

# Why People Don't Want to Enter Big Cities? Professional Ties and Small-Town Living Based on The Case of Village in Central China

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**Abstract:** Based on the experience of peasants in Li Village in the Central China, the urbanization process of Chinese farmers does not always continue to develop towards the big cities. Farmers' willingness to enter big cities is influenced by their professional ties. This study found that, the simple social division of labor in a small-town lead to an infertile development of interpersonal trust. With low-end occupations and high homogeneity, people could not organize their relationships by professional logic. Based on the lack of relationship and trust, social support is insufficient, as a consequence, people start to shrink their social interaction thereby their developmental needs are further inhibited.

**Keywords:** Professional ties; Social support; Nearby urbanization; Upward development

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## 1. Introduction

The urbanization of farmers is considered to be one of the most concerning phenomena in Chinese society in recent years. As it is a problem domain, therefore some parts of it have already attracted the attention of the academic research on: How do farmers enter the city; What kind of city did they enter; How is their livelihood and life after entering the city; What kind of social relations can peasants rely on after they move to the city. The answers to those questions are completely different in different parts of China.

Study of small towns and population development were conducted to find the answers for those questions. The China Comprehensive Social Survey in 2010 (CGSS2010) shows that farmers are not willing to take the initiative to urbanize into the big cities, furthermore only about 10% of the total farmers have plans to move to cities. In the previous studies, scholars have summarized the influencing factors of farmers' willingness to move to cities. Lu Y believes that young rural people with higher incomes with more modern lifestyle have a stronger willingness to actively urbanize<sup>[1]</sup>. In addition, Wang D's research uses the inter-generational transfer of family resources as a study method, where through the relay-style inter-generational support to encourage decent families moving into the city<sup>[2]</sup>. In general, the main factors affecting farmers' willingness to move to cities are including the individual human capital endowment, family demographic structure, physical capital stock, urban-rural linkages, and the level of regional social and economic development<sup>[3,4]</sup>. The level of regional economic development and geographical location are the main influencing factors for farmers to settle in small towns rather than big cities at the prefecture level and above<sup>[5]</sup>. In short, the mechanisms by which interpersonal relationships and social capital affect people are needed to be further elucidated and studied.

Ethnographic research in the Li Village in Central China was conducted, where the entire village was relocated to the nearby Fuxian Town, thereby the identity of the villagers of Li Village was known as the townsmen of Fuxian Town, where the people are engaged in social exchanges intertwined with geographical and professional relations. However, after the villagers enter the township, they did not show the willingness to continue to enter the county seat and prefecture-level city. We try to analyze their livelihood and communication mode based on their professional life to answer this question, ‘Why did the development of Li Village peasants tend to stagnate after entering small towns and no longer consider making further upward transitions?’ We found the reason was due to the subtle interaction mechanism: the lack of social support, the lack of development of professional ties, and the unwillingness of farmers to move out.

## **2. Li Village’s historical evolution of its livelihood model and geographical relations**

Before moving to the town, Li Village was a village that lacked the foundation of mutual assistance and cooperation. The original Li Village is located in a hilly area with a complex terrain, various agricultural management methods, unique irrigation conditions, long-term development of mountainous areas, unequal inheritance system, and a semi-open lifestyle, which makes the people loosely live and socially connected weak, and the whole community is relatively thin. Social norms are as fragile as disciplinary power, making people to adept at seeking revenge such as private remedies. It can be seen that the blood-based and geographical-based social support that people can rely on is insufficient.

After distributing fields to households, people took the nuclear family as a unit to withdraw from the collective production field, however, in the fields of entertainment, the family and society have not yet been separated from dispute mediation and other fields, forming a state of ‘collective semi-dissolution.’ Additionally, the small processing workshops on fireworks and firecracker industry becomes emerged, and the one-to-one production and sales model had a greater impact on the strengthening of nuclear families and the weakening of community connections. The resulting development logic further shaped the unique family form and livelihood model. In the mid-to-late 1990s, the disintegration of commune and brigade enterprises, and the privatization of industries further promoted the transition of livelihood from farmers to workers, and more unexpectedly established a social stratification structure gathered in the middle and lower classes, which also directly affected the process of subsequent urbanization and influences the relationship between blood, geography, and career.

