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Rural Depopulation in China: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Modernization of Chinese society in recent three decades witnessed significant retreat of primary industry and growth of secondary and tertiary industries. The result of rapid urbanization has been accompanied with rapid rural depopulation, context of which is currently labeled by intertwining of many correlation factors. The purpose of this article is to give a general discourse of depopulation in China from comparative perspective based on literature review, long term experience and observation, and two times of fieldwork in June 2007 and June 2010. Rural depopulation can be perceived as a social problem and as a reason of other social problems, affecting sustainable socio-economic development. In turn, rural depopulation and relevant policy-making are also interplaying, making the issue more irreversible. The situation in countryside China is still in the track towards deterioration and emergent action is required if such a process is to be interfered.

Keywords: depopulation, China, rural migration, urbanization, decision-making, law and order

La Despoblación Rural en China: Una Perspectiva Comparada

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Resumen

La modernización de la sociedad china de las últimas tres décadas ha presenciado un retroceso significativo del primer sector así como un aumento del secundario y el terciario. La acelerada urbanización ha ido acompañada de una rápida despoblación rural, contexto que es actualmente caracterizado por un entrelazamiento de muchos factores correlacionados. El propósito de este artículo es proporcionar un discurso general de la despoblación en China des de una perspectiva comparada, en base a la revisión bibliográfica, la experiencia y observación de muchos años, y dos momentos de trabajo de campo, en junio de 2007 y en junio de 2010. La despoblación rural puede percibirse como un problema social y como la causa de otros problemas sociales, afectando el desarrollo socio-económico sostenible. A su vez, la despoblación rural y el diseño de políticas relevantes también interactúan haciendo de la situación aún más irreversible. El ámbito rural en China aún está en vías de deterioro, por lo que requiere una acción urgente si se quiere intervenir en dicho proceso.

Palabras clave: despoblación, China, migraciones rurales, urbanización, toma de decisión, ley y orden



Migration, whether at the international level or at the state level, has been a focus of sociological research for centuries. While the significance of the agricultural sector in economic development is gradually losing (see Table 1, employment in primary industry), an increasingly great proportion of rural population chooses to emigrate from their native land towards urban areas or abroad. Urbanization has always been accompanied by rural-urban migration. Both urban areas and rural areas can benefit from hosting or donating migrants. Social problem can also occur in both the urban destination communities and the rural donor communities. At least three different attitudes towards the flow of human resources have been taken by individuals or institutions that have interests: being indifferent, for and against, each having sufficient reasons.

Table 1.

Development of Employment Structure in China during 1990-2010

| | Total | Primary | Secondary | Tertiary |
|------|-------|---------|-----------|----------|
| 1990 | 100.0 | 60.1 | 21.4 | 18.5 |
| 1995 | 100.0 | 52.2 | 23.0 | 24.8 |
| 2000 | 100.0 | 50.0 | 22.5 | 27.5 |
| 2005 | 100.0 | 44.8 | 23.8 | 31.3 |
| 2010 | 100.0 | 38.1 | 27.8 | 34.1 |

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2010).

Rural emigration has mostly been inquired in industrialized countries for centuries, by discoursing in the name of depopulation. In developing countries, such as China, rural labor population is also enduring consistent decline in recent decades. However, the impact of emigration on donor communities is an understudied subject (Fan, 2008, p. 117).

In recent years, the most unique tendency in these Chinese villages is that the permanent residents are decreasing and aging. Because school age children become fewer and fewer, some primary schools in these villages have been closed or are projected to close. School age children have been transferred to those schools still opening. Old people are left without any cultural activities and entertainment. Cultural facility has not been established yet. The health and caring services are not completely ready for an ageing community. No new improvement has happened for the agricultural production, and farmers cannot get increased income from the

land. Many young farmers choose to work permanently or temporarily in towns and cities, with or without their families accompanying. Some migrated unmarried young farmers even engaged in gang activities in towns and cities and were sentenced to imprisonment. Such a situation was rare in the long history of these villages before. Some official actions have been taken to solve the problem, yet their effects are not evaluated (Yuan, 2009; Liu & Liu, 2010; Wang et al., 2013; Xiang, 2013).

