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Modern Mask Hides Conditions in Rural China

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Modern mask hides conditions in rural China

By Lynette Ong

CHENGDU - Traveling along the expressway from Sichuan's capital Chengdu to Nanchong city in the northeast of the province makes one wonder if this is really southwestern China - one of the poorest parts of this colossal kingdom. The highway is clean, well maintained and clearly labeled with big signboards. It's like cruising along a highway in an industrialized country such as Japan.

Sichuan itself is a diverse and enormous province that boasts a population of 111 million - half that of the Indonesian archipelago and more than double that of South Korea. Sichuanese are primarily Han, but the western region is also home to minorities such as Yi, Tibetan, Miao and Hui. Sichuan has basins in the east, plateaus in the west, mountains in the central south and highland swamps in the central north. The province's economy is as assorted as its geographical diversities. The plains in Chengdu's vicinity are major industrial areas, playing host to a wide range of industries such as food processing, electronics, and medical products. Urban residents in these areas enjoy an annual per capita income as high as 9,000 yuan (US\$1,088), while rural residents average about 3,400 yuan (\$411), according to official statistics. In the western minorities region, farmers' annual incomes only just cross the 1,000 yuan mark.

Nanchong, four hours by road from the provincial capital, has some "signs" of a modern city - two huge shopping malls stand tall in the city center, linked by a pedestrian bridge. On one side of the mall, young consumers pack the air-conditioned space under McDonald's golden arches on a hot and steamy summer afternoon. Dixige (Disco Chicken) - a local fast-food rival - occupies the other end of the mall. Nonetheless, the facade of modernity masks the conditions in the countryside that this prefecture encompasses: Nanchong is a collection of nine counties, many of which are designated poverty counties.

In Xunfeng village, four hours away from Nanchong city, I got a glimpse of the villagers' lives through the prism of Zhou Pinfang, a 35-year-old farmer. Zhou is married with two school-age children and has an elderly father. In this hilly part of the countryside, farmers grow a combination of grains, corn and yams. Grain production is just about sufficient for self-consumption; there is little reserve. Corn and yams are mostly used as feedstock for pigs and chickens. The remoteness of this village means there is no market for cash crops such as fruits and vegetables. Were it closer to the county seat or a major township, where large numbers of non-farming households reside, the villagers could be involved in lucrative cash cropping. It is not. Zhou has four pigs and a dozen chickens - about the average asset level in Xunfeng, where livestock are considered assets, investments and cash cows for the villagers. But Zhou's assets, or those of an average villager, aren't enough for him to make a decent living.

Zhou's wife works in a shoe factory in Guangdong, a prosperous coastal province

in southeastern China. She has been away from home for close to two years. She and her husband take turns at being the breadwinner: Zhou was a construction worker in Beijing in the years before his wife left for the factory. While she's away, he becomes the homemaker. He farms as well as takes care of his two children and his 55-year-old father. His wife is among the county's 230,000 migrant workers who work in other parts of the country, as far as away as Beijing and Xinjiang, to support their remaining family members in the hinterland. Migrant workers account for half of the county's total workforce of 470,000, and remit a total of 1 billion yuan annually back to the villages.

The remittances make up more than a third of the county's total income of 2.8 billion yuan, without which many residents in the countryside could not sustain their livelihoods. The hemorrhage of labor is certainly not unique to this county - many poor areas in the western part of China export labor to industrializing coastal provinces, helping to stimulate the growth of industries and the country's economic progress as a whole. Relaxation of the household registration system, or *hukou*, that once tied rural residents to their places of birth has allowed people to move to where they can obtain higher returns for their labor and, through remittances, improve the standard of living of the remaining rural populations. That said, rural-urban migration is still hampered by lack of information flows about the urban job market, as well as institutional discriminations against rural residents in education, health care and other social services in the cities. Rural residents, or *nongmin*, are not entitled to the numerous state subsidies on social services provided to China's urbanities.

Back in Xunfeng village, Zhou seems content with his life, though he and his children only get to see their wife and mother once every few years. "I consider myself lucky that my wife is working in Guangdong. We miss her, but she helps to support the family," Zhou said. His wife brings home about 4,000 yuan annually, most of which is used for the children's education and medical costs, as well as farming and animal husbandry expenditures - fertilizers, seeds, piglets and chickens. In this part of the world, where kinship and *guanxi* (human relationships) matter as much as formal ties, *hongbaixishi*, or gifts for auspicious occasions such as weddings and birthdays, can also burn a big hole on one's pockets. Many even turn to the informal credit market - borrowing from friends, relatives and rotating credit associations - to finance this expenditure, which they consider an essential part of rural community life.

