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Socio-Demographic Risks and Challenges of Bare-Branch Villages in China

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China's bare branches, the Chinese name for surplus men, have attracted much attention, yet few studies have focused on the increasing phenomenon of bare-branch villages. In this literature review, the formation of bare-branch villages, the impact of such villages on individual bare branches and their families, and potential threats to villages and families are analyzed. It was found that the sex ratio and female marriage migration to prosperous areas are the two main determinants of the formation of bare-branch villages. Individual bare branches in such villages are affected both physically and psychologically and are isolated in social activities. Their families and villages suffer in many ways. Bare branches may accelerate the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and increase the incidence of criminal behavior and violence. Even worse, because bare branches in a village share many bonds, they may take collective actions that can endanger China's social stability.

Keywords bare branch; China; collective action; marriage migration; sex ratio; social network

Introduction

The strong preference for sons over daughters and women's subordinate social status in China have resulted in discrimination against women and a shortage of women, leading to a situation in which large numbers of men are unable to find spouses and are thus forced to remain single, becoming *guang guner*, or "bare branches". "Bare branches" is a term used to describe men in the countryside who are over a certain age and cannot get married; thus, they are forced to stay single. These men do not have any dependants, just like branches without any leaves, leaving an impression of desolation and loneliness.

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In the countryside, the chance of men getting married after turning 27 or 28 years old has dropped sharply (Liu & Jin, 2011; Yang, Attané, Li & Yuan, 2011). In this article, “bare branches” refers to unmarried men over the age of 27 years who live in rural areas.

In China, there is a belief that women can change their destiny through marriage, and they achieve this goal by choosing men who have a higher social status than them. Due to marriage migration and the expansion of the demographic range for marriages, most men who are unable to wed belong to the lowest social class (Hesketh & Zhu, 2006). In some impoverished and desolate areas, these bare branches have started to concentrate spatially, and the development of many bare-branch villages has begun to threaten the sustainable development of society. Compared to other areas, villages that have the most bare branches are relatively poorer, with lower average incomes and more difficult financial and living conditions: these villages are incapable of creating economically supportive environments for young men to find spouses and settle down.

The growing class of bare branches has caused concern for the government, and in academic circles and the social media. Some scholars assert that the existence of this class could lead to increases in the sex trade, risky behaviors (such as alcohol abuse and drug use), and violence, which can negatively influence relations between the two sexes, the stability of marriage, family, and society, and other related aspects. Moreover, the existence of this class could lead to severe political consequences (Hudson & den Boer, 2004). Although this viewpoint has stirred many debates among scholars, both domestically and internationally due to a lack of supporting evidence, the bare-branches class itself, as a part of society that experiences the marriage squeeze due to poverty and social segregation is a major social problem. If this problem is not resolved, it will not only impact China’s sustainable development but also damage China’s international image.

Recently, the influence of the surplus male population on China’s socio-economic development has drawn attention (Das Gupta, Ebenstein & Sharygin, 2010; Ebenstein & Sharygin, 2009; Edlund, Li, Yi & Zhang, 2007; Hudson & den Boer, 2004; Wei & Zhang, 2011). Nevertheless, there are still very few studies on the appearance of bare-branch villages (Jiang & Li, 2009). In this literature review, the formation of bare-branch villages is first examined; next, the impact that bare branches have on individuals, families, and communities due to their inability to settle down is illustrated; then, the effects these men have on the pandemic of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and on social security, as well as the potential threat of collective behavior, is explained; last, the article ends with a discussion.

The formation of bare-branch villages

Generally, China is characterized by a universal marriage pattern. In the 2000 Census, men who remained single in the age groups of 35–39, 40–44, and 45–49 years numbered 41.25 per 1000, 38.20 per 1000, and 39.61 per 1000, respectively, whereas women accounted for 5.06, 2.88, and 2.06 per 1000 for the corresponding age groups. In the 2010 Census, the proportions of never-married men for the age groups of 35–39, 40–44, and 45–49 years were 64.44 per 1000, 41.53 per 1000, and 31.21 per 1000; for women, the proportions were 17.56 per 1000, 7.53 per 1000, and 4.44 per 1000, respectively (Population Census Office under the State Council, 2002, 2012).

Marriage is traditionally the symbol of maturity in China, and people do not treat unmarried men as adults, regardless of their age; in addition, unmarried men face discrimination. Parents consider their children's marriage to be one of their biggest responsibilities. If a son does not wed in a timely manner, the parents have not fulfilled their duties, and if one or more of their sons is unmarried, parents may feel guilty. If all of their sons are not married, then the parents feel they have failed their ancestors because their son (s) cannot continue the family tree (Mo, 2005). To get a son married, parents may scrimp and save every penny; sometimes, they take out large loans to pay a bride price or even illegally purchase a trafficked woman for their son (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012).

