
The inferiority of temporary rural to urban migrants and rural left-behind people in China

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Abstract: It is of significant meaning to analyze the issue of rural to urban migration in China under the context of economic transform and rural reform. Accompany with the rapid growth of rural to urban migrant population, the rural left-behind people is becoming another noteworthy topic. For the urban destination, rural migrants have devoted largely to urbanization and economic development, but they gradually become marginalized and can not integrate into the urban society. At the rural origin, left-behind family members have been separated for ages, besides remittances, they receive disadvantages from rural to urban migration. Even the whole rural community was left-behind. The author argues this dual inferior position is rooted from unequal administration in rural and urban China. With the help of new round rural reform policy, rural left-behind people tend to believe they can benefit more from living together than having family members work in cities, the attitude of rural people toward rural to urban migration is becoming negative. But the fact of increasing rural to urban migration can not be diminished by the rural development policies, rural migrants and their left-behind families still stay at the inferior position.

Keywords: China; Rural to urban migration; rural left-behind; inferiority;

1. Introduction

Rural to urban migration has become one of the most important challenges in the period of transition to a market-oriented economy in China. According to the 2000 Chinese Population Census and other regional surveys, there are 88.4 million people migrating from rural to urban China (PCO and Population Census Office under the State Council and Department of Population, 2001), and in the 2005 1% Population Sample Surveys, this figure increased to 147.35 million (Fig. 1). The accurate figure about rural to urban migration is a controversial issue, many researchers give different conclusions based on different methodologies, a relative acceptable argue is that the magnitude of rural to urban migration is about 70% of total internal migration numbers or more (Liang, 2001).

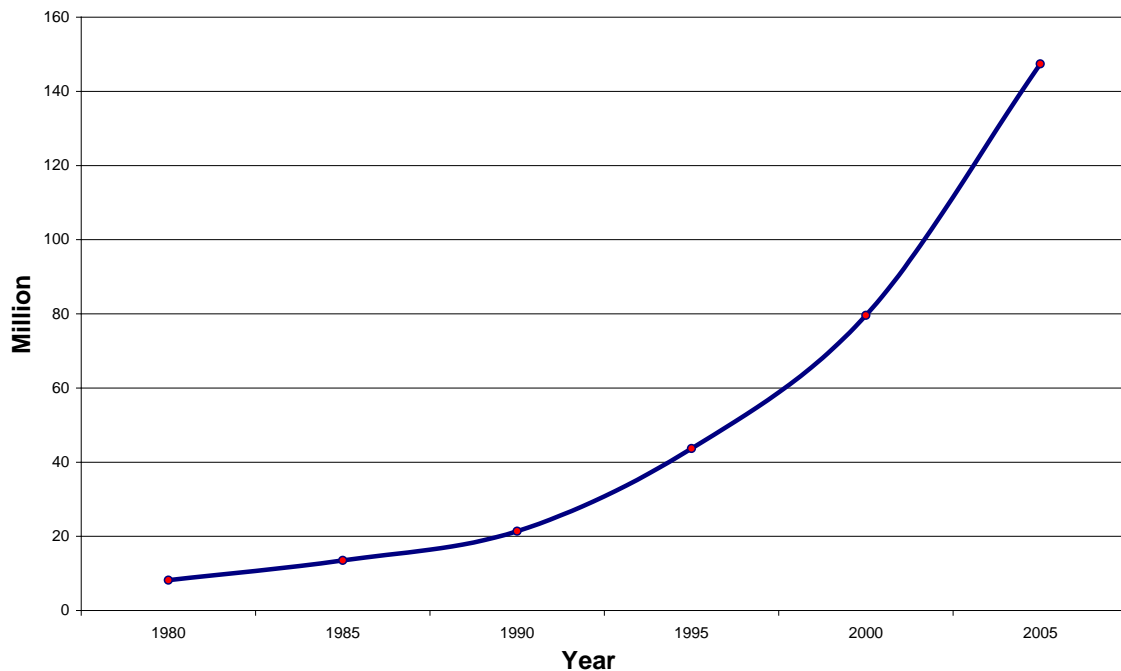


Fig.1 Migrant Population in China, 1980-2005
Source: China Population Censuses and 1% sample surveys of each year

Because 69.9% of these temporary rural to urban migrants are 15-49 year old males (Du, 2004, Zhou, 2006), the magnitude of rural left-behind members is also attracting attention. Scholars have estimated the total number for each left-behind group are 46.7 million wives, about 56 million children (Duan and Yang, 2008), 17.9 million elderly (Tang, 2007), and about 3 million husbands (Zhou, 2006) (Fig. 2). That means the left-behind relatives constitute the major part of the rural population in many places, in some regions

there are even “empty villages”, and the countryside is thus said to be occupied by the “38-61-99 Army”: numbers in this title are to indicate date of festivals for different groups, “38” for the left-behind wives (March 8th, Women’s Day), whose household registration status is rural and the husbands are making lives in urban areas for more than 6 months per year. “61” for the left-behind children (June 1st, Children’s Day), and the definition for the left-behind child is rural household registered child below 14 years of age and one of whose parents is not residing with them for more than 6 months per year (Duan and Zhou, 2005). and “99” for the left-behind elderly (September 9th in the Lunar Calendar, the day of honouring elderly), who are defined as people with rural household registration status, aged above 60 and have at least one co-residing adult child working in urban areas for more than 6 months per year (Zhou, 2006).

