ASIANetwork Exchange
A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts

Article

How to Cite: Hill, Ann Maxwell, Jinji Wei, and Susan Rose. 2020. In Search of Community in Rural China. *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 27(1), pp. 127–149. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.321

Published: 27 July 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *ASIANetwork Exchange*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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Ann Maxwell Hill, et al. 'In Search of Community in Rural China' (2020) 27(1), pp. 127–149 *ASIANetwork Exchange*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.321

ARTICLE

In Search of Community in Rural China

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Change in China's urban areas is dramatic, as cityscapes emerge from rice paddies. China's rural areas reflect the impact of globalization, especially as villagers leave home for work in towns and cities. Much of the current research on migration out of China's countryside has noted its negative consequences for village life, a phenomenon often dubbed "hollowing out." Our qualitative research on "hollowing out," undertaken by a student-faculty team from Dickinson College, focused on village sustainability in an area that has experienced substantial out-migration. Given the time constraints of our funding, we concentrated on village activities that were by and large public and observable – farm ecology and local culture. The village "stay-behinds" did most of the community's agricultural labor and cultural work, the latter especially manifest in religious activities. Based on a combination of fieldwork and available published materials, we found evidence for optimism about the sustainability of the village community in the age of migration.

Keywords: hollowing out; migration; agricultural ecology; religion; community; remittances

Introduction

"Hollowing out" is the term often used in a global context to describe the general deterioration of rural life as megacities prosper and proliferate. In China, "hollowing out" (*kongxinhua* in *Putonghua*, China's national language) typically brings to mind a rural village with dilapidated, abandoned housing at its core, a declining year-round population, and a collapsing of community institutions (Liu et al. 2010). While the negative consequences for rural communities due to population movement from the countryside to the city have been well documented, now new research concerned with how viable rural communities in China survive or even revitalize, in the midst of unprecedented levels of out-migration, is emerging (e.g. Lu and Rui 2019; Qin and Flint 2012; Wu 2016; Yang and Zong 2017). In both sets of literature, the research on hollowing out highlights differences among social scientists in what they identify specifically as critical to sustaining a community. For example, which is more important to the constitution of a community, the state of housing at the village center (e.g. Liu et al. 2010), or the quality and frequency of interactions among people in the community (e.g. Qin and Flint 2012)? While such debates are important, they seem narrowly focused in the face of what is a broad, complex phenomenon across rural China. For our research on community in a rural Bai village, West Brook, our overall goal was to gain an understanding of village viability more broadly in the context of sustainability analysis. Our intention was to collect qualitative data in two general areas: farm ecology and local culture. A sustainable farm ecology was characterized as one leaving sufficient environmental resources for the support of the next generation (adapted from Kates et al. 2005). By cultural sustainability, we mean that as culture changes, it continues to serve the needs of the community as a source of useful values, meaning, and identity across generations (adapted from Daskon and Binns 2010).

These concepts, translated into our work in the Bai village, meant that we focused on the work of the so-called "stay-behinds" (*liushoude* in *Putonghua*) and their physical labor in agriculture and other areas of the village economy, as well as the more culturally embedded work in long-standing village institutions such as temples and festivals. Our Dickinson College research group was composed of six

undergraduate students, two faculty, and a Dickinson farmer; we had funds for only a short stay in the village (three weeks). We wanted to focus on village activities that were by and large public and observable, characteristic of much of the work around villages, temples, and in agriculture. In short, we observed and participated in a community whose stay-behinds continued to work in agriculture, although not usually in the same ways typical of the village's history under the People's Republic of China (PRC) administration (since the mid-1950s) or earlier. The stay-behinds, notably older people and especially women, were also active in community organizations.

What we discovered reflects findings from our group's fieldwork, the research literature on the phenomenon of hollowing out, and published research about local Bai history and culture, government policy, and previous anthropological work in this same ethnic community (e.g. *Eryuan County Yearbook* 2016, Zhao 2016, Bryson 2015, Kao 2014, Chang 2018, Silverman and Blumenfield 2013; Chami *et al.* 2003; Durand *et al.* 1996; Zhu and Luo 2008, Li Donghong 2012). We also considered remittances, money sent back to the village by migrants. Remittances were an important source of new income in the village and played a role in construction of and support for village institutions. From a combination of available source materials and our fieldwork, we found reasons to be optimistic about the sustainability of community in this small village. Below, we discuss the evidence for this optimism. At the same time, we identify in our conclusions a future agenda that would allow us to investigate other areas of the community that we were unable to explore for reasons of access or time.

