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# An Empirical Investigation of Rural Empty-nesters in Chongqing and a Construction of Service System

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**Abstract** Based on field investigation, the rural empty-nesters in Chongqing were comprehensively analyzed from their family conditions, economic conditions, concept of old-age care and needs. As is indicated by the research, there is a high proportion of rural empty-nesters who have low income and live alone at home. The situation of empty-nesters has brought about a series of problems, which propose new challenges to the old-age services system. In this paper, related solutions were proposed from both macro and micro perspectives.

**Key words** Rural elderly, Service system, Chongqing

With the rapid development of economy and society as well as the accelerated pace of urbanization, the number of rural labors working out is presenting a growing trend. However, under the current household registration system and population distribution, the rural labors in urban areas cannot enjoy the equal treatment as urban citizens, and they have no other choice but to leave the elderly in rural areas due to various pressure from housing, medical care, *etc.*, thus resulting in a growing number of empty-nesters, the elderly people left alone in rural areas. It is estimated that there are currently more than two million empty-nesters in Chongqing. Moreover, Chongqing's aging population is increasing, but both its economy and rural old-age security system are still underdeveloped. Thus, in the context of population aging, social transition and urbanization, the burden of old-age care is increasing and the problems of rural empty-nesters demand urgent solutions.

According to the macro social policies, some services were provided particularly for the elderly so as to lead them to a comprehensive understanding about several issues, including the present heavy pressure from employment and economy, the lack of care for both daily life and medical care, the loneliness and rural security. Thus a rural empty-nesters service system would be constructed based on their practical needs and local economic development so as to truly realize the sharing of reform and development achievements by the mass.

## 1 Means of investigation

The rural empty-nesters above the age of 60 whose children had been working out for half a year were investigated in the ten districts of Chongqing from July to August, 2011. The selection of samples was divided into several stages. At the first stage, Chongqing was divided into four districts, namely, downtown,

northeast part, southeast part and west part according to the social and economic level, and then from the four districts, the areas of Shapingba, Banan, Kaixian, Zhongxian, Dianjian, Pengshui, Youyang, Yongchuan, Qijiang and Tongliang were investigated; at the second stage, one town was randomly selected from each one of the above-mentioned ten districts to be the secondary samples; thirdly, from each town, one to two representative villages were selected as the tertiary samples; fourthly, the families with empty-nesters in those villages were comprehensively investigated. A total of 1 050 questionnaires were distributed, 96.1% of which, about 1 009 were received, and the received questionnaires were then analyzed with the SPSS17.0 software.

## 2 Will of rural empty-nesters

**2.1 Basic characteristics of rural families with empty-nesters** Among the 1 009 empty-nesters investigated, 58.9% are male and 41.1% are female with an average age of 69.35, among which there are 54.3% below 69, 37.2% between 70–79, 7.8% between 80–89, and only 0.7% above 90. Moreover, about 89.2% of the investigated empty-nesters have a primary middle school education, 10.4% receive a middle school education and 0.3% have a vocational college education or above. The investigated empty-nesters have an average number of 3.04 children, among them 3.0% are childless, 8.4% have only one child, 17.8% have two children, 26.0% have three children, 18.4% have four children, 10.7% have five children and 5.4% have six or more children. In view of the working places of their children, 22.9% are in nearby towns, 20.4% in nearby counties, 48.7% in other provinces and 0.2% abroad. As for the daily life of the empty-nesters, 34.8% live alone, 48.0% live with their spouses, and 6.2% with their underage grandchildren. As is indicated by the investigation, most of the rural empty-nesters are poorly educated, and have no children nearby, and 16.3% live with their grandchildren, indicating that the children of most empty-nesters choose to bring their children with themselves and leave the elderly at home.

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**2.2 Causes to the problems of rural empty-nesters** As is shown in the investigation report, the problems of rural empty-nesters are caused by various reasons, 81.7% are caused by their children's working out, 29.6% due to their children's marry at other places, 6.3% are caused by the children's unwillingness to live with parents, while 11.0% are caused by the elderly's unwillingness to live with their children, 8.0% are led to by the worse living conditions, 1.3% are because of their children's death, and 4.5% are caused by other reasons.