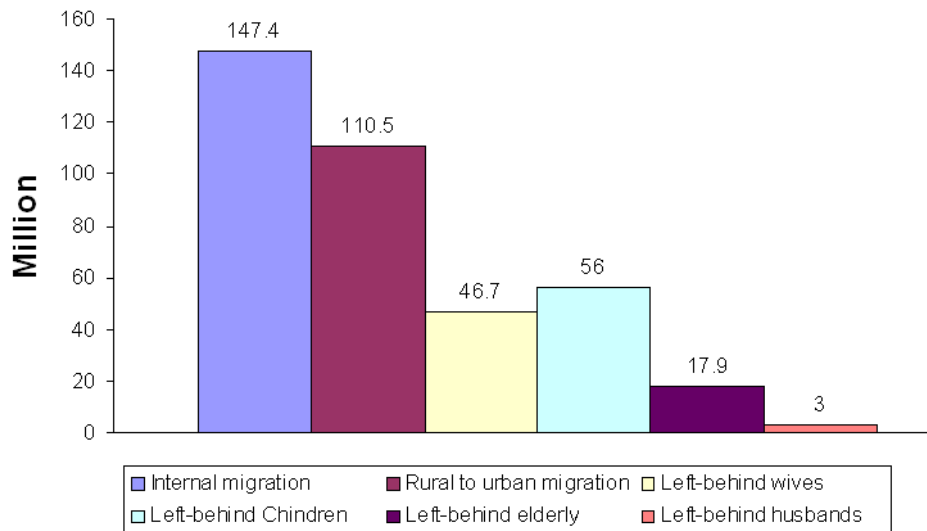


Fig.2 Population of Migrants and Left-behind family members in China, 2000
 Source: Duan and Yang, 2008; Tang, 2004; Zhou, 2006

Millions of Chinese rural families are facing the same hardship and dilemma as the left-behind by rural to urban migration. Admitting the reality that rural to urban migration in China is less possible to vanish in near future, researchers and the government must pay more attention to settle the potential challenges smoothly (Ma, 2008). The interplay between rural to urban migration and the left-behind issue is multidimensional and often open-ended (Toyota et al., 2007), it is really important to understand the broader social, economic and political context in exploring the issue of the left-behind families (Rigg, 2007). While scholars from many disciplines are attracted: demography, sociology,

geography, economics, anthropology and other allied fields. Adopting different methodologies and abundant quantitative and qualitative data on this issue, knowledge of families left-behind by rural to urban migration in China is accumulated.

The process of magnitude rural to urban migration in China has continued for about 30 years, without a proper institutional policy to adjust the overall development of rural areas, migration will render the entire community further left-behind both economically and socially (Gu and Wu, 2007), but until recent years this aspect did not attract enough administrative attention. In 2007 the State Council issued the announcement of building up total security for the minimum living standard in rural area (Council, 2007). The medical care insurance for rural residents is gradually taken into China's public budget plan (China, 2007). Plus the established compulsory education scheme had already covered rural China (Sicular et al., 2007). In 2008, the Department of human resource and social security set up the Office of rural labourers' affairs, which, in conjunction with the 2006 State Council document "Some suggestions for solving problems of rural labourers", show an increasing importance of the issue of temporary rural migrants (Ma, 2008). For a long time rural residents enjoy no social security and can only rely on their own families. As the rapid socioeconomic development and some significant policy modifications, now the burden of providing family member supports is partly taken by the government according to the new policies, and the income of rural families continues increasing obviously. It is of salient meaning to analyse issue of the left-behind families under the context of updated Chinese society, for one aspect, according to the household strategy theory (Stark and Bloom, 1985), the left-behind families would tend to eliminate migration because they can gain the same while living together (Toyota et al., 2007). On the other hand, according to the accumulative causation theory (Myrdal, 1957a), there may be more left-behind members engage in mobility because the policy renders them more capital and opportunity to move (Toyota et al., 2007).

Under the context of a new round rural development reform and partly the influence of the global economic crisis from 2008, the objective of this paper is to determine the living status of temporary to urban migrants and the left-behind rural people, and then to indicate their attitudes toward rural to urban migration and lives, mainly focuses on a

public administration perspective, by comparing the income of rural to urban migrants and rural left-behind people, and also the differences of outcomes of researches conducted during recent five years, then tries to provide policy suggestions. The aim is to gain an insight of rural China and provide a possible solution for the dual inferiority of rural to urban migrants and rural left-behind people.