Field Site and Methods

Our field site was a Bai village located about three hours' drive northwest of Dali, the city historically central to the culture and identity of the Bai ethnic group. West Brook has slightly over 8,000 residents according to the last available census records (*Eryuan County Yearbook* 2016: 314). West Brook is the administrative seat of the local *zhen*, a rural administrative unit that encompasses nine villages in this upland valley, of which West Brook is the largest. The *zhen* population in 2015 was 34,207.

Although we have no exact figures for the number of villagers who have migrated to cities such as Dali, Lijiang, Shanggelila and Deqin in northwestern

Yunnan Province, local government cadres told us that one-third to one-half of the villagers in West Brook had left for short-term or long-term wage work. A local high-ranking official told us that about 10,000 people in the nine villages comprising the *zhen* (with a population of 34,000) had migrated out of the area for long-term work, and approximately 8,000 for short-term work. Based on our own observations and interviews, long-term migrants would include those who established restaurants and other businesses in Yunnan's cities and beyond. Short-term migrants were those, often less educated, whose only capital was their labor. Compared to village incomes – about Y2,000/month on average, according to the local official – educated migrants could make as much as Y8-9,000 a month, in some cases even Y10,000/month. Those migrants without skills made Y3-4,000/month, and sometimes as low as Y100/day. Of course, said the official, all migrants had to pay for rent and buy food when away from the village.

Despite high rates of out-migration, a West Brook native (who is also an anthropologist) told us that almost every family had at least some members who remained in the village (Li, 2018). As far as we know, out-migrants are officially counted as village residents, a common phenomenon in developing economies (Qin and Flint 2012: 36). In China, especially, household registration makes a hard distinction between rural residents and urban residents. These official residential categories, affecting a family's access to better services and education in China's cities, are difficult to change. In the local *zhen*, of which West Brook is a part, all residents were categorized as *nongmin,* or farmers; only local government cadres were in a separate category. The cadres who assisted our research were West Brook natives and likely had a local – that is, rural – household registration. In short, the people who migrated from West Brook for wage work in China's towns and cities retained their rural identities in the household registration system. We discuss more below about the fruits of their labor in the form of rising incomes and remittances from work outside the village. For now, suffice it to say that new houses on the village periphery, on side streets, and in the village center, not to mention the new clothes and spending money we observed among many village youth, all testified to the bounty of remittances.

Our field work in the village, with the help of two research assistants and local cadres, consisted primarily of interviews and participant observation, with some ethnographic filming. We conducted a total of 24 interviews. Some of these were videotaped, both for purposes of accurate translation and for an ethnographic film. We were out in the village every day, going to the fields for agricultural observations, to the temples to see rituals, and/or to simply to hang out with local people. Especially for interviewing, we usually split into small groups to accommodate the individual interests of the researchers and to make it easier for people to invite us into their homes. Small groups worked better for translations, as well, since we were interpreting among three languages.

Serendipitously, our group was in West Brook for the Torch Festival on August 5th, (6/25 in the local lunar calendar), one of the major annual holidays. The other is the lunar New Year when most of the migrants return home. Many kinds of family-related celebrations, in addition to the neighborhood activities for the Torch Festival, were held around this holiday when friends and relatives were in residence. The village lanes were thronged with people. The main village ceremony for the Torch Festival was held in front of a local temple where dancing and singing teams performed. Such celebrations are meant to ensure good fortune in the coming year and reflect myths inspired by a popular local narrative related to the old Nanzhao kingdom centered in Dali (c. 649–903 CE). We also were invited to attend a funeral and were included in other village activities, such as a housewarming celebration, a family celebration for a son headed off to university, and a temple celebration for male students graduating from high school. We stayed in the local hotel and ate most of our meals in village restaurants, but were occasionally invited to lunch or dinner as guests of local families.

To bridge the language and cultural barriers, we were assisted by an anthropology graduate student who spoke *Putonghua* and English, and a university librarian who was from the village and was indispensable in translating from the Bai language to both *Putonghua* and English. One of our most enjoyable evenings was spent at the librarian's home, where we had dinner, and then learned a local dance from her grandmother. Three in our group had some degree of fluency in *Putonghua*.

One student in our group was fluent in Putonghua and became indispensable as a translator; another student had just begun studying Chinese but picked up more conversational fluency the longer we stayed in the village. One of our group leaders also spoke some *Putonghua* and did some translating.