Even though the repercussions of rural-urban migration for socio-economic development have been of long-standing interest to scholars, little literature has explored the consequences of emigration on the rural communities in the destination area of this study. Unique process of such social transformation is freshly demonstrating in rural areas at present. Chinese scholars call these phenomena “empty nest”, not only referring to empty nest families, but also empty nest communities. Recalling that “empty nest families” has traditionally been a research theme in the discipline of psychology, research from the viewpoint of sociology has not been emphatically highlighted. It is an issue that has not been paid much attention.

The escalating significance of rural-urban migration leads to a great number of people exposed to new social environments and new lifestyles. An understanding of the reorganization of rural communities associated with rural-urban migration has the potential to influence social policy and the structuring of rural governance through an appreciation of the differential social needs of rural areas relative to traditional communities. In sum, this is a fresh social phenomena and a fresh sociological topic. This article will analyze the phenomena of rural emigration which is typically observed in economies in the premature phases of industrialization.

The world will witness the largest population movement in human history. The unprecedented population movements have extremely critical implications to the economic and social stability. The evaluations of the existing policies and comparative analysis on different strategies within a region can serve not only as an assessment of the existing policies but a guideline for future policymaking. This article will be concentrated on the process of migration in China and its medium and long-term impact on migrants, their families, and rural communities, with significant endeavors

for comparing previous international-wide studies on the same phenomena otherwise in other countries.

Besides literature review, the article was based on the author's long term empirical observation of countryside China, and two times of fieldwork in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, one in June 2007 and the other in June 2010. The author was born, raised and educated there in his early years, and has still had close connections with local people. Taking such conveniences, the author experienced, observed, or acquired information about the process of depopulation occurred there over years. Much of the writing in this article utilized the author's direct and indirect knowledge about his changing and defaced homeland.

Following this introduction, the second part of the article will turn to context of rural depopulation in China. The third part deals with depopulation as a social problem. The fourth part is revolving around correlation factors of depopulation. The fifth part looks at results of depopulation. The sixth part examines policy-making and its effectiveness. The last part will conclude the article.

Context of Rural Depopulation in China

The cataract of rural-urban labor migrants occurs in China as it has been undergoing a multi-dimensional change since the introduction of state policy of reform and opening up at the end of 1978. While towns and cities acquired most of the inclined policy and investment, rural areas were basically untouched by the public sector. Economic activities were concentrated in urban areas, where there was not sufficient labor force. Thus economic development provokes crucial structural transformations, such as changes in the demographic structure and the social control system. The so-called surplus rural labor force seeks jobs in urban areas where there are more employment opportunities and higher salary. The central factor of the transformation is that demographic imbalances between rural and urban areas rendered wide-ranging movement of labor force from rural areas to secondary and tertiary industries in urban areas (Williamson, 1998).

The decomposition of traditional household registry (*hukou*) system signifies the loosening of official control over rural-urban migration, which

results in tremendous changes in the labor market in China. Although there is not an exact figure depicting the actual scale of such a human movement, a latest official statistics estimated that approximately 131.81 million people of rural origin working in urban areas of China in 2006 ([National Bureau of Statistics of People’s Republic of China, 2008](#)). Table 2 shows some fundamental aspects of such a process.

Table 2.

Totality and Constituents of Rural Labour Emigrants

| | National | Eastern areas | Central areas | Western areas | North-eastern areas |
|--|----------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Totality of rural labour emigrants (million) | 131.81 | 38.46 | 49.18 | 40.35 | 3.82 |
| Constituents of sexes of labour emigrants (%) | | | | | |
| Male | 64.0 | 65.8 | 62.8 | 63.1 | 70.2 |
| Female | 36.0 | 34.2 | 37.2 | 36.9 | 29.8 |
| Constituents of ages of labour emigrants (%) | | | | | |
| Younger than 20 years | 16.1 | 14.2 | 17.6 | 16.1 | 16.7 |
| 21-30 years | 36.5 | 36.1 | 36.6 | 36.7 | 35.4 |
| 31-40 years | 29.5 | 27.3 | 29.3 | 32.2 | 25.4 |
| 41-50 years | 12.8 | 15.4 | 11.9 | 11.1 | 15.3 |
| Older than 51 years | 5.1 | 7.0 | 4.6 | 3.9 | 7.2 |
| Constituents of educational background of labour emigrants (%) | | | | | |
| Illiterate | 1.2 | 0.9 | 1.1 | 1.7 | 0.5 |
| Primary school | 18.7 | 15.0 | 16.5 | 24.9 | 20.1 |
| Junior middle school | 70.1 | 70.9 | 73.0 | 65.5 | 71.8 |
| Senior middle school | 8.7 | 11.4 | 8.4 | 6.9 | 5.9 |
| Colleges and and higher | 1.3 | 1.8 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.7 |