2. Trends of rural to urban migration remains while public policies developed significantly

Starting from 2004, the State Council of China and the Chinese Community Party announced a series of policies to promote the peasants' benefits, such as stimulating peasant's income, abolishing agricultural tax, raising the grain price, pay directly subsidy for grain growth etc. To some extent the No.1 Community Party Central Document is the administration outline and framework for the government's work at each level during the whole year, and it can reflect the trend of administration on rural development. So we can compare the cumulative development in rural China through analysis on the No.1 Community Party Central Document. Almost every year after 2004 the No.1 Community Party Central Documents have put the peasants' benefits and development of rural regions to the first importance (Tab.1).

Someone believes these serial of administrative developments are affecting rural Chinese families significantly by increasing their cash income and provide better public services (He, 2009). But same as the public administrative policies published during the beginning of 1980s, these administration guidelines treat the rural area and total peasants as a whole, and evaluated the issue of *Peasant, Agriculture and Rural areas* at the macro level. Lack of specified attention paid to the rural left-behind people and their families. Actually, the rural left-behind people are facing more complicated situation than other rural residents who have no outgoing family member. Whether the rural reform policy and rural development administration applied to these left-behind people well, is of significant meaning to be tested.

Tab.1 No.1 Community Party central documents, 2004-2008

Year	Topics	Contents & Outcomes
2004	Stimulate peasants' income	1. to stimulate the agricultural income of peasant; 2. to develop second and third industries in rural China; 3. to improve the peasant workers' income and work condition; 4. to open up the agricultural productivity market; 5. to enhance rural infrastructure construction; 6. to provide administrative ensure. 10 billion was paid directly for three subventions for peasant. Rural residents' average income has increased 6.8%.
2005	Improve agricultural productivity	1. to improve rural development policies; 2. to protect arable; 3. to enhance rural infrastructure construction; 4. to advance agricultural technologies; 5. to reform rural financial scheme; 6. to increase the human capital and comprehensive ability of rural labourers. Food provision reached 484 million tones.
2006	New countryside construction	1. to integrate rural and urban development; 2. to impetus construction of modern agriculture; 3. to stimulate peasants' income; 4. to enhance rural infrastructure construction; 5. to improve the rural administration scheme. All agricultural taxes were abolished. Rural residents' average income has increased 7.4%.
2007	Develop modern agriculture	1. to build up security scheme for modern agriculture; 2. to enhance rural infrastructure construction; 3. to impetus agricultural technologies; 4. to develop logistics industry for modern agriculture; 5. to cultivate peasants with high quality; Total security for the minimum living standard in rural area was developed. Compulsory education system was able to waive all rural children's tuition fees and other payments. Collaborative medical security system has covered 86% rural China.
2008	Enhance rural infrastructure	1. to increase agricultural productivity; 2. to enhance rural infrastructure construction; 3. to broaden path for peasant to get income; 4. to strengthen agricultural mechanization; 5. to promote rural and urban integrational development; 6. to provide comprehensive enhancement for rural migrant labourers' rights and benefits. State financial investment on rural relative aspects reached 562.5 billion RMB. More subventions were set, such as direct grain subvention and combined agricultural investment subvention.

Source: http://www.china.com.cn/aboutchina/data/zgncgk30n/node_7042758.htm

As shown in Fig. 3, during the recent 5 years Chinese financial investment on rural development raise from 262.6 to 595.5 Billion *Yuan* (RMB), which covers almost a half of the annual national budget, mainly used for infrastructure construction and many other aspects of social development in rural China (He, 2009). While the temporary migration in China rises from 140 million in 2004 to 147 million in 2007, then dropped to 120 million in 2008. If we take the impact of financial crisis into consideration, we can find that: 1). the rapid increasing investment into rural regions did not reduce the population of rural to urban migration, more and more people preferred to migrate into cities while the China government was trying to improve the infrastructure and living condition of rural people; 2). rural to urban migration declined sharply from the beginning of year 2008, during the global economic recession. As no research indicated that the

demographic characters of rural to urban migrants are changing in recent years, we can also infer that the amount of rural left-behind family members has been increased accompany the obvious raising number of outgoing rural labours.