We also wrote blogs (http://mosaics.dickinson.edu/chinapracticum/), which provided opportunities for us to begin to organize and synthesize our findings.

Discussion: Sustainable Farming Ecology and Community

Thanks to the two farmers in our group (Dickinson farm's assistant manager and one student worker), we were able to get enough information from villagers and other people involved in local agriculture to grasp some of the dimensions of the local agricultural ecology. We indicated that we relied on the general definition of farming sustainability adapted from Kates et al. (2005). They characterized a sustainable farm ecology as one that leaves sufficient environmental resources for the support of the next generation. If many in the contemporary generation are migrants who live elsewhere, as is the case in West Brook, then the population dependent on village farms for food has declined, with less pressure on local agricultural resources. Moreover, more cash is brought into the community through remittances to purchase foods in the marketplace and local village shops. Remittances are also used to pay for materials and labor for new houses and for improving community facilities. For the next generation, the post-collective farming ecology we describe below is sustainable, given current land use and other variables we note. How far into the future this trend will prevail is much more difficult to predict. It will likely depend upon local changes in farm income (e.g. crop choices and rent levels) and opportunities for off-farm work, such as tourism. At the national level, any changes to China's household registration policy will have a huge impact on farming in West Brook.

While we gathered some data on village agricultural income, we have no hard data on what is counted as agricultural income for government purposes in yearbook statistics per se. However, according to Eryuan County statistics for 2015 (published in 2016), incomes in the local *zhen* overall increased 12 percent from the

previous year (*Eryuan County Yearbook 2016*; no page number; in section "Obvious Measures of Increases in Overall *Zhen* Strength"). Based on our interviews, local agricultural income might be derived from rental income (fields), home-grown foods sold in the market, and wage income from agricultural labor. From interviews with blueberry workers in the fields and with people selling in the village's weekly market, it is clear that these days, household incomes are complex, especially for older people in the village unable to leave for the more lucrative city wages. For them, agricultural income is an important part of the mix of activities they engage in to keep body and soul together, and to supplement their retirement insurance and grain subsidies from the government. Many older people also receive remittances from family members who work in urban areas. Two other changes affecting village incomes and farming are also evident. First, the market for land and labor has come to predominate over that for local agricultural commodities. Second, the variety of village crops now grown contrasts with the less diversified crop system of the earlier years of collective farms.

Land use in the local valley reflects new, post-collective markets for cash crops. For most of the twentieth century, the valley floor was planted in rape seed in the early spring and rice in the summer (Xu 2013: 9,31). Collective farming begun early in the 1950s under the Chinese Communist Party would show a similar cropping pattern: reliance on wet rice for subsistence, supplemented by income from rapeseed oil for some families. Since labor migration got underway in the early 1990s, the most important crop in the valley nowadays is blueberries. Although rice is still cultivated in some village fields, the farmer in our group estimated that the blueberry fields comprise about 500 acres, a large part of the valley floor surrounded by the *zhen*'s constituent villages.

A large commercial blueberry company based in Dali came to the area in 2012 to rent land in the valley from village households. We were told by agricultural officials and locals that many village families no longer had enough labor to cultivate their small plots of land, so they rented out their fields to the blueberry company. While we were there, the blueberry company was the most frequent renter of village fields, although some fields were still rented out to local agricultural laborers. In

an interview with the blueberry company manager and a truck driver on August 4, 2018, they said they hired local people to harvest and cultivate the fruit. More than 200 local people were employed at the time of our interview; our interviewees said they hired even more in harvest season. Below is an excerpt of what we were told in their interview:

> The company pays the workers on a piece basis, meaning they get paid based on how much they pick. They said generally there are slightly more women than men, all ages. The women pick blueberries and the men weed, hoe and do other heavy labor. A variety of different blueberry plants are grown on around 3,000 mu (about 494.2 acres) and produce several hundred *dun* (1 *dun* = 1 metric ton or 1,000 kg/2,205 lbs) per year (Gross 2018).

In addition to the blueberry fields, we saw small plots of corn, beans, and squash everywhere. These small plots were found at house sites and also in fields close to village homes. As our Dickinson farmer put it:

> In and around West Brook village, local families are making good use of land close to the homes. Almost all of the small patches of land in between homes (what we would think of as "yards" in the U.S.) are fully planted to corn and other crops. While in the US, corn is almost exclusively planted in very large fields that accommodate tractor equipment for tillage, crop care and harvest, in West Brook the small plots necessitate working the fields by hand. During the week that I wandered the farms in the area, I did not see one tractor, and while there are a few small rotary tillage machines around we did not see them in use for field work. Nor did we witness any draft animals being used during our visit, although they could have been tucked away somewhere (Steiman 2018).

