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China's Food Conundrum: Insecurity of the Rural Abandoned

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Synopsis

The 130 million people who are left behind in China's rural areas are posing a severe challenge to the country's food security -- for the food producers as much as consumers. The conundrum of the abandoned farmers and farmland may have global implications.

Commentary

REPORTS BY Xinhua News Agency indicated that the migration of over 250 million rural labourers to the cities is hollowing China's countryside. Besides those working in the cities all year round as unskilled labour, a large number of rural people have migrated to the cities to enter colleges as students or joining the army. For practical reasons, these rural people have to leave behind their children, wives and parents. Currently, a total of over 130 million people have been left behind in the rural areas, comprising 50 million children, 40 million elderly and 47 million women.

This large number of left-behind rural dwellers is causing a wide range of social concerns. One is the impact on China's food security. It is a big challenge for the government to ensure food security for this most food-insecure group. China's agricultural production is also being threatened as those who have migrated to the cities include important players in the agricultural sector, and even the main work force in some rural areas.

Feeding the millions left behind

As an agrarian society, self sufficiency has been the main feature of Chinese society, particularly in the rural areas. Chinese farmers have almost entirely relied on their own farm outputs for food from grains to vegetables and from fruits to meats. However, with the continuous marketisation of China's agricultural sector since 1978, agricultural production in the rural areas has become increasingly specialised. For instance, in recent years, the Chinese government has made substantial efforts to promote the development of OVOP (One Village One Product).

According to official statistics, by the end of 2010, there were 51,486 OVOP villages and they are increasing at a rapid rate. Rapid specialisation of China's agricultural sector is certainly favourable for farmers' income growth, but it also means Chinese farmers' food self sufficiency has been broken. Therefore, how to feed the farmers, particularly the 130 million left-behind, is becoming a major headache for the government.

In these hollowed out villages, the people left-behind, who are virtually "abandoned", largely rely on themselves

for food. However, understandably, it is very challenging for them to undertake the physically demanding agricultural tasks. Consequently, their agricultural output can barely meet their own food demand. Thus, they have no choice but to buy food from the market, which then makes them vulnerable to price shocks.

In addition, as the majority of those villages are located in the remote areas and mountainous regions, it is very difficult to transport food, which further threatens the food supply for the stranded villagers. The 40 million elderly population, in particular, are the most food-insecure group. According to surveys, around 81% of them have to depend on their own efforts to feed themselves. Worse, in many cases, they even have to bear the burden of raising their grandchildren. Not surprisingly, the food security situation is very bleak in China. Malnutrition is very common among the stranded elderly, and there are even cases of the elderly dying of starvation.

Safeguarding China's Food Production

Farmers not only have to produce enough food for their own consumption, but also produce for the nation. To feed China's growing, more urbanised, and richer population, China has to significantly increase its agricultural production, the task of which naturally falls on the shoulders of the farmers. Theoretically speaking, the rapid outflow of labour from the rural areas should lead to increased productivity in China's agricultural sector, which is dominated by small household farming. When large numbers of workers move out of the agricultural sector, land will be concentrated in the hands of the most productive farmers. This will help achieve economies of scale and facilitate mechanisation in the agricultural sector.

However, due to weaknesses in the sector such as slack property rights, poor contract enforcement and stringent legal restrictions, China's agricultural sector is still dominated by small household farming. With the increasing hollowing-out of the rural labour force, agricultural activities in many parts of China are mainly carried out by the millions of the stranded elderly, women and even children.

It has been reported that, in some regions, around 80% of farmers are 50 to 70 years old. These farmers received little education and know very little about modern farming techniques; thus, they are still using primitive methods. In times of crisis, it is very challenging for them to respond effectively. For example, during the severe drought in northern China earlier this year, the government implemented a variety of policies to encourage the farmers to fight the drought. However, the farmers seemed indifferent to those policies because they are either old or infirm. This situation inevitably hinders China's agricultural production.

A critical emerging question is this: when those farmers become too old to work, who will then farm for China? This concern is certainly not an exaggeration. It has already been reported that in many of the hollowed-out rural areas, large swathes of arable land have been abandoned or are in disuse. At the national level, around two million hectares of arable land are abandoned annually. In some regions, the abandoned farmland makes up more than 10% of the region's total arable land.

However, the Chinese government has not introduced any effective policy to address this potentially explosive problem; indeed China's continuous efforts to speed up its urbanisation drive will exacerbate the situation. As the most populous country in the world, China's food security is of vital importance to the country and may impact the world. Serious efforts have to be taken to safeguard China's food security, in particular, the challenge posed by the 130 million left behind – and to their own devices.

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