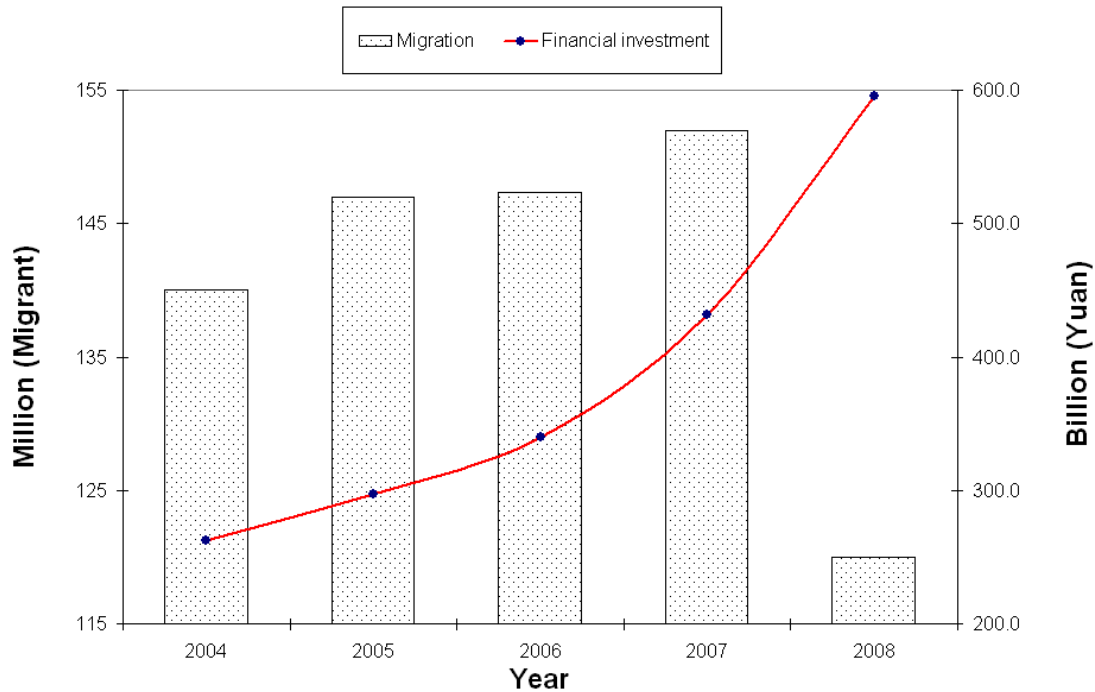


Fig.3 Migration and Rural development in recent 5 Years
 Source: http://www.china.com.cn/aboutchina/data/zgncggkf30n/node_7042758.htm

3. An analytical framework based on the cumulative causation theory

Because the views of both rural to urban migration and rural development have been connected more tightly (Xun, 2007), and term of systematic research on this issue becomes more popular, it is necessary of taking into full account the economic, social and political factors when assessing the interaction between rural to urban migration and the left-behind family in China (Xiang, 2007). Borrowing ideas from the cumulative causation theory (Myrdal, 1957b), it is possible to examine the issue of rural to urban migration and rural left-behind within a broader and dynamic context in very recent years (Massey et al., 1993), and consider about administrative solutions for difficulties faced by the two groups.

The origin of cumulative causation theory was influenced by Smith and Marshall (Fujita, 2006), whose theory of “division of labour” and “economies of scale” helped Young to develop a theory that increasing returns make the economic growth process progressive

and propagates (Young, 1928). Another original theory roots from Veblen's article which focused on "institutional change" and explained it as a mutual relation between an individual and the social structure (Veblen, 1898). The third origin stems from the mechanism of circular and cumulative relationship between changing investment and variable price level established by Wicksell (Wicksell, 1936). Kaldor also proposed the cumulative causation theory (Kaldor, 1966), which emphasizes that the growth rate of the manufacturing production positivity relates to that of GDP. Production growth in the manufacturing sector will induce productivity growth in its sector through the operation of increasing returns. Simultaneously, it will induce labour transfer from the non-manufacturing sector to the manufacturing sector. Subsequently, the productivity as a whole improves, which leads to an advantage in export competition. Increased export is connected to increased production in the manufacturing sector. This causality results in a circular and cumulative effect (Fujita, 2006). The most famous cumulative causation theory was addressed by Myrdal when explained the social and economic problems of African Americans (Myrdal, 1944). By adding the concepts of "backwash effects" and "spread effects" in his works, Myrdal demonstrated the process of circular and cumulative causation had indeed caused a remarkable increase in standard of living for blacks (Myrdal, 1957b), and he devoted much to the cumulative causation theory. A noteworthy thing is that students of migration have elaborated on the cumulative causation theory to explain migration relative issues. Such as Massey (Massey, 1990a), whose research on the continuous rise in the magnitude of Mexican immigration to the United States indicated that each migration action cumulates causation to alter the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, for example the additional movement (Massey, 1998, Massey et al., 1993). Researcher even indicated the causes for additional migration as seven factors: (1) expansion of networks, (2) distribution of income, (3) distribution of land, (4) organization of farm production, (5) culture of migration, (6) distribution of human capital, and (7) social labeling (Heer, 2002, Massey, 1998). Until now, the cumulative causation theory plays an important role in institutional and development economics (Fujita, 2006, Toner, 1999).