Adapted according to National Bureau of Statistics of People’s Republic of China (2008, Table 3).

Rural-urban migration has favorable and unfavorable consequences for origin and target communities alike. The most perceived impacts on rural origins are that rural migrants contribute to poverty reduction through remittance but also leave their rural communities relatively disintegrated and

undeveloped. The migration of younger generation means loss of society's interest in maintaining and developing traditional cultural inheritance. The psychological gap between older generation armed with old tradition and younger generation facilitated with new social skills becomes larger and larger. Therefore, for the cultural context in rural areas, the greatest challenge is not change of the tradition; it is the disappearance of the tradition.

The most perceived impacts on urban targets are that new comers fulfill the requirements of labor in the process of urbanization but also compete with former urban residents in housing, employment, transport and welfare, and causing other social problems. Urban cultural content was also changed by the influence of large amount of rural labors, which learned to adapt to the new social environment, urban culture, and discipline in new employment. However, with the integration of new rural comers into urban population, urban spiritual existence becomes stronger and stronger.

Many previous studies of migration have focused on urban areas, left the rural donor communities generally neglected. This article endeavors to investigate the impacts of rural labor population movement on rural donor communities. Table 2 tells us that in China, young and more educated rural population are moving out of their local rural areas, leaving the countryside to old and more illiterate residents, particularly females. Low comparative income out of the agriculture discourages people from farming, while migration of part of the family members to the towns and cities does not motivate them to invest in constructing their home. As the time passes, they finally move away, or return when they get old, with their children educated and employed in towns and cities. Therefore, urbanization brings about prosperity to towns and cities, while depopulation leads the villages to disappear. In fact, it was estimated that, about 20 Chinese administrative villages are naturally disappearing due to migration, pitifully daily ([National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China, 2010](#)).

Depopulation as a Social Problem and as a Reason of Other Social Problems

Internationally, even though there is a trend of counterurbanization in some

developed countries (Hodge & Whitby, 1986; Kayondo, n.d.), which means a movement of urban population to rural areas, causing an increase of rural population, many countries, regions, in particular, rural communities in developed (Varouhakis, 2000; Imanishi, 2003; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Council of Europe, 2004), transformation (Knappe, 1998; Borodina & Borodina, 2007; Eberhardt, 1994) and developing countries (Kayondo, n.d.; Fan, 2008) are suffering from emigration of labour population, ranging from Western Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania to America (Varouhakis, 2000; Imanishi, 2003; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006). Particular attention has been paid to the processes of depopulation as well as their range and intensity (Stasiak & Mirowski, 1990; Eberhardt, 1994). Areas of specific environmental patterns, for example, mountainous areas are particularly investigated (Knight, 1994).

Falling number of rural population and process of depopulation becomes one of the biggest threats of low standards of living (Borodina & Borodina, 2007). Emigration may well lead to welfare losses (Mann, 2005).

The phenomena of rural depopulation have been an intense continuing process (Council of Europe, 1980; Collantes & Pinilla, 2004). It has been considered one of the pessimistic tendencies in social transformation, together with worsening of living conditions for rural population, increasing of mass poverty, growing unemployment, and sharp income differentiation (Borodina & Borodina, 2007). Rural depopulation, land abandonment, and loss of biodiversity usually proceed in a long run but are often irreversible (Westhoek, van den Berg & Bakkes, 2006).