Despite the fact that marriage is deeply valued in China, more and more bare-branch villages have emerged. There are many socio-economic factors that contribute to the formation of bare-branch villages, including rapid urbanization, which has led to large-scale migration, and age structure changes, which may exacerbate the sex structure problem, as suggested by Goodkind (2006). However, two main factors are predominant in the formation of bare-branch villages. From a macro perspective, China's imbalanced sex ratio at birth has resulted in more boys than girls, and under monogamy, some men will not be able to get married because of the scarcity of women. From a regional perspective, women's marriage migration from mountainous areas to the plains, from the rural countryside to cities, and from inland to coastal areas has led to the phenomenon of the marriage squeeze, which in turn causes a spatial shift, making men of the rural, destitute farmlands bear the consequences. From a family and individual standpoint, weak personal characteristics and family conditions are the main factors in men's inability to wed (Liu & Jin, 2011).

Sex ratio

Since the strict implementation of family planning policies in the 1980s, China's male sex ratio at birth has continuously climbed. Although some scholars believe there is no correlation between the increase of the male sex ratio at birth and China's family planning policies, statistics have shown a direct causal relationship (Gu, Wang, Guo & Zhang, 2007). The ratio in provincial cities and regions that implemented the one-child policy in 2000 was 111.6 men to 100 women; the ratio in regions that allowed a second child was 109.0 men to 100 women; and the ratio in regions that followed the 1.5 child policy (families that have girls as their first-born are allowed to have a second child) was 124.7 men to 100 women, which was 15.7 percentage points higher than the regions that permitted a second child. In fact, China's 1.5 child policy conveys the message that girls' value is lower than boys. This policy has also encouraged the preference for sons over daughters and prenatal sex identification, resulting in an abnormal sex ratio at birth (Zeng, 2007). Based on recent Census data and selected Census statistics, some scholars optimistically believe that the male sex ratio at birth has begun to drop (Das Gupta, Chung & Li, 2009; Guilmoto, 2009). However, whether China's sex ratio at birth will decrease, increase, or remain at 120 cannot be determined. Based on a short Census survey, the male sex ratio at birth in 2000 was 116.9, but the long Census survey showed 119.9. The long Census survey data have been used as a reference in multiple instances, but the data have been shown to be unreliable (Goodkind, 2011). A preliminary Census survey in 2010 showed

that the male sex ratio at birth was 118.6 men to 100 women, which was higher than the 2000 Census data figure of 116.9.

The increasing male sex ratio at birth has created an imbalance in the sexes and an increasing disappearance of women, which has made it more difficult for men to find wives after 2010. In the next decades, China's marriage market will face a severe marriage squeeze. In an actual Chinese marriage, the man is usually older than the woman by approximately 2–3 years. As the number of births decreases, the marriage squeeze in China will not only result in a sex imbalance, it will also influence the age structure. As people who were born after the 1980s get married, the surplus male rate will increase rapidly from 2010. Between 2020 and 2050, it is estimated that 15% of men will not find a wife. Beginning in 2010, China has and will continue to experience a serious marriage squeeze for the next few decades, and the surplus male population will continue to grow. In 2015, the surplus male population between the ages of 20 and 49 years will surpass 20 million. In 2025, it will exceed 30 million. In 2035, it will increase to over 40 million, and in 2040, it is estimated that the surplus male population will reach 44 million (Chen, 2004).

Women's marriage migration

After China's reform and opening up in the early 1980s, a less strict administration and a rapidly developing economy resulted in young adult women moving to the cities and gaining financial independence, as well as a changed perception of marriage and lifestyle and an abnormal male-to-female ratio in the marriage market. A large number of women migrated from the countryside to the cities and from the backward, poor south to the coastal, rich north. These migrant workers first traveled to urban areas for jobs. However, their migration also widened their horizons and increased their desire to move and stay in places that they perceived to be better than their home towns. For women, migration has usually been achieved through cross-regional marriages (Chen, 2004). Both the population of women who migrated through marriage and the migration distance has increased dramatically. Currently, marriage migration is still important, accounting for up to one-quarter to one-third of women's migration (Davin, 2005).

Chinese women have traditionally altered their destinies through marriage, and families usually look for husbands with a high social status for their daughters to marry (Fan & Huang, 1998). However, a large number of young adult women are now unwilling to be married in their home towns, and these areas have developed the same characteristics: destitution and isolation, with inconvenient transportation and difficult life conditions. In addition, it is difficult for families to prosper with an underdeveloped local economy (Shi, 2006). The economic and social advantages of the man's family are especially important to women: the level of a region's economic development, its environmental conditions and other factors determine whether a region will attract women. For these reasons, the marriage migration of young women is usually from the countryside to the city, or from the impoverished south-western region to the relatively affluent coastal region (Davin, 2005; Sun, 2004). Many women who have migrated have stated in interviews that "We are indeed married to a place that is far away from home, but we cannot

stay in that dirty, poor place our entire life, right?" Marriage migration is the ideal method for women from poor regions to attain long-term stability and wealth (Sun, 2004; Tan, Short & Liu, 2003).