The new round of rural development policy influences the variation in rural to urban migration pattern, more rural residents worked in cities for several years and finally

returned to their rural origins (Shi et al., 2008). According to the cumulative causation theory, the administrative and social factors could be cumulated and cause new situations faced by rural to urban migrants and rural left-behind people, furthermore alternate their attitudes about the lives and the decision of migration. It is meaningful to analysis this attitude change. The theory of cumulative causation has been applied to explain the change patterns in international and internal migration. Furthermore, the framework also contains political and social influences. But only a few studies on internal migration in China used this theoretical framework (Lan and Wang, 2006), not to mention studies on rural left-behind issue. The author thinks the reason for applying this theory to the issue of rural left-behind in China is that, internal migration has continued for 30 years, during such a long period China's economic and society have developed obviously, and given the fact that the issue of rural left-behind has emerged decades before and continued till now, their status may be different from previous time, in some regions the social norms and traditional culture were varied, for example, in some regions where a considerable families were left-behind for a long time, the social norm may change from negative to positive against migration because that behavior has become a "demonstration and emulation" effect (Toyota et al., 2007).

4. The temporariness of rural to urban migration is the cause for inferiority of both groups

The mainland of China is composed of 31 first level administration divisions. Data of 2005 Chinese 1% Population Census shows that the total migration is 147.35 million, and 47.79 million people migrated to another province. Sichuan province sent largest floating population as 7.74 million, 6.89 million migrated to another province, among them 2.80 million were migrating to Guangdong province, while other 1.12 million were to Zhejiang province and definitely more to the Yangzi River Delta region. Guangdong is the province received most migrants as 21.60 million in all. Besides Sichuan, Hunan sent 4.50 million into Guangdong (Fig. 4). One major migration steams is flowing into Pearl River Delta region, another is into Yangzi River Delta region. Although according to Zhou's research Sichuan is not the Province of highest left-behind family proportion, the left-behind family shares 28.3% of its total household number, far less than Jiangxi (70.5%) and Anhui (61.2%), and even Hainan (30.8%) has a higher proportion than

Sichuan (Zhou, 2006), but many previous studies still chose Sichuan as the research destination because its quantity of migrants and left-behind members is the largest (Duan and Zhou, 2005). And also because Sichuan's urbanization rate is lower than Jiangxi and Anhui Provinces (Tsui, 2007), the meaning of rural reform is more significant for rural people in Sichuan than in other provinces.

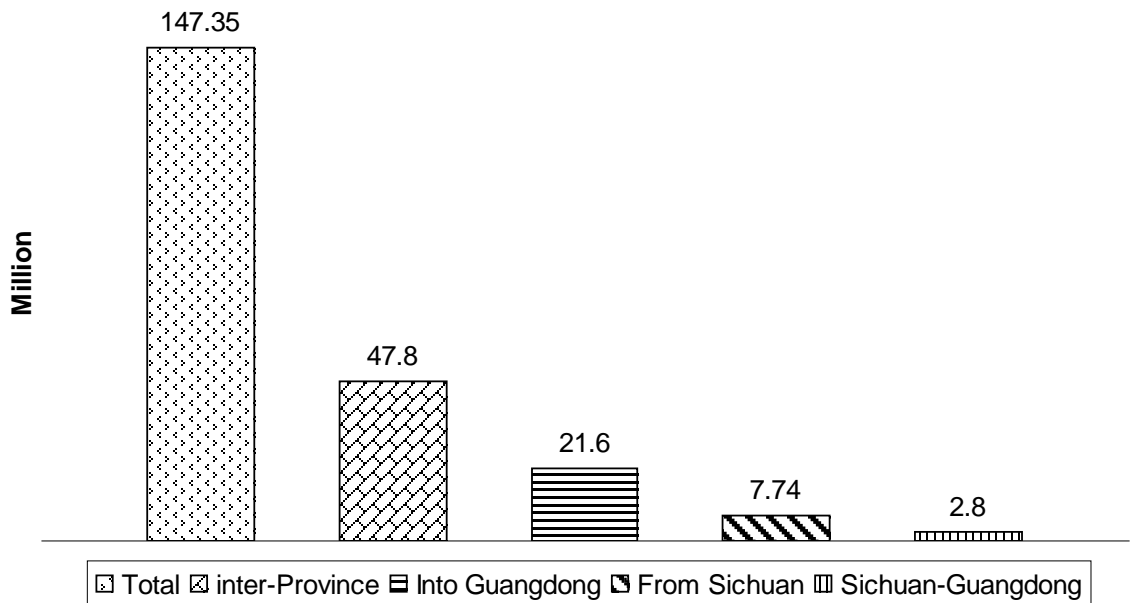


Fig. 4 Provinces sent and received most rural to urban migration, 2005
 Source: 1% population census 2005, National statistic bureau of China, 2006

