position in the pattern of economic production. All this causes the authoritative position of the elderly in rural areas in the field of economic production to collapse. The next aspect which has made the authoritative position of the elderly to collapse is the living mode and ideological concept. With development of industrialization and urbanization, more and more people in rural areas migrate to seek to work. Accordingly, a lot of new living modes and ideological concepts are constantly penetrated to rural areas. In the meantime, the traditional living mode and ideological concept gradually fade away from the young generation which, however, has been rooted deeply in the mind of the elderly. Contradiction between the tradition and the modernity is thoroughly manifested between the elderly and the young generation. With development of the industrialization and in the in-depth process of urbanization, the elderly group becomes more and more conservative and laggard as the representative of the tradition. Their social position and authority are constantly losing, and, accordingly, their children lose supposed awe and veneration for the parents.

2.1.3 Overall Penetration of Instrumental Rationality Action in the World of Living and Impact of the Market Economy

According to Weber, instrumental rationality action is to take advantage of the expectation on the situation of external things and behaviors of other people which is deemed as a condition or a means and to realize the objective that is striven for and considered by one with rationality and that is deemed as an achievement. Modernity is growth of freedom and rationality and excessive expansion of rationality will cause the instrumental rationality action to spread in the world of our life. This kind of rationality has been developed to its perfection in the market economy. With establishment of the system of the market economy and its rapid development, the principle of economic benefit has gradually become a standard that dominates people's behavior, and even filial obedience to the parents is also measured by whether the economic benefit has been acquired. Under the influence of this kind of super rationality thinking mode, we may find such an odd phenomenon in rural areas that the elderly need to pay wages for their children who work for them. "Bringing up sons to provide for the old age", however, changes to "several sons do not provide for the old age". The reason is that modern people become rational in reality, and most of them behave to the end of sparing no effort to go after

money. They also measure the value and significance of their behavior by the gain and loss in terms of money. As a consequence, they even begin to calculate on the issue of supporting their parents; for fear that they take a beating even if they exert more efforts than their brothers and sisters. Then, the concept of filial piety gradually fades away under such a backdrop.

2.2 The Legality Authoritative Mode in Rural Areas Gradually Face Away

Weber classifies legality governing into three ideal types, namely, traditional governing, and Charisma governing and legal-rational governing. According to him, legality of the traditional governing is established on the sacred foundation of the system and governing power that is passed down from the ancestors and the governors are determined in accordance with the rules that are passed down, so obedience to the governors is due to the intrinsic dignity which the tradition endows. Governing in Chinese traditional rural society belongs to the type of the traditional governing. In the stable traditional society with rare migration, a village is almost a big family and authority of the village comes from the family. The family constrains the behaving rules of its members and deals with contradictions within a family and between families. If the children do not support the elderly, they will be punished seriously by the family. Power of the family is not to be disobeyed and it has powerful constraining force on behaviors of its members. However, with collapse of the earthbound society, the power of family verges to die out and the family gradually loses its constraining force on the behavior of children not to support their parents. At present, it is villager autonomy system that rural governance carries out. Nevertheless, in the past few years, contradictions and conflicts between grass-root organizations and the peasants have increased. The social administration and control function of grass-root organizations gradually wears off. Formulation and implementation of grass-root organizations' policies fails to win recognition and acceptance of the public and the authority of grass-root organizations are at a position of having no influence. Under this circumstance, when children of the elderly in rural areas refuse to support their parents, the village organization only has the capacity of coordinating and mediating the behavior of the children. Yet, the organization has no restraining power on whether the children will fulfill the outcome of the coordination. Even a large part of village organizations turn a deaf ear to this kind of situation. The family in rural areas can no longer give play to its former influential power, while the current grass-root organization in rural areas is far from having adequate restraining power on the villagers. When the elderly face the dilemma that their children refuse to fulfill the obligation to support the elderly, they are unable to cope with this situation as they are deficient of legal awareness.