The issue of depopulation is primarily treated as economic opportunity and prospects for economic regeneration (Varouhakis, 2000; Stockdale, 2006). Not all areas are able to partake in growth in the long term (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006). Jobs are in the cities and working in an office is more attractive than doing agricultural jobs (Varouhakis, 2000). The concentration of urban population and depopulation in rural areas has resulted in ageing in depopulated areas and lack of social infrastructure systems in urban areas (Imanishi, 2003; Mann, 2005). Because depopulation

is primarily driven by the out-migration of young and bright adults (Stockdale, 2006), the process of depopulation shaped the characteristic picture of the age structure of donor communities, dominated by the elderly (Skowronek et al., 2005). Usually, the viability of small rural communities becomes a major concern (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006).

In China, depopulation of rural areas well means migration of younger generation into urban areas, leaving older generation behind. A few young people there caught the governance power, usually not by democracy nor by knowledge, but by force and by fight. It is not rare that Chinese scholars claimed that majority of the Chinese rural areas were currently controlled by gangs themselves, or by powerful local figures with the help of paid gangs (Yu, 2003). They controlled resources, investment, income, and opportunities. Compared with desolation of arable land, old houses, poverty of old population, and lack of education and healthcare facility, control by gangs was more than destructive.

Even worse, those gangs or those who employ gangs were themselves members of the Chinese Communist Party, which is generally more powerful and prestigious but is taken as protective umbrella. Gang governance is not only destroying cultural tradition, but is also extinguishing conscience. This reminds the historical scene of 1940s when many of the rural Chinese areas were under control of local bandits. This also reminds the chaotic situation in some war-tossed countries in today's world. Their forms of gangs, bandits, or warlords are different, but their contents are similar: causing a lack of democracy, a lack of sense of security, and residents' wait for migration or disappearance.

Correlation Factors of Depopulation

In international literature, correlation factors of rural emigration can always be socio-economic (Gawryszewski & Potrykowska, 1988; Anderlik, 2004). Usually, rural emigration has been considered driven by decrease in agricultural employment, lack of employment opportunity outside agriculture, and more economic opportunity in urban areas (Drudy & Wallace, 1971; Douglass, 1971; Varouhakis, 2000; Knappe, 1998; Rao,

2007). This is often termed push and pull effects: push effects caused by surplus in the agricultural employment, and pull effects created by attraction of urban employment (World Bank, 2006). Some viewpoints directly link the two aspects together, arguing that urbanization draws population from the villages to the point of impeding their social reproduction and inducing their absolute depopulation (Knight, 1994).

With the reform of agriculture in China, the traditional mode of labour-intensive agriculture changes gradually. Production of grain crops that are more difficult to plant and harvest is substituted by production of commercial crops that are easy to plant and harvest. Commercial crops have lower demand for fertility of land, quality and quantity of labour, and even irrigation. Resulting from changes of market, emigration of surplus labour force becomes evident in rural communities. Rural population declines as a result of emigration (Williams & Griffin, 1978). Thus the influence of the farming system on depopulation processes has been examined (Mann, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2000). Some conclusions suggest that a depressed farm economy, the agricultural adjustments, structural change, break-down of traditional economic model, or the neglected rural economy and service sector led to rural depopulation (Drudy, 1978; Daniels & Lapping, 1987; MTT Agrifood Research Finland, 2002; Collantes & Pinilla, 2004; Rao, 2007). Furthermore, easing restrictions on farm land ownership will contribute to rural depopulation and the demise of rural communities (Dockstader, 2002). The shortage of opportunities of on-farm employment caused by land-use transformation is the biggest impact (Rural Affairs Coordinator, Sector Performance Policy, New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, n.d.). A high percentage of people are employed outside agriculture (Pak & Brecko, 1998). Particularly, the young labour population migrate for lack of employment (Protsenko, n.d.). The lack of economic development provides few wage employment in rural areas, which are lacking in investment and infrastructure. This in turn discourages labour population to live in villages with low productivity and low incomes (Kayondo, n.d.). In specific cases, no more young people left could emigrate (Vartiainen, 1989). Decreasing population is also linked to lowering household size, in particular, to a reduction in numbers of children and young adults (Spencer, 1997).