From a macro perspective, the empty-nesters are the derivatives of nuclear family which is both the result and mark of modernization, thus the families with empty-nesters are, to some extent, the products of modernization<sup>[1]</sup>. It is believed that this macro perspective is applicable to the problems of empty-nesters in both China and foreign countries as well as to both urban and rural areas, which are simply different in the emergence time of empty-nesters in different areas<sup>[2]</sup>. In Chongqing, the rapid development of economy and society brings about not only the urbanized employment of young farmers but also the rapid urbanization of rural areas. As the number and lifestyle of the second-generation migrant workers develop tremendously, the trend of empty-nest families has been irreversible in rural areas.

From the perspective of rural families, some of the empty-nesters are compelled. Most of the migrant workers live a hard life in other places and cannot bear the economic pressure by bringing the elderly to live together in the city. Among the empty-nesters, 81.7% have children working in urban areas, 29.6% have children marrying at other cities, and 8.0% live alone due to the limited living space. As for those childless empty-nesters or those with unfilial children have no other choice but to live alone. About 6.36% live alone because their children do not want to live together with them and another 1.3% live alone because their children have past away.

From the perspective of the elderly themselves, some elderly prefer to live alone, especially when some elderly people are both physically and economically independent, and are pursuing an independent life. 11.0% empty-nesters show their unwillingness to live together with their children due to their different living habits, which indicates that the concept of some elderly people has greatly changed, and they wish to have a free and independent life.

**2.3 Economic status of rural empty-nesters** The investigation results show that the rural empty-nesters have an average annual income of 3 951 yuan. 13.6% have 1 500 yuan, 40.8% have 1 501 – 3 000 yuan, 24.7% have 3 001 – 5 000 yuan, 11.0% have 5 001 – 8 000 yuan and 9.1% have more than 8 001 yuan. The present social assistance standard is 1 920 yuan in rural areas of Chongqing, while the standard for rural five guarantees is 2 496 yuan. In contrast, the rural empty-nesters in Chongqing are generally poor.

The incomes of Chongqing rural empty-nesters are mainly from the rural endowment insurance (86.1%), their children (50.5%) and agriculture (43.9%), while the incomes from other areas,

such as the contracted land revenue, minimum living standards, working out, social welfare, business, *etc.*, account for only a small proportion. Thus it can be found out that the incomes of empty-nesters mainly depends on the government, their families and themselves, only 3.4% elderly who work out have a higher income of about 5 787.1 yuan. With the establishment of rural endowment insurance, the rural elderly in Chongqing will receive 80 yuan per month per capita, which, however, still can't solve the problems of their basic needs. Rural empty-nesters spend an average of 353 yuan per month, 48.2% are lower than 300 yuan, 26.8% spend 301 – 500 yuan, 17.2% spend 501 – 800 yuan and 7.8% spend more than 800 yuan, indicating that the income of empty-nesters are fairly enough for their basic lives. A further investigation finds out that only 10.8 have prepared money for their old-age care, but only 18.5% think the money enough; among those without preparing the old-age pension in advance, only 24.5% apply for poverty relief, and 53.9% have successfully applied for. But among the 53.9%, 9.6% have to raise their children who cannot make a living on their own. Among all investigated empty-nesters, only 23.5% are satisfied with their current conditions, while only 27.4% are completely unsatisfied with their conditions. The rural social security system which has been carried out actively by the government in recent years has greatly relieved the old-age care pressure of rural empty-nesters. But to construct a long-term mechanism and fundamentally reverse the situation of rural empty-nesters, the government should increase their support, which is the practical problems needing to be solved in the service system of rural empty-nesters.

**2.4 The concept of rural empty-nesters towards old-age care** The concept of traditional family support for old age is deeply rooted in rural areas, especially in the mind of rural elderly people. When asked about how to live their old-age lives, as high as 83.9% expressed their will to stay at home, while only 9.6% wish to live in such institutions as nursing houses; when asked about the reasons to live in institutions, the elderly all showed the idea not to increase the burden of their children; but when further asked about the reasons why they do not want to live in institutions, 46.1% wanted to live with their children, and 50.6% children do not want to send their parents to live in there. Among those who are willing to live in institutions, they can only cover an average expense of 213.42 yuan, 52.2% can only pay less than 150 yuan, 29.7% pay 151 – 300, 14.1% 301 – 600 yuan and only 4.0% can pay above 600 yuan. In addition to some empty-nesters who clearly expressed that they could not afford the high expense of nursing houses, many elderly still have some traditional concept, they feel it a shame to both themselves and their children to live in nursing houses. Moreover, nowadays, many nursing houses only receive those old people who have no children, which is another reason why some rural empty-nesters do not live in the nursing houses even they want to.