2.3 Incomplete Mechanism of Social Welfare and Supporting for the Aged and Mechanism of the Legal Security

With development of industrialization and urbanization and the tide of migrating to urban cities to seek to work, family supporting which was regarded as the major mode of supporting the elderly in rural areas can no longer adequately meet the new requirements of supporting the elderly for the time being. At present, social pension system has become a critical approach to resolve the issue of supporting the elderly. However, at present, the dualistic social structure still exists; the social pension insurance system in rural areas seriously lags behind. Social pension insurance system in rural areas has a narrow coverage as it only covers part of the elderly and the guaranteed pension is not enough to completely guarantee the life of the elderly. Furthermore, the large majority of social welfare and pension mechanism at present only involve the economic support for the elderly and rarely focus on the daily care of the elderly. In the meantime, laws and regulations concerning guarantee of the life of the elderly in rural areas are not formulated thoroughly or carried out solidly.

2.4 Limitation and Restraint of Urban-Rural Dualism

First of all, due to the urban-rural dualistic employment system, peasant workers have no stable work in the cities and are unentitled to sharing any social support in the cities after they are out of work. Therefore, peasant workers are faced with all kinds of risks and uncertainties when employed in the cities. They themselves might be a member of the vulnerable group, let alone fulfill the obligation of filial piety at such a strange place. Then, the peasant workers have no luck to share all the kinds of social welfares that are shared by urban residents under the social system of urban-rural dualism. Thus, they have no choice but to pay all kinds of expenses by the slender income, which will necessarily add to their burden on living. Finally, ever since the household contract responsibility system with remuneration linked to output was put into practice, land in rural areas has been better utilized and exploited. This, to a certain extent, can meet the basic living needs of peasants. However, the particular group of rural left-behind elderly who are deficient of knowledge and culture will necessarily be forgotten by the society if living in the cities.

3. COUNTERMEASURES TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE OF THE LEFT-BEHIND ELDERLY IN RURAL AREAS

a) To build a family and social atmosphere of respecting the elderly and loving the elderly, publicize

the responsibility and obligation of children to take care of the elderly, continue to carry forward the tradition of respecting the elderly and loving the elderly and establishing a harmonious relation between generations. To propagandize the significance of the community in assisting the elderly so as to build an ideological foundation for the community to assist the elderly. To pay attention to serving the elderly in action and add to facilities of the community in the service of assisting the elderly.

b) To set up “demand-oriented” rural insurance system, consummate the social welfare system and enlarge focus on taking care of the elderly in terms of living. To accelerate the step of developing the rural cooperative medical care system and construction of the retirement pension system, continuously expand the coverage scope and enhance the medical assistance level.

c) The local government ought to pay attention to the spiritual supporting issue of the left-behind elderly in terms of policy. In rural areas with better conditions, the local government can direct the supporters to contribute funds, and the society to organize to set up elderly activity room and organize the elderly to travel nearby to improve their spiritual outlook and to make them enjoy the life when getting old.

d) To direct the left-behind elderly to enjoy senior education. As for the left-behind elderly who live together with their left-behind grandchildren, they need to arouse special attention of the governmental section. These left-behind grandchildren are at different ages and have difficulty in being raised and educated. Currently, a large majority of rural elderly have experienced the hard years’ living and have relatively low personal quality, so their way of educating their grandchildren is more to indulge and spoil them. Hence, the local government should take advantage of modern media of broadcast and TV and such simple and plain modes as picture poster to conduct education on the elderly. In the meantime, it is necessary for the elderly to keep in more contact with the principals of the nursery school and the middle school and primary school and guide the left-behind elderly to communicate with the community and the school to enable this group of children and juveniles to thrive who live in particular trans generational families. In the meantime, in the case of the elderly whose children work outside all the year round and refuse to fulfill their obligation to support the living of the elderly, the local government also needs to propagandize relevant legal knowledge and help them to take up the legal weapon to protect their rights deserved.

In one word, we are striding forward towards the society of the elderly and focus on the undertaking of the elderly is our responsibility. Furthermore, currently, the left-behind elderly in rural areas are getting in a

more terrible situation, which calls for much more and adequate focus. It is necessary to re-construct the traditional value system, strengthen propaganda of public opinions to build a good atmosphere for respecting the elderly and loving the elderly, intensify construction of the social welfare and social insurance system of the elderly in rural areas and maintain construction of institutional channel for the legal rights of the elderly and improve the legal concept of the elderly to protect their own rights and interests.

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