From mountain regions to the flatlands, from the countryside to the cities, and from inland to coastal areas, this type of female marriage migration has resulted in a shift of the marriage squeeze between regions and between urban and rural areas, and marriage-aged men in the poor countryside, as an inferior group in the spouse-selection market, have become the direct victims of China's structural population imbalance (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012).

Characteristics of bare-branch villages

When people choose a spouse, they consider all of the potential spouse's resources. One's personal features, such as socio-economic status, wealth, profession, and looks contribute to these resources. In addition to personal characteristics, there are many other characteristics that may contribute to the difficulties that young men face in finding a spouse.

Geographic locations and environment are also important influences on people's decisions in choosing spouses. Bare-branch villages in the countryside of the mid-west region have some similar characteristics: a remote location, inconvenient transportation, difficult life conditions, an underdeveloped local economy that makes it difficult for families to prosper, and sluggish education development that results in limited opportunities for young men to receive an education. Regardless of the environment or family background and personal qualities, these young men lack competitiveness in their local marriage market (Peng, 2004; Shi, 2006).

The family factor has a major influence on the success of finding a spouse. However, the family factor is usually based on natural conditions and the geographic environment for families that are in isolated and destitute areas. Although each family's conditions may be different, the overall economic circumstances are usually poor. For people who live in the countryside, their standard for choosing spouses is based on their family's overall qualifications, including financial ability, the parents' popularity, and the family's reputation and status. Among these factors, the family's financial condition is the most important, and better financial conditions lead to greater chances of getting married (Lv, 2006; Zhang & Zhong, 2005).

From the standpoint of individuals, there is a correlation between poverty and singlehood: a lack of social status and financial stability are the principal factors contributing to some men's inability to wed. In the rural countryside, the bare-branch problem is usually accompanied by poverty, economic instability and a low social status (Zhang, Attané & Yang, 2009). As a survey that was carried out in Anhui Province in 2008 demonstrated, a man's appearance, ownership of resources, social connections, financial stability, and family and community factors usually determined his ability to wed. Typically, the worse a man's personal characteristics and owned resources were, the less likely he was of settling down (Liu & Jin, 2011). Because women's marriage migration worsens their local region's female-shortage problem, men, consciously or subconsciously, lower their standards with regard to the ideal spouse so that they have a larger selection pool.

People who are at the bottom of the social ladder and are suppressed in the marriage pool do not have standards for choosing spouses: they shoulder the consequences brought about by the marriage squeeze, and they may or may not wed or may even end up marrying someone with disabilities. A mother of bare branches in Shaanxi Province expressed that if her son could find a wife who was willing to stay with him, she would be satisfied, and that as long as the wife was a woman, regardless of whether she was a widow, visually impaired, disabled, or a cripple, the mother would have no complaints (Mo, 2005).

In Jilin Province in China's north-eastern region, the prefecture of Yanbian Zhou had 19,871 bare branches who were between the ages of 25 and 45 years and 13,293 who were over the age of 28. There is a large number of bare-branch villages, with each village having at least 10 bare branches and some with more than 50. It was not uncommon for families to have two-to-three bare branches at home. A Korean ethnic peasant's household in Longjin City had four bare branches who were over the age of 30 (Xu & Liang, 2007).

In Shaanxi Province in the north-western region, a village in Xiqin Ling, with 257 families and a population of 1013, had 87 bare branches who were over the age of 35 years. Poverty and backward customs forced young women to stay in the city to earn a living and they refused to return home. Some young men brought their girlfriends home, but they usually could not stay for more than a few days. Liu, aged 46, was the oldest in his family and had four brothers. He pointed to a row of houses and said, "This is for my second brother, this is for my third brother ... and the two to the east side are for my youngest brother and my mother. We distributed our houses a long time ago, but we did not study much and never married" (Hu, 2002). In the north-western region, Xinjiang Province's Qitai County had more than 5000 bare branches. One of the village officials said:

Our village has an estimated population of 4000, and we have more than 400 bare branches who cannot find wives. We are a village neighboring a city so the conditions are not bad, but we just do not have young girls. And the situation is worse for villages with poorer conditions than villages that are neighboring cities, and they have more bare branches.

Liu's mother said, "I have three sons. The oldest is 40 and the youngest is 35, and none of them is married. I am over 70 years old, so if my sons do not settle down, I will never rest in peace" (Zhong & Liu, 2006).