From table 1 we can infer that, the total basic social security for rural residents and some other supports such as compulsory education have been provided by the Chinese government, as a result, the pattern of rural to urban migration has modified obviously. All these factors are of significant meaning for those rural to urban migrants and rural left-behind people. More rural left-behind parents want their migrant Children back because of the improved rural compulsory education, and, because the of medical care expense receive less support from the migrant members, rural left-behind people think it is meaningless to let them work in cities alone (Shi et al., 2008). The rural left-behind people, the rural to urban migration and their context can be understood as a whole system (Fawcett, 1989), when associated administration policy is advancing, it will have influences on the status of rural to urban migrants, rural left-behind people and rural

communities, and if this process is being examined under the view of cumulative causation theory (Massey, 1990b), the gradual cumulating changes in the new round of rural policy reform may lead to an innovative style of rural to urban migration and rural left-behind issue, or even the whole society.

children of rural to urban migrants were impeded entering urban schools or left-behind to their grandparents, either of these choices has negative affect on their education participation rate, but many rural left-behind children still want to enter school if the tuition fees are reduced or exempted, the compulsory education system reform provides them such an opportunity (Ye and Pan, 2008). For the left-behind wives, the income stimulating policy released their economic dependence on their outgoing husbands, as a result the rural left-behind wives' household position get promoted, but their health condition become worse because more housework and agricultural burdens (Ye and Wu, 2008). For the left-behind elderly, if they can enjoy enough economic supports, they prefer their adult children working at the rural origins instead of in cities, which was also fulfilled partly by the new rural development policy (Ye and He, 2008). Because the family difficulties seem largely solved by the development of administrative policies, rural labour forces should be more willing to seek opportunities in urban areas instead of stick around their rural origins, the sharply raising number of rural to urban migration has proved this inference, and with no administrative policy impeded the personal decision obviously, the 2008 rural to urban migration plummeting phenomenon was probably caused by the wave of enterprises bankruptcy. About 6, 7000 enterprises closed down in the first three months of 2008, as a result a quarter of the total rural migrant labour forces backed to their hometown during the whole year (OME, 2009).

In traditional societies, most people are born and die in the same location. Some short-distance migration occurs when marriages take place between people in nearby villages. In China, Confucianism dominates the traditional social values and thus reinforced the relative lack of population mobility through its famous doctrine: "do not travel far away if your parents are alive", but gradually, rural residents tend to believe that it is better to be apart to earn more money than to stay together to be poor (Xiang, 2007). It is reasonable that the affects of administrative policies can be measured by the changes in

rural people's living condition and their attitudes toward lives (Ben et al., 2008), but it usually takes time to emerge, so it is reasonable to apply the changes in lives and attitudes of rural to urban migrants and rural left-behind people to research on the issue of rural left-behind in China one year after the announcement of new policies. The author utilizes the data sets of surveys conducted in 2005, 2007 and 2009 to compare the changes in living conditions and attitudes of the two groups. Each survey on rural to urban migrants contains questions about their demographic characters, economic conditions, social activities, and their attitudes toward lives in cities and migration decisions. Questionnaires for the rural left-behind people are differentiated for different groups, but the main bodies share the same questions such as their household income, agricultural behaviors, family structure and their attitudes about being left-behind and their community relationships.

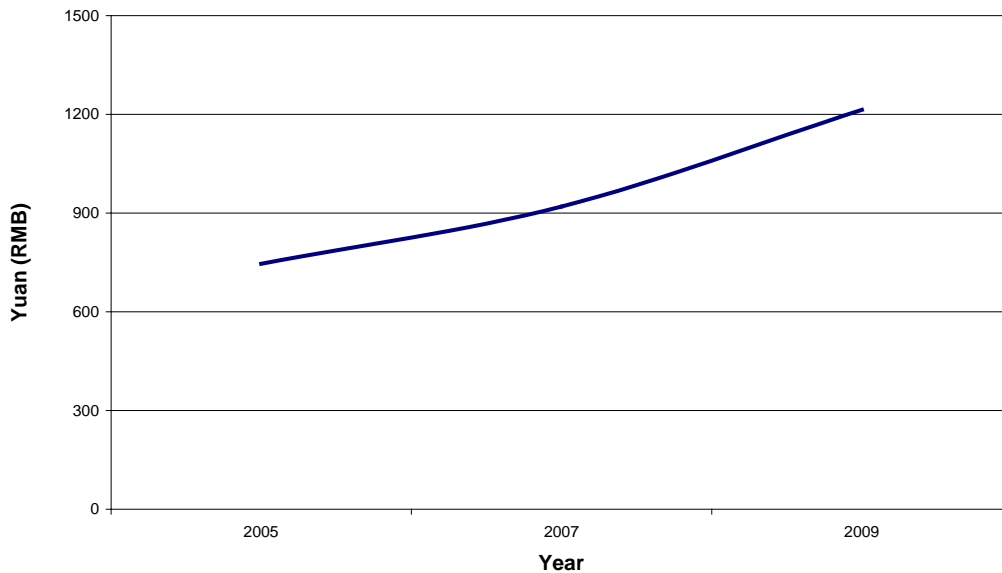


Fig. 5 Average monthly income of rural to urban migrants, 2005; 2007; 2009

For the urban destination, rural migrants have devoted largely to the process of urbanization and economic development, on the other aspect, huge volume of rural migrants have threatened normal daily lives of urban residents through occupying the amenities and public resources. The actuality is temporary rural migrants have suffered from discrimination and plight so far, the average wage for migrant workers in Pearl Delta River regions remains at a poor level and have not improved for the last decade