There are several factors driving rural depopulation. These include: (a) technological improvements in agricultural production and transport, (b) economies of scale and scope in agriculture, (c) decreasing returns to agriculture, and (d) the fact that most agricultural products are inferior goods (Australian Government Department of Families, Husing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. *Communities*, 2006).

Another aspect of the emigration is the attractive wage in urban employment (Imanishi, 2003; Kayondo, n.d.; Varouhakis, 2000). Depopulation has been due largely to the emigration of young people, rather than whole families (Knight, 1994). Young people emigrate from rural areas to seek employment in the urban areas where economic activities are concentrated and income level is higher (Imanishi, 2003). Young people, who are hope of rural communities, are in the center of the issue, but they will always move (Stockdale, 2006). As a result, a depopulated region will be hard to repopulate (Westhoek et al., 2004). In China, the income gap between urban and rural residents developed since 1978 as first decreased in early 1980s, but increased through the last two decades upto three times (see Table 3). It is natural that rural residents seek employment in urban areas.

Table 3
Statistics of Urban and Rural Residents in China during 1978-2011 (Unit: China RMB Yuan)

| Year | Disposable income of urban residents | Disposable income of rural residents | Disposable income of urban residents as times of rural residents |
|------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1978 | 343 | 134 | 2,560 |
| 1979 | N/A | 161 | N/A |
| 1980 | 478 | 191 | 2,503 |
| 1981 | 458 | 223 | 2,054 |
| 1982 | 495 | 270 | 1,833 |
| 1983 | 526 | 310 | 1,697 |
| 1984 | 608 | 355 | 1,713 |
| 1985 | 739 | 398 | 1,857 |

(continued)

Table 4

Statistics of Urban and Rural Residents in China during 1978-2011 (Unit: China RMB Yuan)

| Year | Disposable income of urban residents | Disposable income of rural residents | Disposable income of urban residents as times of rural residents |
|------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1986 | 900 | 424 | 2,123 |
| 1987 | 1002 | 463 | 2,164 |
| 1988 | 1181 | 545 | 2,167 |
| 1989 | 1376 | 602 | 2,286 |
| 1990 | 1510 | 686 | 2,201 |
| 1991 | 1701 | 709 | 2,399 |
| 1992 | 2027 | 784 | 2,585 |
| 1993 | 2577 | 922 | 2,795 |
| 1994 | 3496 | 1221 | 2,863 |
| 1995 | 4283 | 1578 | 2,714 |
| 1996 | 4839 | 1926 | 2,512 |
| 1997 | 5160 | 2090 | 2,469 |
| 1998 | 5425 | 2162 | 2,509 |
| 1999 | 5854 | 2210 | 2,649 |
| 2000 | 6280 | 2253 | 2,787 |
| 2001 | 6860 | 2366 | 2,899 |
| 2002 | 7703 | 2476 | 3,111 |
| 2003 | 8472 | 2622 | 3,231 |
| 2004 | 9422 | 2936 | 3,209 |
| 2005 | 10493 | 3255 | 3,224 |
| 2006 | 11759 | 3587 | 3,278 |
| 2007 | 13786 | 4140 | 3,330 |
| 2008 | 15781 | 4761 | 3,315 |
| 2009 | 17175 | 5153 | 3,333 |
| 2010 | 19109 | 5919 | 3,228 |
| 2011 | 21810 | 6977 | 3,126 |

Source: China Ministry of Civil Affairs (2012).

However, employment is not the only reason for rural residents to migrate. In China, rural area suffered more from weakening of social control and comparative reduction of welfare. On one hand, during the past three decades, infrastructure in most Chinese cities enjoyed repeated construction: construction, demolition, re-construction, re-demolition, re-re-construction. The waste of tax-payers' money has been a huge amount, unprecedented in human history. Comparatively, in rural areas, investment in infrastructure constituted only a small and pity part. The rare examples are motorways, schools in big townships, to name some. Motorways do not have substantial affect on improvement of people's income and living standard. Schools in big townships helped to enhance the primary education for some children, but it also means to worsen the situation of other children by being concentrated in schools at a farther distance from their residence, school nearby were demolished or discarded. So in general, a correct approach did not even exist in dealing with the countryside.