Working farmland by hand, according to our farmer/team member, provides many sustainability benefits. First, the fuel that powers the people who do the farming is mostly coming directly from the land; there is none of the pollution, noise, and

capital expense characteristic of a tractor-powered system. Hand farming also permits polyculture – the growing of multiple crops in small spaces, sometimes even two or more crops growing together in the same plot of ground. We frequently witnessed beans and sometimes squash planted with corn throughout the area. Polyculture provides potential advantages in fertility, as well as in pest and disease management, compared to large plantings of the same crop (monoculture) which often requires external inputs for successful production. The other major benefit of hand working the land is that it allows full utilization of every piece of farmable ground. Whereas tractor-based systems ignore tight spaces, edges, and hillsides, human-powered farming permits terracing, very small plots, and therefore extraction of as much food as possible from the available landscape.

The hand-worked, small-plot nature of the farmed land in West Brook indicates that labor is cheap (especially the labor of the elderly on their own land), and food is valuable. It will be interesting to see if this changes in coming years as living standards and employment patterns change with the developing economy of the region. For example, one grandmother we interviewed was farming 4 mu (about 2/3 of an acre) of corn, rice and wheat by hand without complaint. However, all of her grandchildren were in school with aspirations to work in non-farming professions in the future, including becoming a doctor, teacher, and engineer. In the terraced fields above the village, we observed some flat fields that weren't planted, which may be a sign of the changing farm labor situation as more people work away from the village.

Most of the crops we saw planted in and near the village looked very healthy and well-tended. The corn was tall, straight, and dark green, indicating sufficient soil fertility. Manure from household dairy cows is well used for fertilizer – people collect the manure from their household cow pens in buckets, which are set outside the front door for collection. We observed a man carrying manure buckets by hand down a narrow side street to a loaded three-wheeled cart – presumably this is a normal practice. Farmers also reported using synthetic fertilizer to make up the difference, and there were several small shops around the town that sold such farm supplies. In

the past, human waste was applied to the fields as well, but this practice stopped in 2017 with the completion of a municipal sewer system to reduce pollution in Erhai Lake, downstream (see blog referenced in Steiman 2018 for more information).

In the time before collective farming, roughly prior to the 1950s, the villagers said that "we rely on the mountains, we eat the mountains," meaning that the slopes behind the village not only provided pastureland, but also medicinal and edible plants for people (Li Donghong 2012: 204). All that changed in 1957–58 during the Great Leap Forward, a radical era when Mao Zedong and local cadres encouraged people to make steel from local iron, a process that required burning wood for high heat. While little useable steel was produced, vast tracts of the Luoping Mountains behind the village were denuded of forest, a process from which they are still recovering.

When we were in the village, we witnessed extensive use of the hilly landscape behind the village for grazing goats, sheep, and dairy cattle, an indication that the villagers have restored some aspects of their traditional relationship with mountain lands. On several occasions we bumped into farmers leading small flocks of animals up into the surrounding hillsides for foraging – even among the stones of the grave plots that dominate the hilly area above the town. According to our Dickinson farmer, a meat seller he met at the village market who owns about 100 sheep said there are no rules about grazing on communal land. The meat seller said that he did not own any pasture but used the hillsides at his discretion, and also that farmers use small hand sickles to collect large quantities of fresh forage in baskets for feeding household dairy cows and pigs. Our group saw folks collecting weeds from within corn plantings, field edges, and unplanted areas of the surrounding hillsides.

The "local food" system in West Brook was alive and vibrant. Vendors at the daily farmers market on the edge of the village brought vegetables, spices, wild mushrooms, fermented foods, fresh tofu, live poultry, and butchered meats from the surrounding farms. All of this was then purchased by local families and restaurants. On Tuesday, the local market day serving all the villages in the *zhen,* vendors come from as far away as Dali to sell produce, meat, seeds, tea, and manufactured goods

to local villagers. Based on our market observations and eating at local restaurants, we found that the diet of West Brook villagers is highly diverse, with a wide variety of locally grown vegetables, meats, and spices.