In 2005, small family workshops were banned, the logic of development drove the people of Li Village to work between the villages and towns, further working hard to obtained a good job to improve the family living conditions. In addition, the active market transactions and the practice of simulating township life not only meet the development needs of the people in Li Village, but also stimulate their motivation to make an upward leap. Furthermore, the introduction of education, and the entry of production into the town resulted in the separation of the sons or the father of the nuclear family from the village into the town. In the process of urbanization nearby, the people of Li Village show the characteristics of fast speed, wide participation, periodicity, coincidence of time and space, mainly self-built houses into towns and pre-consumption building houses. Due to the coincidence of time and space, the living distribution of Li Village people after moving into the town is very different from the living distribution in the village. The old neighbors were separated, and the people of Li Village faced unfamiliar neighbors, however they could quickly form connections with their new neighbors according to their new geography location, and developed more daily contacts on the basis of geography, and reorganized a more complex geo-relational circle.

The new living pattern and employment choices, which is formed after the people of Li Village moved the town, did not completely change their social connection mechanism. The main orientation of life for

the people of Li Village who took the nuclear family as their unit of action, was still based on the geographical circle. The blood ties have always been weak and could not effectively penetrate into all aspects of family life. In this situation, the family's mutual assistance and cooperation in the sense of functional theory, as well as the preference in behavior, and the trust and belonging in emotional value are still dominated by the geographic circle formed by the intersection of the old and the new. In addition, the industry and commerce in Fuxian Town are generally at the low level of production with strong homogeneity, which is lacking a condition to form a strong business relationship, furthermore the business relationship could not invade into the relationship networks of an individual life, not to mention the life of Li Village people. The development provides social support; therefore, people's lives are not really scattered by other social connection methods, which in turn strengthens people's identification and depending on their geographical circles.

Through the above statement, we have discussed the three most important social facts, which are the weak blood ties, the social interaction in the unit of the nuclear family, and the insufficient development of career in the town. In short, the blood connection of people in Li Village has always been weak and could not effectively penetrate into all aspects of family life. In this case, the mutual aid communication between the geographical nuclear family replaces the role of the consanguineous nuclear family. Additionally, the social interaction in the unit of the nuclear family avoids the excessive development of individual social interaction, which further consolidates the status of geographical ties. Due to the low-end industry in the town area and the insufficient development of the social division of labor, the role of an industry relationship in organizing personal life and reshaping social relationships is too weak.

### **3. The mechanism of low-end employment and the willingness of upward development**

#### **3.1. Weak professional connection under low-end employment**

As a theoretical abstraction, we attempt to respond to the existing sociological propositions, where the social division of labor and social solidarity. It is generally believed that the ongoing refined social division of labor do not only shapes or organically united modern cities, but also shatters the mechanically united rural communities by absorbing labor. A group of people who used to be purely engaged in farming have to reorganize their social relations based on the occupational differentiation. They have to step into the urban society with one foot, where they must re-arrange their daily lives according to the two sets of logic. Scholar Wang Guohua has studied the communication behavior of migrant workers, and believes that the strengthening of the professional ties can make the communication space of farmers gradient. Among them, the strict hierarchical system in the industry, the wage system, and their daily work rituals largely shape their daily life. The important characteristics that changed are the strengthening of career ties, in contrast the weakening of small geographical ties<sup>[6]</sup>. In an urban society dominated by industry and commerce, will the logic of social interaction be dominated by professional ties? If not, under what circumstances can professional logic become dominate in the social life? These are the next research questions which we try to find the answer.