On the other hand, corruption in rural areas was a factor that was neglected until today. Much of the investment in countryside might be subsequently embezzled by officials at different layers. "Xiaoguan Jutan" (small official, but arch corrupt; low-level official, but embezzling hundreds of millions of Chinese RMB Yuan) is a popular term prevailing in recent years. By using this term, the authority now began to recognize that low-level managers in governments or enterprises could commit economic crimes as serious as central leaders. The reason why rural infrastructure has not been improved, to some extent, was due to embezzlement and misappropriation. Without transparency and democratic decision-making, officials could easily take the money that meant for the poorest villagers for their own private use. If this is the case for building a house for a poor family, such money might be used to build a villa for the official's parents, for example.

In particular cases, mountainous areas and small villages are becoming depopulated very quickly (Knight, 1994; Stasiak, 1992). The most likely explanation is that smaller communities can hardly support their own services (Tyrczniewicz & Ragone, 1995). In one specific case, the arid interfluvial areas have suffered depopulation but the irrigated valleys have enjoyed population growth (Gwynne & Prtiz, 1997). The Chinese cases of

disappearing villages are also extreme phenomena of depopulation, thought to be irreversible.

Results and Affects of Depopulation

The socioeconomic consequences has been a perpetual topic revolving around the issue of emigration (Gawryszewski & Potrykowska, 1988; Anderlik, 2004). Traditionally, studies and research attribute many urban social problems to immigrants, who impose pressure on employment, housing, traffic, social infrastructure, sanitation, health and medical provisions, criminal prevention, and education in the urban areas (for example, Kayondo, n.d.; Lee et al., 2004; Imanishi 2003).

It is generally acknowledged that the migration is beneficial to the individual out-migrant (Stockdale, 2006). Migrants have the opportunities to be employed in secure and responsible positions, and paid more than they could be in the donor community (Stockdale, 2004). Even many rural migrants originating from the least-educated sector, are able to secure low-status and low-paid jobs at their destinations (Kasimis et al., 2003). Because of the relative decline of agricultural sector's importance, income sources from off-farm employment complement or substitute income from agricultural production (Glauben et al., 2006).

A number of studies have provided empirical support to the positive impact of remittance on production despite its negative impact on labor availability at farm level (Miluka et al., 2007). Labor emigration benefits local economy in a variety of ways. First, emigrant labors acquire more opportunities for employment. Second, some returning farm labors make investments or startup enterprises in their hometown by using their accumulated capital and human resources, so that the local economic development as well as the pace of poverty alleviation is promoted. Third, the rural emigrant labors directly stimulate the change of farmer's income structure and income growth in rural areas. Fourth, the labor emigration promotes the human capital (Sheng, 2007). Migrant labourers who have expanded their experiences and increased their human capital through their migration can become a positive force in the local socio-economic development of sending areas (Huang & Zhan, 2005). Through their hard

work, high savings, low consumption and by reducing the pressure on the land, these tens of millions of rural labourers have helped their family members who had stayed behind by sending a large amount of remittance (Zhao, 1999; Huang & Zhan, 2005). Labour migration has multi-facet, positive and significant influences on agricultural development and agricultural production (Sheng, 2007). Nevertheless, some studies worry that these constructive impacts may be countervailed by potentially unfavourable affects on individual households or local communities, for example diminished household labour supply, weakened human capital and diminished labour efforts by members left behind (Miluka et al., 2007).