(Zhang, 2005). But in recent 5 years, the average monthly income of rural to urban migrant labourers shows a certain increase, which is a pulling factor (Kelley and Williamson, 1984), on the other hand, development in administrative policies weakened the push factors in their rural origins, results of the survey on rural left-behind people conducted in 2007 and 2009 indicate that the average annual income of rural left-behind families raised from about 1,3500 to 1,5200 RMB. Take the counteracting effects of the push and pull factors into consideration, the willing of migrate from rural to urban areas is to be dominated by the lives of rural migrants in cities.

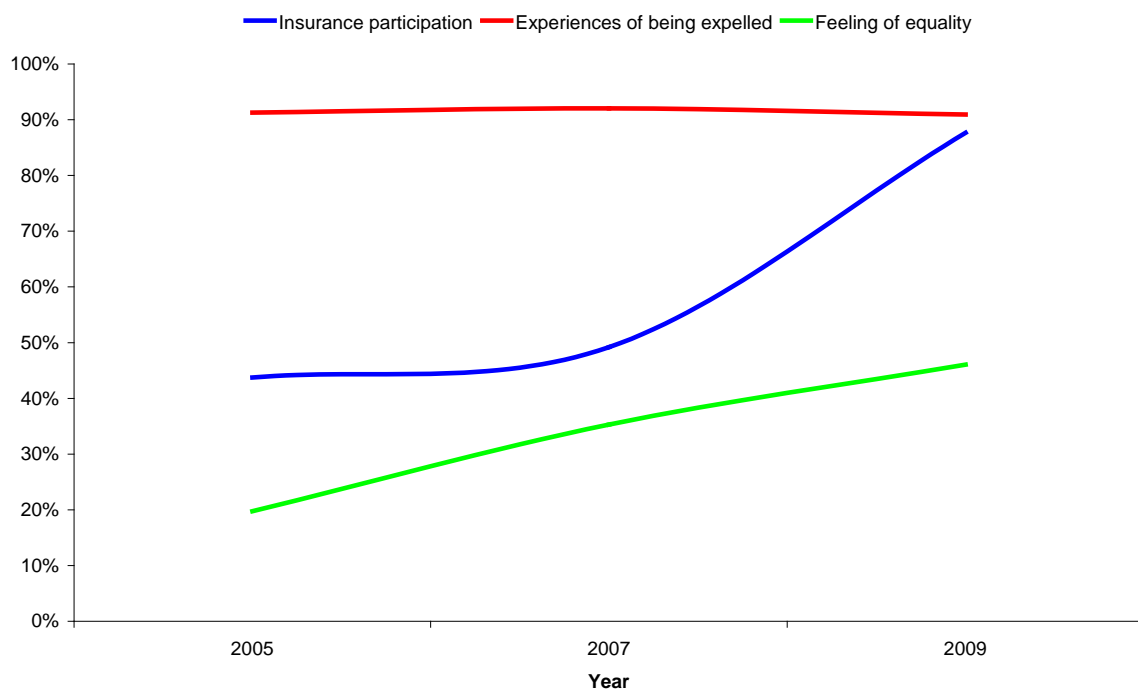


Fig. 6 Living status and attitudes of rural to urban migrants, 2005; 2007; 2009

The phenomenon of the “dual segments city” was attracting researcher’s attention, which means the divide and stratification between rural migrants and origin residents in urban areas (Zhang and Guo, 2005). To some extent the rural-urban dual structure is copied into the internal urban areas (Chen, 2005). Accompany the social-economic development process, these temporary rural labourers become largely marginalized and pushed to the bottom of urban society (Li, 2003). From Fig. 6 we can see that, the living status and attitudes of rural migrants in cities have being developed during recent years, although they still suffer from being expelled generally, such as asked or even forced to leave cities, the temporary rural migrants now benefit more from the high social security

participation rate, also more of the rural migrants begin to feel equal with the urban residents. If the barrier to live a normal urban life continues to diminish, it would become an accumulating attractiveness of urban areas for the rural labour forces.