Education is largely on a user-pay basis in the countryside. Zhou pays about 500 yuan a year for his daughter, who goes to a local primary school, and 1,000 yuan for his son, who attends a secondary school. That aside, there are other miscellaneous fees for examinations and textbooks. Nine-year compulsory education exists only in name. Many children in China's rural areas have been forced to quit school simply because their families are not able to afford tuition fees. In the hinterland, basic education is supposed to be funded by the local governments - township and county - but local authorities' fiscal stress has

caused them to rationalize education expenditures. Most of them can only afford to pay for teachers' salaries, leaving other school expenses to be funded by the users.

Across the black-and-white screen of their television, the material lives of the city dwellers flash before the eyes of Zhou and his children. "I want my children to be well educated and get jobs in the big cities - that's the only way for us to live like they do," Zhou said.

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高速公路旁的中国农村

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开车行驶在四川省省会成都至该省东北部的南充市的高速公路上时，人们不禁心生疑惑这真的是中国最贫穷的地区之一大西南吗？这段高速公路不仅清扫得很干净，巨大的标识牌也非常清楚。在这样的高速公路上行驶，感觉和在高度工业化的日本没什么区别。

四川省人口达1.11亿，相当于印尼总人口的一半，韩国人口的两倍还多；民族成分多样，以汉族为主。该省地形复杂，经济情况如同其地理条件一般，呈现出多样化的局面。成都平原及其周边地区是主要的工业区，食品加工、电子工业及制药业在这里都有所发展。根据官方统计数据，这里的城市居民年均收入约为9000元人民币，农村居民的年收入为3400元，而在偏远的西部少数民族聚居区，农民们的年收入则仅为1000元出头。

距省会成都仅4小时高速公路车程的南充，市中心矗立着两座大型卖场，它们之间由一座步行天桥相连，看起来有几分现代城市的气息。在卖场的一边，麦当劳的标志赫然入目；而另一边则有德克士快餐雄踞一方。然而，这样一副现代化城市的面具所掩盖的事实是：南充9个小县城中的大部分还在贫困线上挣扎。

距离南充市区只有4小时车程的一个小县城，那里有一位叫周品方（音译）的农民，他的生活足以折射当地方方面面的情况。

周品方今年35岁，家中有两个正在上学的孩子和一位老父。这个小县城属于山岭地区，农民主要种植谷物、玉米和土豆，种植的谷物仅能填饱他们自己的肚子，而玉米和土豆主要用于养鸡喂猪。由于地理位置偏僻，没有市场，他们无法种植经济作物来增加收入。如果依照当地习惯将牲畜和家禽均视为家产的一部分，周品方的家境在当地属于中等，但即便如此，他的所有收入仍不能维持像样的生计。

周品方的妻子在广东省一家鞋厂打工，已经离开家将近两年了。在他们家，丈夫和妻子轮流承担养家的责任。周品方所在的县城，有23万人出门打工，其中还有人远赴新疆或北京。他们背井离乡，为的是挣钱养活自己的家人。这个小县城的劳动力总数约为47万人，其中到外地打工的劳动力约占一半，他们每年为家乡带回的收入达10亿元，占到了当地28亿元总收入的1/3还多。如果不是因为他们的贡献，当地的许多居民将无法维持生计。

劳动力输出并不是这个小县城特有的情况，事实上，中国西部的很多贫困地区都向沿海工业城市输出了劳动力，在推动这些城市发展的同时也促进了家乡经济的增长。户籍政策的调整，使这些曾因户口所限不得不在同一个地方生老病死的农村居民，得以有机会迁居到其他地方，为留在家乡的亲人带来更好的生活。但是，这种农村劳动力向城市转移的进程还是受到了一些因素的限制，比如，对城市劳动力市场信息缺乏了解，城市对外来人口在教育、医疗及其他社会福利方面的政策歧视。比起城市居民，农民们能享受的由国家提供的社会福利还比较有限。

尽管周品方和孩子们好几年才能见他妻子一面，但他对自己的生活状况还是比较满意的。他说：“我妻子能在广东打工养家，我觉得自己很幸运。”妻子每年给家里4000元，其中大部分用于孩子的教育和医疗，以及种地养牲畜。

在这里，教育是要自己掏腰包的。周品方的女儿还在上小学，每年需要支付500元学费；而他正在上中学的儿子，则每年花去家里1000元，这都还不包括考试、书本等杂费。九年义务教育在这里名存实亡，中国农村的许多孩子们都因为家境贫穷而不得不辍学。内地的一些地区，尽管基础教育应该由当地政府拨款支持，但是由于政府财政困难，他们大多只能支付教师的工资，学校方面的支出则由受教育者承担。

一部黑白电视机将城里人的生活展现在周品方和他的孩子面前，周品方说：“我希望我的孩子能够多读些书，以后在大城市里找到工作，只有这样，我们才可能像城里人那样生活。”

http://qnck.cyol.com/gb/qnck/2004-09/29/content_958680.htm