From the above-mentioned ideal of urbanization, the urban life of Li Village is completely different, and the professional ties do not reorganize the social relationship of the farmers. The mechanisms involved in this condition are both the economic and social. From an economic point of view, the most important reason why the logic of karma could not take the lead is due to the underdevelopment of career. As an industrial and commercial town with a relatively developed with certain types of handicraft industry, the Fuxian Town has not developed yet to form a social organization with a collective nature of blood, geographical, and professional ties. In the existing industrial system and commercial system of Fuxian Town, there is no dominance, support, and competition relationship in the production process and the relationships tends to be simplified, which makes it impossible for Li Village people to form a stronger

professional relationship based on occupation. This weak professional connection could not invade other aspects of the social network in the Li Village people. Therefore, after moving to the town, the people of Li Village are still a simple society with the nuclear family as the unit and geographic location as the main communication link. The most obvious manifestation is that individuals outside the work still choose to return to their nuclear family and geographical circle of social support, rather than colleagues. Under certain circumstance, where they need to choose between the geographical and professional relationships, the social contacts of Li Village people usually give priority to the geographical relationships.

From a social perspective, weaker professional ties cannot invade an individual's social life. People in Li Village have never attached their expectations and meanings of life into their professional ties. As far as the general Li Village family is concerned, the social support provided by the nuclear family to the individual is sufficient to meet the needs of an individual life to a great extent, and the geographical circle can also provide social support for the individual and the family, thus eliminating the strength and role of career bond. However, the people of Li Village have shown a great self-sufficiency and conservatism in their demand for social support. Why do people in Li Village only need minimal social support, but not other developmental support?

### **3.2. Lack of social support shrink social interaction**

In addition to the social interaction issues, the low-end social division of labor also directly affects everyone life that lives in the small towns. And this leads to our next study issue: the demand and support for the further upward development of farmers after entering the town.

Firstly, it is known that farmers do not eagerly continue to develop, this is not because they are satisfied with their current life. Many villagers in Li Village have mentioned the enviable rich educational and medical resources in the city, however, they did not have the courage to move to the city rashly, and they explained this as 'no education, no technology, no acquaintances help, and can't find a job.' From a comparative perspective, the 'no acquaintances,' which is often mentioned in the local discourse, enter our field of vision.

The move of peasants to enter the city is a part of the transformation of the social structure of the whole society, however, for an individual, it is not only an action based on an economic rational calculation, but also based an action which is full of social meaning. In the social network theory, the relationship between economic rational and social action is very close. 'No acquaintances' means the lack of social network and support, which is a long-standing problem with Li Village people. What is more serious is that, as a traditional industrial and commercial town, Fuxian Town has also not developed a good relationship based on the social division of labor. The dual insufficiency of strong and weak ties seriously hinders the construction of social networks. The blood and geography ties can bring about strong ties, repeating the same information transmission within homogeneous organizations or groups, while the weak ties exist between heterogeneous individuals, which help an individual to acquire new information outside the organization or group, therefore, have an advantage in social mobility, job hunting, and others <sup>[7]</sup>. Among different types of relationships, the kinship has always been relatively weak, not strong enough which one can rely on. Additionally, professional ties are difficult to develop in today's prevailing industries, further it is difficult for people to build a network with sufficient information advantages. Li Village people are well aware of this, thereby they are neither willing to move upwards, nor to actively build social relationships for the sake of upward mobility.

Therefore, through the status quo of social relations in Li Village, we can find a subtle interaction mechanism: The lack of social support; The unwillingness of farmers to move out; The lack of development of professional ties. The three forms an interactive relationship, where the lack of social support leads to the lack of resources for peasants to flow out, while the lack of industrial differentiation leads to the lack

of post-consequential social support of the farmers, which in turn inhibits their demand for out-migration, therefore after farmers' willingness to move out is reduced, therefore the variables and difficulties in the system can usually be overcome without the influences of the external force. Usually, people's social interaction is not boundless, and it has the connotation of classification and stratification, where people will limit their social interaction with certain circles as the core. In a more developed modern society, this limitation is usually caused by economic differentiation and occupational differences. However, due to the weak economic differentiation and small occupational differences within the township, people could not find a suitable basis for initiating a social relation, therefore the loose geographical relations became more important. In the daily life of the town area, families and neighbors have basically met their needs of mutual assistance, cooperation and emotional value, and then farmers are more reluctant to actively participate in the establishment of business relationships. Ultimately, the social interaction within the township takes on a shrinking pattern, where the similar pattern exists in other underdeveloped towns in China.