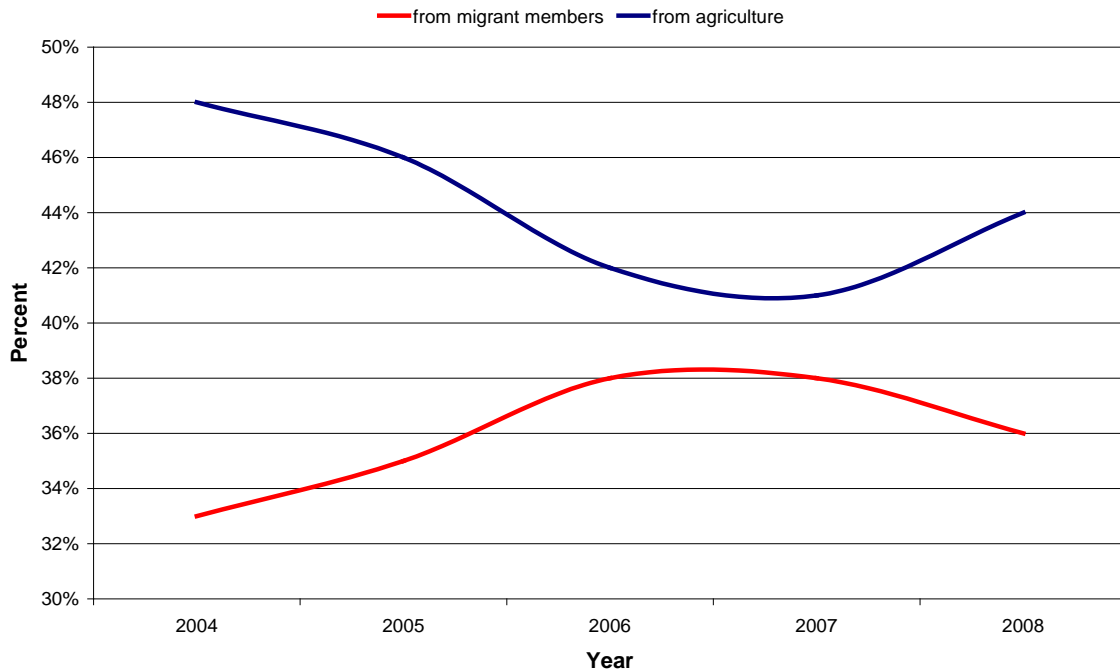


Fig. 7 Components of rural household income in China, 2004-2008

Source: China yearbook of rural household survey 2008, National statistic bureau of China, 2008

There has been decades from the commencement of economic transformation and myriad rural to urban migration, with no fundamental change happens to the administrative scheme, rural migrant workers' living in cities is still unequal to local habitants (Li, 2004). Urban authorities in the Chinese cities have long practiced labour administration policies serve to fulfil requirement of local residents. Temporary rural migrants are excluded from urban planning and amenities, regardless of their length of residence and jobs in the cities, the migrants are seen as economically active participants who came to city to fill the gaps in the labour markets and contribute to urban development and constructions. Their limited income made them lack of economic support to move the whole family into cities together, thus the rural migrants have no base to stay in cities when they became older and less effective in simple jobs. This situation does not change until today, from Fig. 7 we can see that, based on the fact that the social security participation rate and income level are both improving in recent years, temporary rural migrants can provide better

support to their left-behind families, but when they lost their job in cities for a certain period, they have to return back to their rural origins because lack of economic support or sufficient social security. On another aspect, families were left-behind in rural communities thus the migrant's human capital can hardly be accumulated for the next generation. If the outgoing members came back, the whole family has to rely on agricultural productivities again. Furthermore, performance of agricultural productivity and domestic affairs is usually deficient in left-behind families, more than 90% of the left-behind families in surveys reported that they needed helps during agricultural seasons. The temporary migrants are in inferior position in urban China as well as their left-behind family members in rural China.

5. Conclusions

In both the traditional or economic views, adult male member is the backbone for rural families, but a lot of male labour forces in rural area move and work in cities or even in another province, and usually come back only during the Spring Festival (Xiang, 2007). For a long time people with rural household registration status were excluded from the social security scheme because of the dual segments administrative structure, neither the left-behinds nor their migrant members can resort to social and governmental support. Now this situation has been changed by policy (Meng, 2008), all rural residents are guaranteed the minimum living standard (Council, 2007), thus the rural migrants' burden to provide their left-behind members living cost had been released partly. But the rural family still need to take charge of its members. Compared with the ordinary rural family, the left-behind family is more fragile. Rural to urban migration in China commonly signal departure, separation and leaving family members, loved ones and familiar places behind for the migrants. On the other hand, individuals' migration presents a major rupture of daily lives of the entire rural families, plus emotional and psychological struggles as well as complex rearrangements of the material aspects (Yeoh et al., 2002). By comparing material derived from the surveys on Sichuan Province, the author suggests that it is reasonable for the migrants to return back and work either in agricultural or industrial sectors in rural areas. Rural to urban labour force migration should be updated to urban to rural capital migration. With more investment the non-migration rural families can benefit as well as work separately.

Limitations of this study are not taking the destination difference of rural left-behind people and communities into consideration.

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