A village in the south-western region of Guizhou had a population of 2249, with 665 families and 282 bare branches. The village had almost no young, unmarried women suitable for marriage; in fact, 60 young, unmarried women had already left the village and were working somewhere else. The town had eight administrative villages with an estimated 1500 bare branches, and one village had more than 300 (He, 2007). Another village had more than 600 families and a population of 2100, and the unmarried male population was more than 290, of which 198 were over the age of 25 years, 81 were over 30, 43 were over 40, and 27 were over 50 (Chen, 2007).

In Shanxi Province's north-western area, a village had 110 families with a residential population of 351. It had a large number of young bare branches between the ages of 25 and 40 years: among 145 marriage-aged men, 44 were unmarried, representing more than 30% of the total. Villager Xue felt despondent about the village's conditions. He said that there were so many bare branches in the village that even a smart man could not find a wife. In 3 years, only two men found wives, and one of them was a fraud. If a family could find a wife, it became the biggest news in the village (Jiang & Li, 2009).

In the southern region, a village in Jiong-Zhong County in Hainan Province had beautiful scenery and a suitable natural environment, but it had 51 families and 59 bare branches, and an increasing number of young adult men who were not able to find wives. The village chief said, "Young women in the village are married out one by one, but young men rarely bring girls home." A survey conducted in the Baoding Li and Hmong autonomous ethnic regions showed that, between the ages of 25 and 50 years, there were 4200 unmarried men but only 500 unmarried women (Lai & Zhang, 2005).

In China, a country of multiple ethnicities, Han villagers' marriage-squeeze problems have triggered minority ethnic women's marriage migration, taking Hans' problems to minority ethnic regions (Ma, 2004). Due to historical reasons, some of China's ethnic minority groups live in isolated mountain regions with poor natural conditions and slow economic development, and female marriage migration has resulted in unmarried men's regional congregation (Shi, 2006). In the south-western mountainous region of Yunnan, where Lahu, Va, Hani, Lisu and other minority ethnic groups live, the ratio of young adult men to young adult women was between 4:1 and 10:1, and problems brought about by the female deficit had existed since the early 1980s. Yunnan Lancang Lahu Autonomous County Village was a poverty-stricken village that had 300 families and 1300 villagers, and the total average income per family was less than 800 Yuan, with one-third of its families short of food. Some young peasants that came from Jiangsu Yancheng City looking for wives explained, "The region in which Yunnan Lahu live is very poor and backward. You can spend 10,000 Yuan and find a wife. Many people from our village paid an agent to come to Yunnan to find wives for them." By 2005, it was rare to see an unmarried young girl over the age of 18 in the village, and the ratio of unmarried men to unmarried women was as high as 10:1 (Ma, 2006). Currently, conflicts between ethnicities exist at the political, economic and socio-cultural levels. However, due to Han men's marriage squeeze, many minority women have left their ethnic enclaves, making the region's men unable to settle down in families. This phenomenon could impact racial unity and social stability on some levels (Jiang & Li, 2009).

The impact of bare-branch villages

The inability of bare branches to get married disrupts their normal life and affects both their physical and psychological health; moreover, it exerts significant effects on their families and communities.

The impact on individuals

Living conditions

Due to their own poverty and low social status, bare branches are unable to wed. However, once they start to live the life of bare branches, without a woman's care and restrictions and subject to people's prejudices and a lack of economic stability, they often lead a life without purpose or goals. Even if they open up small businesses, they only conduct their business as a means to meet life's minimum requirements, which can trap them in a vicious cycle of poverty and bare-branch destitution (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2011a). A survey conducted in 2007 in Shaanxi Province and Jilin Province showed that bare branches had no family, no children, no stress, and no sense of responsibility, and they were unproductive or would sell their land and go drinking or fishing all day (Mo, 2005). Another survey conducted in 2007 in Henan Province showed that bare branches lacked goals and motivation, and because they did not have a complete family, they would exert minimum effort in their lives due to the lack of warmth and responsibility that can come with a family. Additionally, because they did not have the motivation to accumulate wealth, they did not have the incentive to work a second job: they would perform the least amount of work possible just to get through life (Jiang & Li, 2009). A survey taken in 2008 in Anhui Province showed that the rate of older, unmarried men making a living was far lower than for married men, and most of the rural area's income came from villagers leaving the village to earn money. This lack of motivation could easily lead them into poverty, making them a new poverty class (Li et al., 2010).

Health conditions

Bare branches cannot enjoy the life of a normal family, they lack communication with the opposite sex emotionally and physically, and they do not exchange thoughts with other family members. This is likely to be unhealthy physiologically and psychologically.