At national level, rapidly depopulation may induce “ageing recessions”, accompanied by falling demand, collapsing asset values, shrinking corporate profits, deteriorating household and financial institution balance sheets, weakening currencies, and soaring budget pressures (Hewitt, 2002). The donor communities possibly suffer from landscape abandonment, an ageing of the local population, and a decline in rural services and facilities (Stockdale, 2006), particularly transport (Drudy & Wallace, 1971; Imanishi, 2003). Low population density usually entails great negative implications for rural development as a whole (Muilu & Rusanen, 2003; Stockdale, 2004; Stockdale, 2006; Anderlik, 2004; Mann, 2005; Kayondo, n.d.), causing manpower lack and the wage increase, which subsequently reduces the competitiveness of agricultural sector (Lee et al., 2004; Kayondo, n.d.). During period of significant depopulation and the successive ageing of the rural society, the decline of farming output and the abandonment of farmland may occur (Kashiwagi, 2004; Imanishi, 2003; Kayondo, n.d.). Anderlik (2004) identified three critical problems for depopulating areas, besides unhealthy demographic age structures, there have been also a “brain drain” phenomenon and declining commercial activity. As far as new economic activities are concerned, it was found that rural depopulated areas have insufficient infrastructure of e-business (Uesuqi, 2004). Therefore, the World Bank concludes that regardless of considerable rural-urban migration, rural poverty will not be alleviated in near future (World Bank, 2007).

Other studies indicate that rural emigration can have impacts on rural financial institutions (Anderlik, 2004), school rolls (Rural Affairs Coordinator, Sector Performance Policy, New Zealand Ministry of

Agriculture and Forestry, n.d.), everyday facilities such as stores (Imanishi, 2003), and public transport systems (Imanishi, 2003). Migration very likely affects the welfare of future generations. For instance, a typical phenomenon in China is that many children of migrants are left behind in home villages, while those who are brought to cities have limited access to local schools and other public facilities. The lack of parental care of migrant children in China can potentially lead to the under-investment in their education, nutrition and health. This in turn has important implications for the income mobility and poverty of future generations.

The construction and operation of rural grass-root regime is confronted with challenge from out-migration of native elites. Well-educated students, successful entrepreneurs, and experienced craftsmen usually migrate to cities and towns, and even other rural areas with better environment. Depopulated rural society may become unable to reproduce itself, and increasingly depend on the state intervention in welfare, employment and even marriage brokerage (Knight, 1994).

The emigration of a huge proportion of population also has deep implications on stability of marriage and family life, criminal prevention, operation of educational facilities, etc.

In depopulated areas, tragic circular reactions have always been identified. For example, in Anderlik (2004), a circular reaction was identified: low population density is insufficient to maintain their critical infrastructure, such as government agencies, roads, schools, and hospitals, while declining infrastructure makes these areas less attractive to live and conduct business and the costs per capita to provide needed services increase. As a result, current residents will leave, environment will worsen, and economy will decline. In Imanishi (2003), another circular reaction was identified: scattered facilities over large areas necessitate high levels of car ownership, high levels of car ownership drop the demand of public transport, reduction in transport services makes the distance from residence to stations and bus stops far, or the frequency of services low, this in turn makes it difficult for people to utilise public transport, and finally, cars are necessary for maintaining everyday lives.

Policy-making and its Effects

The impact of changing policies on such trends has frequently been addressed (Drudy & Wallace, 1971; Gawryszewski & Potrykowska, 1988; Imanishi, 2003; Kayondo, n.d.; Irving, 1996; Dockstader, 2002; Worldbank, 2006; Tyrchniewicz & Ragone, 1995; Friends of the Earth Europe, n.d.; Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006; Rao, 2007; Commins, 1978; Madureira, 2004; Knight, 1994; Imanishi, 2003). The state may play a part in decelerating population movement, or meliorating its negative impact (Knight, 1994). The practical experience is that the transition from depopulation to repopulation may improve public services, the economy, the quality of community life and planning policies and the environment (Bolton & Chalkley, 1990).

Constructive public policies have been taken to reverse demographic behaviours (World Bank, 2006). Besides others, it has been pointed out that the extreme population concentrations shall be economically unnecessary (Commins, 1978). Furthermore, rural regions need public policies that will allow improved mobility while preserve the essence of local communities (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006).

Successful measures in certain context, such as (Kayondo, n.d.), specific benefits are provided for farmers to keep them to carry out on-farm work. In EU, mountain areas have been given specific compensation for disadvantage (McDonald et al., 2000).

