



# Left behind, at-risk, and vulnerable elders in rural China



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## ABSTRACT

Migration of any distance separates family members for long periods of time. In China, institutional legacies continue to privilege the migration of working-age individuals who often leave children and elders behind in the rural areas. Up to now, the literature has treated children and elders analogously, labeling each group as “left-behind.” We argue that analysis of elder stayers needs to be more nuanced, distinguishing among differing groups of elders. Of these groups, those living alone without any adult children in the village are most at risk, while those living with other non-migrant adult children are much less affected by migration. Another group of elders, clearly affected by migration, are those caring for their grandchildren while the children’s parents have migrated. Members of this latter group need to be distinguished from those living alone as they are dissimilar in many fundamental ways (age, working status, marital status) and face a very different set of challenges from those left behind (perhaps frail) and alone.

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## 1. Introduction

In many places around the world, large numbers of prime working-age adults leave their traditional family homes and migrate to urban areas in search of work. In most instances, they leave behind close relatives including children, spouses, and parents. In China, the situation is exacerbated by a set of laws and regulations that both make family migration difficult and provide incentives to keep family hands in agriculture. Even when the benefits of migration outweigh the costs, the costs may be quite high and are inherently borne by the more vulnerable members of society, that is, children and elders.

In the rural data sample of the Rural Urban Migration in China Survey (RUMiC)<sup>1</sup> that underlies the analysis of this paper and was gathered in 2008, 28% of elders live in households that include an adult child who was away from the household for six or more months the previous year. A migrant-centric approach would classify all these “left-behind” elders as vulnerable. However, a problem with defining any elder affected by the migration of one of their adult children as left-behind and vulnerable is that the

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<sup>1</sup> (Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Australian National University, the University of Queensland, & the Beijing Normal University, 2014). The Longitudinal Survey on Rural Urban Migration in China (RUMiC) consists of three parts: the Urban Household Survey, the Rural Household Survey, and the Migrant Household Survey. It was initiated by a group of researchers at the Australian National University, the University of Queensland, and the Beijing Normal University and was supported by the Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), which provides the Scientific Use Files. Financial support for RUMiC was obtained from the Australian Research Council, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), the Ford Foundation, IZA, and the Chinese Foundation of Social Sciences.

concept of left-behind was borrowed from the analysis of left-behind children. The situations of children and elders are not parallel. Defining dependent children as left-behind is straightforward enough. Children are left behind if one or both parents migrate out for work. The direction of responsibility is simple for parent/young child relationships; parents are responsible for the well-being of their children. It is erroneous to treat elders analogously with children, that is, to select and identify elders as left-behind simply from the perspective of having an adult migrant child. Many of these supposedly left-behind parents are still relatively young, in their forties, fifties, or sixties; are healthy; and have agency. They are also likely to have participated in family decisions involving migration.

Elders live separately from their adult children for many reasons. Economic studies of living arrangements around the world show that privacy is a normal good, that is, older people with higher incomes are more likely to live separately from their children, all else equal.<sup>2</sup> Even when their children do not migrate, parents of adult children may choose to live independently. In addition, for elders in need of care, it is possible that their care is provided by children who live nearby rather than within the same household. Of course, it is also possible that some elders find themselves in need of care, yet living alone and vulnerable and without nearby offspring, not as a matter of choice, and that this is not a desirable situation. Certainly, members of this last group are worthy of policymakers' concern and of further analytical research that explores how their situations relate to migration.

Another group of elders affected by migration consists of those whose adult children have migrated, leaving them to care for the grandchildren. These elders are relatively young. They provide child care while also carrying out farm work and looking after the various cottage industries of their rural households. Although migration certainly affects their workloads and could potentially affect their physical health and well-being negatively, their situation differs substantially from the vulnerable elders described above.

In this paper, we investigate the interrelationships among family decisions on migration, living arrangements, and employment for elders in rural China. We also consider the interrelationships between migration, living arrangements, and psychological well-being of rural elders. Our analyses are agnostic on causal direction. Migration of adult children has the potential to affect elders' decision making and well-being, but it is equally likely that the migration decisions of adult children are affected by family circumstances including the exogenous health status of living parents and parents-in-law, a direction of causation explored by Antman (2012); Antman, (2013), Démurger and Hui (2015); Giles and Mu (2007), and Stöhr (2015). The causal direction is strongly influenced by the age of the elder. Younger and relatively healthy elders enable the migration decisions of their offspring by acting as caregivers of their grandchildren and maintainers of the family's land allocation, while those of advanced age or in frail health may deter the migration of offspring (Giles and Mu, 2007). With both pathways of causality potentially strong, we opt instead for a descriptive analysis of the situation on the ground. We employ the RUMiC rural data set to create taxonomies of the living arrangements of China's rural elders that focus on access to potential care from co-resident and/or nearby family members. We then use these taxonomies to explore elders' labor supply and mental well-being. We find that a substantial share of elders with migrant children still live with, or very near to, another of their adult children. The elders who appear most vulnerable are those who live alone with no children residing in their village. However, this group constitutes a very small share of elders. A much larger share of elders live with their spouse only. Although those living with their spouse only, without any children in the village, are potentially vulnerable, we find they also are more likely to be working and to express positive feelings of well-being than those living alone. They also exhibit higher levels of psychological well-being than widows/widowers living with their adult children. Elders who are caring for their grandchildren while the grandchildren's parents are migrants have high rates of employment and exhibit psychological well-being that is more negative than those living with their children and spouse, but less negative than those living with children and no spouse. Overall, the loss of a spouse appears to have a larger impact on self-reported psychological well-being than living arrangements vis-à-vis adult children.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides both background information on Chinese migration patterns and a short review of the literature that analyzes the effects of migration on rural elders in China. Section 3 introduces the rural RUMiC data set used in our analysis. Section 4 provides a descriptive look at the living arrangements of rural elders that privileges the relationship between the migration of adult children and elders' living arrangements. In Section 5, we explore the relationship between elders' proclivity to work and their living arrangements as well as the migration status of their adult children. Similarly, in Section 6, we consider the relationship among living arrangements, migration of adult children, and elders' psychological well-being. Section 7 concludes the paper.

## 2. Background

In the socialist period, prior to the implementation of urban economic reforms, the household registration (*hukou*) system, in conjunction with the food rationing coupons, effectively kept rural people restricted to living and working where they were born (Chan and Zhang, 1999, Fan, 1999, Maurer-Fazio, 1995, and Meng and Manning, 2010). The restrictions on migration and the *hukou* system were relaxed gradually, starting in the mid-1980s. In the early 1990s, with both the abolishment of urban food coupons and the growth of the manufacturing sector with its concomitant increase in the demand for labor, the flows of migrants from rural to urban areas gained momentum. Over the most recent three decades, between 200 and 250 million rural residents moved to China's towns and cities (Chan, 2012). Despite the relaxation of many of the historical restrictions on migration, the legacy of those constraints continues to severely restrict family migration and privileges the temporary migration of younger,

<sup>2</sup> See Lei et al. (2011) and Meng and Luo (2008) for examples from China.

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