From a physical perspective, a survey conducted in a village in Henan Province in 2007 showed that the bare branches in that village had minimal education: 53.8%, or half of the population, had only an elementary school education and 11.5% were illiterate. Their insufficient education limited their cognitive and adaptive abilities: nearly 20% of the older bare branches were either physically or mentally disabled, and another 20% had chronic diseases (Wei, Jin & Li, 2008). Of course, their health conditions might be a reason for their inability to get married. An analysis of men over the age of 30 years was conducted in relation to their health conditions, based on data from a Chinese families' income survey in 2002. The results showed that the health conditions of the unmarried group were worse than those of the married group (Das Gupta et al., 2010).

From an emotional perspective, in a survey taken in 2007 in a village in Henan Province, a 52-year-old bare branch expressed, "Whoever does not have a wife feels ashamed, and it is difficult for them to go to places as people worry when single guys visit their homes." When asked if he was "satisfied with his life", he said with frustration that "even if life is unsatisfying, there is nothing that can be done to change it". This man felt pressured and lacked confidence and capability (Li & Li., 2008). The aforementioned scenario clearly demonstrates the detrimental effect that an unmarried status has on men's

emotional and psychological states. They usually suppress their feelings, which renders them incapable of communicating with others effectively, even with their own brothers (Wei et al., 2008). In a survey conducted in Anhui Province in 2008 on bare branches, the pressure exerted on people who were unable to wed in a common marriage-based society came from different sides. First, they could not enjoy a normal marriage and family life, and they felt pressure psychologically and physically; second, while their children's lack of marriage brought emotional stress to Chinese parents, who would dedicate their lives to finding spouses for their children, it also created a psychological burden for the bare branches; third, society's unintentional or intentional ridicule, inappropriate words or behaviors, and even sympathy could hurt the feelings of the bare branches, who believed they suffered from segregation and discrimination. These pressures and stresses could not be resolved or expressed through the care of family and the consolation of a spouse with whom men could share their most intimate relations, making them feel even more burdened (Li, Li & Peng, 2009)

Social network

One's social network has the functions of social interaction, social support and the satisfaction of fundamental emotional needs in the transformation from being an individual to being a part of a society. However, bare branches have the weakest social networks, and they rarely participate in official and unofficial activities.

Compared to married men, bare branches lack emotional communication and the support that is achieved by the intimate relations of a marriage. Because they are not in a marital relationship, bare branches do not have in-laws or offspring, and they rely on their parents, siblings, and relatives as their main sources of social support (Li et al., 2010). If their parents are still alive, these unmarried men often choose to live with their parents for the convenience of receiving daily care from them. In a survey conducted in 2008 in China's north-western Shaanxi Province, among the 136 families that had bare branches, 68 bare branches lived with their parents, 33 lived with one of their parents (the other parent was deceased), and 17 lived with other relatives (Jiang, Guo, Li & Feldman, 2009).

The scope of bare branches' social networks is very narrow. People's interaction with them is usually confined to playing cards or some other type of game, but people seldom associate with bare branches in other daily activities (Mo, 2005). Bare branches' pride is bruised and they are unwilling to interact with those who are married. Married couples also do not wish to interact with bare branches: they think that the bare branches are abnormal because their manners of thought and interaction are different from how normal people operate. Some bare branches responded that "it feels closer to be with unmarried people: we can sit together and it is easier to communicate. For those who are married, it is inconvenient for us to visit their homes, and during holidays, the unmarried have drinks together". Married men also replied that bare branches "usually do not hang out with married men during their leisure, but only hang out with other single guys, as they have nothing to talk about (with married men)" (Li & Li., 2008). Some bare branches stated that "although it was never expressed publicly, I think people look down

on me and feel sympathetic toward me. I do not need others to feel sorry for me because it makes me feel worse” (Mo, 2005).

In rural areas, one of the important social interactions is having “whip-rounds”. Whenever a family has a wedding or a funeral, people give money or presents to show their respect. The practice is an essential means for rural Chinese society to preserve, structure, cultivate, and strengthen their social networks. Having a whip-round is based on the concept that “Today, I will have a whip-round for others, and tomorrow others will do the same for me.” During the process, no one is taken advantage of or gains unfair favors (Mo, 2005). If bare branches participate in the village’s ceremonial gift exchange, but lack sufficient gifts to exchange, then they may not receive the same return from other villagers. One interviewee in Henan Province stated, “Giving in the village is on a one-to-one basis, but I cannot do much just by myself, and therefore do not receive any exchanged gifts, so they (villagers) usually do not let me participate.” Marital status affects bare branches’ participation in villages’ ceremonial gift exchanges, which in turn impacts their social networks and social integration, resulting in isolation. Because bare branches cannot participate in whip-rounds, their relationships are diminished (Li & Li., 2008).