However, many schemes fail to alleviate the problems of rural depopulation in Japan (Irving, 1996; Knight, 1994). These policies are only partly effective, while the problem of harmonization between urban and rural areas is left unsolved (Rao, 2007). Dockstader (2002) presents that restrictions placed on farm land ownership has no mitigating effect on rural depopulation and the declining number of farmers. Similarly, governmental protection on smaller communities becomes increasingly difficult under the circumstances where the policy and the economic forces are unbalanced (Tyrchniewicz & Ragone, 1995). In another case, no general evidence for a positive affect of marketing campaigns on in-migration (Niedomysl, 2007).

Many suggestions have been posed against depopulation through raising of citizen civil awareness and education (Tyrczniewicz & Ragone, 1995), organic agriculture and other environmentally friendly farming systems (Friends of the Earth Europe, n.d.), balancing planning between the city and the countryside, reinforce regional macro-leading, quicken relevant legislations, and promote the independence of the rural regions (Rao, 2007), land consolidation (Miranda et al., 2006), improving farm productivity through easier mechanization and reduced transport costs (Miranda et al., 2006), promoting rural municipalities to attract new residents: An evaluation of the effects (Niedomysl, 2007), and drawing experiences from other countries (Kashiwagi, 2004). Transformation of economic structure and improvement of community functions become increasingly important for rural development (Pak & Brecko, 1998).

Unfortunately, in China, preferential policies are always delayed in introduction. For example, construction of infrastructure in rural areas, particularly, medical care, education, and cultural and sports facilities, have far been lagging behind those in towns and cities. On the contrary, rural education has been ruined resolutely through forcibly implementing failing policies, such as merger of primary schools. Before, there were always schools in big villages. But according to such policies, average distance between pupils' home and schools are usually beyond walking distance. Pupils have to live in the school during weekdays. However, accommodation and foods, with expenses beyond their families' ability to pay, are in inferior quality. Children's health and welfare cannot be guaranteed. Due to various reasons, families with school-year children prefer to move to towns and cities, where they can easily get temporary employment with a salary easily more than possible income from cultivating crops and farming poultry and livestock. In a word, current policies does not provide sufficient support for residents in rural area to continue their work and family life. Rural areas are losing sufficient attractiveness for further development by local people. Presumably, it is part of the results of the failure of policies.

Conclusions

Rural depopulation is a common process occurring during the modernization

of many countries. The changed faces of rural areas can never be reversed to their original image before. The irreversible development is erasing the long-lasting rural memory that was accumulated in history. Of course, such development has its both merits and drawbacks. Depopulation became a fact before the world, around which the same thing has happened and is still happening.

China is repeating such a process at a larger scale due to its traditional dependence on agriculture in at least last two thousand years. Presently, modernization of Chinese society witnessed significant retreat of agriculture in rural areas and growth of industry and services in urban areas. Agricultural resources became insignificant in many families' economic life, and in turn their investment on agricultural activities is gradually diminishing. Hence the majority of rural labor migrated to big cities, as if the only economic life existing only in urban area. The reasons why rural residents are moving to urban areas cannot be identified as only economic. But economic pursuance is the most powerful driving force for such a large scale of population flow.

Some other factors also contributed substantially, such as unequal allocation of resources and income. In fact, backward, biased and weak rural policies contributed to the resolute desolation of the rural area. Missing of positive state intervention leads to lack of investment, lack of construction, lack of education facilities, lack of cultural and entertainment facilities, even lack of sense of security, made rural areas uninhabitable. For example, many schools were simply forcibly closed without any further investment and renovation. Other schools were reserved but only sparsely distributed. Students from their seven years of age have to travel several kilometers everyday to and from schools. Many of them were discouraged by the fact that the employment expectation of university students was dim. Many teenagers ended up with discontinuation of schooling. Others have to move to towns and cities to study. But household register system imposed other limits on their migration, and their study in other places was not officially guaranteed. Finally, the rural areas and people there were left in chaotic ideological ruins and such a vicious cycle had found no end.

Therefore, the most relevant and most possible reason of depopulation in rural China might be the unbalanced scale of policies. The issues of rural

areas, agriculture and farmers left only in official documents without major steps towards effectively solving the problems of urban congestion and rural emptiness, both of which have and would continue to become the new normal.

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