### **3.3. Simple social division of labor leads to insufficient development of interpersonal trust**

In the process of spontaneous flow of villagers to towns, there were no substantial difference between the inner logic of urban and rural life in the past, where the occupational environment is nothing more than entering factories from farmland, or even odd jobs on call just to fulfill daily life needs. It is a small-scale street market trade mainly based on acquaintance trade, perhaps it is just an extra facade. The peasants entered the city, however, the city did not have the inner core of the city in essence. The market logic and relatively standardized rules that exist in the urban society are like a system that enables people to trust each other beyond individual relationships. It is not only different from the closed rural society, where people share a set of standards and trust each other because of complete familiarity. But it is also different from the urban society, which is established by the social division of labor and rely on strangers to complete the logic of daily actions.

The shrinkage of social interaction does not mean that people can avoid social changes and development, and it can be said that the relationship between people in the town is maintained in a state of 'half-baked.' The two ways of people thinking about social interaction are implicit in their life experience, and the essence to this problem is trust in a relationship. This has been theoretically explained, in economic relations, where the first type of trust is based on the personal relationships is what Granovetter called 'relational embeddedness' [8]. The trust is inherited in a separate relationship, which relies on an identity that is constructed between the two parties, however this also can increase the chances of fraud. Secondly, trust based on group and network identities, where the relationship between two people is intertwined into a more complex 'structural embedding,' thereby the relationship under the coverage of this social network is substantially more reliable. In addition, based on the issue of economic relations arising from the industrial development of Fuxian Town, there are many examples of deceit and betrayal caused by 'relational embeddedness,' therefore it is difficult for the people to trust each other. On the other hand, all kinds of power, competition, and cooperation relations are not fully developed, therefore, the soil of 'structurally embedded' professional relations are thin. In addition, the ties of blood and geography have always been relatively weak, which makes the norms and authority of the entire community disorderly, and further could not develop a structural trust with a stable foundation.

In addition to the relational and structural trust carried by the real interpersonal relationship itself, the social relations of the town also lack in the systematic trust contained in the abstract society dominated by modernity [9]. The systemic trust means that the development of modernity has gradually created various rationalized procedures and systems [10], and there are not a naturally occurring process in the endogenous people's daily life, but are created by institutions or experts who are not presented according to their professionalism. However, the abstraction of social operation makes people gradually to adapt to the broad

social division of labor, trust the division of labor system, and hand over the rights and opportunities of survival and development to abstract procedures and systems. This systemic trust manifests itself to varying degrees in different individuals. From a technical point of view, although as mentioned earlier that the introduction of modern technology has changed the farmers' lives, however these changes are still superficial. Everyone who participates in social life and market activities could not resist the coercion of abstract society, but this does not mean that everyone has to adapt to the abstract operating mechanism with procedural, reflective, and impersonal characteristics. Meanwhile, from the perspective of value, people's identification with procedures, institutionalized individualism, and the categories of instrumental rationality contained in abstract society is still far from being produced. The consequence of the lack of participation in the social system is that either people's daily lives depend on blood, geography, or weak karmic ties, the essence of township society are still a society of acquaintances.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In summary, this paper argued why the urbanization process of Chinese farmers does not always continue to develop towards the big cities. Previous research confirms, the impact of interpersonal relationships and social capital during the urbanization process. According to the work done on people Li Village after they moved to the town, we found the following mechanism between the low-end employment and the willingness of upward development, where under low-end employment, the professional ties do not reorganize the social relationship of the farmers, meanwhile a simple social division of labor leads to insufficient development of interpersonal and systemic trust. Based on the lack of relationship and trust, social support is auxiliary, and people's willingness to move up is further inhibited. In this sense, there is no substantial difference between the inner logic of urban and rural life for farmers live in small towns.

#### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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