The impact on families

Chinese villages have a family-based culture, and in these families, the children’s marriage is not just a personal matter, but one that concerns the whole family. Thus, bare branches can also bring stress to other family members. During a 2007 survey conducted in Henan Province on bare branches, using the grounded method, researchers found that bare branches’ inability to settle down affected family members’ psychological well-being, the family’s social status in the community, and the family’s financial condition (Jiang & Li, 2009).

During the research, many mothers cried when they were asked about their sons’ marriages: they expressed extreme worry and considered it their fault if their sons were not married (Li & Li., 2008). The psychological impacts on families in the countryside brought about by bare branches may include worry, low self-esteem, frustration, and other emotions. The parents of older unmarried children may feel social pressures as well (Li & Li., 2008).

Many people in Chinese society are concerned about saving face, and for peasants, saving face is a social pressure created by cultural norms. The formation of the cultural norms is predetermined by the narrow spatial factors in which peasants live and temporal factors that have endured for thousands of years and that cultivate the current customs. Parents and other family members may feel more pressure if there are bare branches at home, which can make them feel that other people look down on them and that they are losing face, thus making them unwilling to interact with neighbors and minimizing their human interactions (Wei et al., 2008). In an interview conducted in Anhui Province in 2008, more than 70% of bare branches said that they received pressure from home, and 57% stated that they felt pressured by society (Li et al., 2010).

Bare branches may also increase their families' financial burdens. Some bare branches are not only unable to support their parents but have their own expenses covered by their parents. One study showed that in a village, 80% of bare branches between the ages of 25 and 29 years still relied on their parents. The initial motivation for a family to work hard is to find a wife for the son, and this motivation is strong. However, when the hopes of finding a wife become dimmer and dimmer, the parents' motivation to work decreases and the burden becomes heavier (Mo, 2005).

However, parents never give up hope of finding a wife for their sons, so ordinary rural households spend money frugally, resisting overspending. They save for many years, even taking out loans so their son is able to wed (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). To expedite the process of finding a wife, some families think of every possibility, but many times they are tricked by hoaxes, losing both their money and the bride they were supposed to have, as well as worsening the family's financial burden (Wei et al., 2008).

The impact on the community

Bare branches usually stay in the countryside, which is economically and socially underdeveloped, imposing a negative impact on the region's economic development, retirement welfare, cultural establishment, and security. If the "surplus" male population is concentrated in a few regions that are destitute and backward, those regions can face more serious issues.

A direct consequence of the increase in bare branches is that because there are no newborn celebrations and wedding banquets, villages often lack vivacity. Families are the fundamental production units in villages, and the inability to build families destroys the production system, which in turn obstructs villages' economic development. If people's hearts are not focused on producing, village officials have to expend efforts encouraging them to produce. From a social perspective, the result is a waste of labor resources and another form of destruction of the labor force (Lv, 2006; Mo, 2005). Young men who could have achieved something are forced to leave their home towns and migrate to other towns because they are unable to find wives at home. Their departures also subtract elite producers from the local labor force (Shi, 2006).

The existence of congregated bare branches can also trigger potential problems for a village's stability and harmony. Retirement benefits for a large number of bare branches are also a serious issue. Most Chinese people in the countryside rely on their families in retirement. As the number of bare branches increases and the population ages, their need for social security and welfare will intensify because they do not have complete families to support them or wives and children to take care of them. In addition, their already-existing economic hardships and low social status will only aggravate the situation (Das Gupta et al., 2010; Ebenstein & Sharygin, 2009). The failure to obtain retirement support from families could force older unmarried men to turn their hopes to the government, believing that the most ideal retirement method is to rely on the government's social welfare and relief (Guo & Jin, 2011). Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future, the main retirement approach in the countryside will still be the support of families. Aside from economic support, the need for daily care and psychological comfort will also grow.

Without a spouse and children's support and psychological reliance, bare branches will become impoverished materialistically and spiritually. Presently, some rural villages may be bare-branch villages, but in a few years, bare-branch villages could become "Five Guarantees villages",¹ resulting in even more pressure on social security and a potential breakdown in social stability (Shi, 2006). Presently, the Chinese government is establishing social security systems, especially old-age support systems. However, these measures are far from sufficient to support the rapidly growing older bare-branch groups.