**2.5 Needs of rural empty-nesters** Given the special characteristics of farmers and rural areas, rural community plays a great

role in the lives of farmers, especially when there are growing number of empty-nesters. The empty-nesters in rural areas have diversified needs. During the investigation, when asked about their needs, the empty-nesters answered support for agricultural production (51.0%), maintenance of electric appliance (37.2%), day care (27.3%), help for their out (13.6%), payment of fees (12.8%) and door-to-door barber (12.5%), among which the support for agricultural production is mainly concentrated in those calling for great labors, such as tilling (39.8%), harvesting (38.7%) and sowing (30.4%). The empty-nesters also have more services related to their daily life, such as health check (82.4%), medical consultation (48.4%), door-to-door delivery of drugs and medical care (40.7%), which all exceed 40%. In addition, their needs for emergence relief (65.2%), electric and gas maintenance (46.6%), regular visits (42.7%), check of hidden dangers (41.8%), *etc.* are also high.

In view of their spiritual needs, more than 58.9% want to have someone to talk with to expel the loneliness, 24.1% wish to participate some cultural and sports activities, 17.5% wish to take part in agricultural training, 15.0% wish to enjoy old-age school education, and 13.9% wish to travel, indicating that there are very few cultural and entertainment activities in rural communities. It is obvious that the community services in rural areas of Chongqing are barely at work and the needs of empty-nesters cannot be satisfied. Thus, there is so much to be improved in rural areas in order to meet the spiritual needs of rural empty-nesters.

### 3 The measures and suggestions to improve the service system for rural empty-nesters

From the foreign experiences of industrialization and urbanization, the situation of empty-nesters emerged in different countries to different extents and with different characteristics. Especially in developing countries where the migration of young population is necessary, the phenomenon of empty-nesters is very common. However, to solve the problem of empty-nesters is a complicate system, which calls for not only local government to consider the distribution of regional industrial structure from a macro perspective, but also the related departments to work together to solve this problem.

**3.1 Macro perspective** Firstly, to rationally adjust the industrial structure and distribution, which not only solves the industrial hollowing in some less developed areas, but also arranges the nearby employment of rural young labors and creates conditions for narrowing the spatial distance between the empty-nesters and their children. It could be explored to carry out a visiting system enabling the migrant workers to go back home regularly. Based on the types and economic status of the elderly, the economic subsidies should be appropriately improved, and the range and strength of medical care and living assistance to those poor empty-nesters should be expanded; the coverage of old-age subsidies should be increased from multiple channels, and improved timely.

Secondly, to establish the real sense rural community, take full use of rural community services, and enhance the services

provided by rural communities to the elderly. Moreover, to optimize the village cadre team, promote the specialization of rural employment, and gradually realize the goal of one community in one village. From the social perspective, the services should be given to different groups of rural elderly, especially to those weak groups.

Thirdly, to be far-sighted and reasonably construct centralized old-age care facilities. With one or several villages as a unit, the centralized old-age care facilities should be constructed for those empty-nesters in remote and scattered areas, the investment on grass-root facilities should be improved. The facilities for the health care and entertainment of empty-nesters should be increased. By the way of government purchasing, qualified social service organizations should be selected to be responsible for the daily care, spiritual comfort, health and medical care of those empty-nesters, leading the services to a socialized and professional path, creating conditions to solve the problems of rural empty-nesters and improving the quality and range of rural old-age services.

**3.2 Micro perspective** The regulations for empty-nester families should be improved, and a database about empty-nesters should be constructed with a natural village as a unit, so as to realize the institutional, standardized and network management of empty-nester services.

Firstly, the role of family support should be paid full attention to. The traditional concept of family support is still deeply rooted in people's mind, and it is quite natural that the members form one family help each other<sup>[3]</sup>. The awareness of old-age care should be enhanced from both the legal and ethic perspectives, so that the children of empty-nesters take their responsibilities for supporting the elderly and enabling the elderly to live a quality life.

Secondly, various organizations aiming for the self-services of elderly should be actively developed, a mutual aid association could be established based on their own wills, so as to solve their physical and spiritual needs through diverse activities.

Thirdly, the medical-care services should be strengthened, a system of regular health check and tour medical care system should be established, a health file is constructed to care for the healthy conditions of empty-nesters.

Finally, related departments should arrange the services based on the practical needs of empty-nesters, provide services through capital support and tax reduction. The government should provide quality services and explore a service system for rural empty-nesters in those less developed areas.

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