Potential threats

Sexually transmitted diseases

Bare branches cannot attain sexual satisfaction through normal means, and therefore may turn to the illegal sex trade. Although bare branches' economic difficulties may restrict their spending capacity so they cannot become the main clients of prostitutes or engage in other pornographic activities, they will become a large group with potentially insatiable sexual needs, which could be used as the basis for the pornography industry's argument for its "existence" and "expansion" in a particular region (Mo, 2005). According to a survey in Anhui Province in 2008, the quantity of bare branches' sexual partners was almost the same as married men's, but because of the lack of social and legal recognition of fixed sexual partners, older unmarried men's sex partners varied. Moreover, the survey showed that it was more likely for bare branches to have sexual intercourse with prostitutes. In the survey, 30% of the interviewees admitted that they had paid for sex, and their possibility of visiting a female sex worker was six-to-seven times higher than that of those who were married. Such results could indicate an opportunity for the spread of HIV, with the bare branches becoming HIV-carriers (Zhang et al., 2009). Bare branches are a high-risk group of people who could be infected with STDs, and they, along with prostitutes, would have a significant impact on the transmission of HIV and other STDs (Tucker et al., 2005). In some villages in Jilin Province, the chances of bare branches settling down become smaller as they age; therefore, they often smoke or drink to comfort themselves. Some bare branches like to go to karaoke bars and spend 60% of their annual incomes there hiring prostitutes (Mo, 2005). The sheer number of bare branches creates a broad "sex trade market" in the countryside, and some of the villages close to a city now have a fully developed pornography industry. Bare branches are tempted by the low rates because they can afford the expenses from their low income levels, but because of poor sanitary conditions and inadequate sex education, the countryside's pornography industry could easily lead to a pandemic of STDs, especially the spread of HIV (Jiang & Li, 2009). According to some macro-simulations, the adult HIV

¹ "Five Guarantees villages" refers to villages in which rural elderly people who are unable to work, who have neither sources of income nor family support, or whose family members do not have the ability to support them can rely on local economic organizations that are required to provide adequate food, clothing, housing, medical services, and proper funeral arrangements (five aspects in all) for these elderly people.

prevalence rate may rise to 3% in 2050 (Hertog & Merli, 2007; Merli, Hertog, Wang & Li, 2006).

Criminal behavior and violence

A large number of marriage-aged young adults in the countryside cannot find spouses and are therefore excluded from the marriage-and-family institution. This group has already affected other people's marriages through affairs and increased divorce rates. In a village in Guizhou Province, every Spring Festival period, the director of the village committee gathers all the bare branches to study the Marriage Law and Constitution Law to attempt to prevent extramarital affairs and their consequences (Chen, 2007). At the same time, other types of abnormal marriages, such as fraudulent marriages, purchased marriages, bride rentals, polyandry, and spousal exchanges have occurred, creating an enormous impact on the Chinese ethical system. Researchers found that some bare branches have experienced marriage fraud at least twice: after giving money to a so-called matchmaker, they never hear from that person again (Wei et al., 2008). Most marriage fraud occurs when villagers use a bride price to buy brides, but the brides run away after the wedding reception or after several days or years. Families that buy a marriage do not only have their "happy bubbles" burst prematurely, but they can also end up in debt, become bankrupt, or even lose their family. Men who have been tricked not only bear financial consequences but also suffer psychological torment. Because it is impossible to resolve such problems via legal channels, they may take drastic and dangerous actions with the intent of destroying everyone involved, including themselves (Sun, 2005).

Following the appearance of bare-branch groups and bare-branch villages, a market has been created to serve the potential need for women, including heinous acts such as kidnapping, human trafficking and selling women as brides to those who can afford the fees. In certain regions of China, buying wives has become a common practice. This phenomenon has fostered criminal activities, such as kidnapping and female trafficking, which are counterproductive to society's stability and development.

A large amount of quantitative and qualitative research has determined that the increasing ratio of men who are unable to get married could trigger serious threats to society's security and peace. From a macro perspective, the sex ratio is an important determinant of the level of violence. According to a study in India, there is a strong correlation between an increasing sex ratio (male to female) and violent crimes and murders, after controlling for socio-economic development indicators such as the literacy rate, urbanization rate, poverty index, caste distribution, and the ratio of under-5 years old mortality probabilities (Dreze & Khera, 2000). With data from 26 provinces in China between 1988 and 2004, one study found that the population's male-to-female sex ratio between the ages of 16 and 25 years had a major influence on the level of crime, after controlling for variables such as per capita income, employment rate, secondary school enrollment rate, urbanization rate, and age structure (Edlund et al., 2007). Pursuant to a survey conducted in 2009 in 28 provinces and 364 villages in China, in the past 3 years, some bare branches have participated in activities that are destructive to the security of

society. The occurrence rates from the highest to the lowest were gambling, disturbing the social order, theft, and affray. Among these occurrences, participation by bare branches from the southern region was the highest and caused relatively more severe destruction to society (Jin, Guo, Liu & Li, 2009).

Collective actions of bare-branch villages: Is it possible?

During the Ming Dynasty, Qing Dynasty and early Republic, because of the heinous customs of female infanticide and polygamy, more than 20% of men were not able to marry and eventually became bare branches. Some scholars have found a strong correlation between violence and bare branches (Ownby, 1996; Perry, 1980). Causes such as social, political, and economic issues, the unfair distribution of land, and war and famine may irritate discontented people at the bottom of society and lead bare branches to mobilize to form secret societies and bandit groups (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2011).

Men tend to congregate, and male congregation tends to lead to aggression. Therefore, aggression is a predictable characteristic of male groups (Tiger, 2004). Young people who are frustrated and segregated may attempt to elevate their social status through a series of inappropriate behaviors and might even become trouble-makers (Li, Li, Wei & Jiang, 2010b). In a 2004 survey conducted in Jilin and Shaanxi provinces, many interviewees of different backgrounds expressed the similar viewpoint that bare branches were a group of overly honest people, and that they were “good citizens” in society. However, people also admitted that, on some level, the increasing numbers of bare branches could cause an increase in sexual crimes, theft, robbery, affray, and other misconduct. According to the same study, it was also more likely for bare branches to start organized criminal gangs (Liu, 2005).

With the emergence of more and more bare-branch villages, there is increasing concern about the collective actions of bare branches, which may endanger social stability (Hudson & den Boer, 2004). In China, villages often consist of one or more clans. In such villages, a village culture has developed, where a clan or the whole village experiences more or less the same benefits and losses and shares the same ethical views and behavioral norms. In these groups or clans, everyone is familiar with the other members’ situations because all internal information is shared (Li, 1994). This type of information-sharing makes it easy for bare branches’ subcultures to be broadcast, which in turn can simplify the creation and establishment of bare branches’ communication networks within the region. Bare branches, with much in common, may form a “generalized belief” system. Under this generalized belief system, with mobilization by influential people, these groups may take collective actions and initiate large-scale social conflicts (Krottnerus, 1983; Smelser, 1962).

Discussion

In China, because of the high male sex ratio at birth and women’s marriage migration, an imbalance of the sexes has appeared in many regions. When there is a deficit of women, poor men are not able to find wives, which can result in the creation of

bare-branch villages that suffer from inconvenient transportation, an underdeveloped economic environment, and a difficult lifestyle. However, because of the imbalance of the sex ratio, bare branches do not only appear in impoverished villages: some wealthy communities also experience the bare-branch phenomenon.

Congregations of bare branches have an aggravating impact on public security. Individually, the life of a bare branch is miserable, unhealthy, and physiologically and psychologically suppressed. Bare branches are excluded from many social activities because of their inability to wed in a timely manner. Additionally, their social networks are much smaller than those of other people, causing them to bear a heavy burden and making them feel discouraged and diffident about life. They have a poor sense of social responsibility and lack motivation. Bare branches cannot contribute to their families' financial, psychological and social status, and they can only restrict a community's economic growth, corrupt social moral values and destroy the community's security.

In the countryside, congregations of bare branches are a potential threat to the local region. The bare branches may turn to prostitution and commit other inappropriate acts that can exacerbate the risk of spreading STDs. For those who are forced to stay single, they will do anything to find an opportunity to marry, causing such issues as affairs, a third person meddling in a marriage, a constant rise in the divorce rate, and threatening the stability of the traditional marriage institution. Criminal cases will increase, and criminal activities that had disappeared, such as trading marriages, child marriages, kidnapping and human trafficking, will resurface, breeding unethical practices and ugliness.

Respect is a prerequisite for establishing communication networks between different social groups and in the cognitive recognition of organizations. In Chinese society, when someone cannot settle down in a timely manner, he often loses others' respect for him. As time goes by and the unmarried person remains single, he may start to think that he has been abandoned and forgotten by society, which can result in a growing sense of discouragement and uselessness, so that he becomes resentful toward society. The formation of a congregation's emotional state usually relates to the congregation's subjective feelings. This group, under certain conditions, is likely to form a subculture that deviates from mainstream moral standards, creating negative emotions, blaming the country or local government on which the group has relied, and obstructing the execution of decrees and the operation of grassroots organizations.

The Chinese Government has recognized the severity of the problem and has adopted a series of measures to decrease the male birth sex ratio, such as a national operation called "Care for Girl Children", which originated from the Chaohu Care for Girls Experimental District (Hvistendahl, 2009; Zheng, 2007). Through operations like "Care for Girls" and the appropriate relaxation of the one-child policy, there could be some effects on the birth sex ratio. Of course, it will be years before concrete results are seen (Das Gupta et al., 2010). However, for bare-branch congregations and bare-branch villages that exist on different scales, the Chinese government should immediately address and resolve such issues as satisfying the life needs of bare branches, providing necessary retirement security or welfare, and preventing potential problems that bare branches could cause.

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