Discussion: Sustainable Culture and Identity

Next, in approaching the question of cultural sustainability and identity in West Brook, we focused on religion. Religion (as Westerners think of it) cannot be said to be the totality of Bai village culture. However, judging by the village's numerous temples, water and well shrines, domestic ancestor altars, and rituals associated with these, highly visible religious activities were a significant source for people's engagement with local culture and identity, even as they traveled in and out of the community. In fact, one of the reasons people returned to the village was to participate in local ritual activity.

The revival of religion throughout China which started in the 1980s was the result of many local factors as well as government policy changes. The work of Assad (1993) speaks directly to the complicated role of larger political and economic structures in the process of religious change. This is relevant to understanding the religious traditions in West Brook. Assad's work helps illuminate how religion is authorized in different times and circumstances, and he sketches out a productive model for making sense of what we saw in West Brook. His work prompted us to ask, how did the religious practices we observed in the village come to be popular? How did they become important sources, although clearly not the only ones, for local ontology? We propose three processes we think were important in legitimizing the religious activities in contemporary West Brook.

The first process is a matter of history and the way in which earlier belief systems ultimately survived and regenerated. These pre-date the efforts of modern reformers, especially the mass campaigns of the PRC government in the 1950s to wipe out superstitions. In brief, underground activities, the collective memories of the elderly Bai, and the more overt positive views of local religion of Bai scholars in the ethnological writings of the 1950s and later ensured that all was not lost (Zhao 2016). The second

process is based on the water ecology of the area defined by an old system of wells and springs. It remains critical to irrigation on the valley floor, to agriculture more generally, and to household water supplies. The wells and springs were marked by various hydrosocial gods and, even in the era of collective agriculture, expressed local neighborhood identities (Hill and Zhuang 2017). The third process reflects changes in PRC government policies toward religion. The old view of religion as superstition, held by the Chinese Communisty Party (CCP) cadres until the reform period starting in 1979, still puts some constraints on public religious expression. However, starting roughly in 2006, the government's "cultural heritage" policies re-authorized some local religious practices as heritage culture inextricable from minority identities (see Oakes 2012; Silverman and Blumenfield 2013). In brief, ethnic culture encapsulating many religious beliefs and celebrations was now deemed good for development and tourism, good for local officials, and good for the channeling of local religion into folkways acceptable to the state. Furthermore, the revival of religious activities as a result of the easing of government restrictions was later expanded upon by new wealth from rural participation in China's commodity and labor markets (see Yang 2011: 33–34 for a summary of this trend and its consequences).

As was the case in other areas on the periphery of China, occupied by peoples not part of the Han majority, most religious practices in West Brook that did not fit into the state's official religious categories (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism and the concomitant mass organizations for each), were banned in Bai areas in the 1950s and later, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). For local Bai religious traditions, this meant that most local temples were re-purposed for schools, storage, and other functions (see Bryson 2015: 145–148). *Benzhu,* a widespread religion among the Bai centered around each village's cadastral gods, was suppressed, but "ignorant and stubborn" elderly women continued rituals in the few remaining temples (Zhao 2016: 486–488). Bai scholars in the 1950s, while writing in the mode of their peers critiquing local superstitions, at the same time saw value in *Benzhu* as local culture (Zhan 1990 cited in Zhao 2016: 486). Of the religious suppression during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), one scholar noted:

> Today the middle-aged and elderly villagers who lived through this time emphasize their attempts to preserve *Benzhu* worship. In one village in Jianchuan, one woman tried to save a wooden stature of Baijie (local goddess, ed.) by hiding it in her home, but her house burned down with the statue inside. Elsewhere, people continued to make offerings at the site of the temple, even if the structure had been re-purposed or did not exist anymore (Bryson 2016: 148).

In our experience while in the village, temples, especially *Benzhu* temples, were busy sites for large celebrations and activities of individual families, as their members left the village for work or education elsewhere. Older people, as they did for household celebrations, cooked and waited tables for these sorts of celebrations. They were organized into age cohorts according to their year of birth. Household celebrations were more likely to be catered, as was the case for a funeral ritual we attended. Ancestral graves continue to be added to the mountain fields surrounding the village *Benzhu* temple. In sum, we were continually reminded, not only by cadres but by other local residents, that *Benzhu* religion today is a mark of Bai identity.

Much of the village's religious activity also testifies to the continuing cultural significance of water in West Brook. For example, in the Luoping Mountains behind the village, every water source had a place nearby, usually a small building, for offerings to the mountain god (*shan shen* in *Putonghua*), also called the water god (*shui shen* in *Putonghua*). In the Bai language, these gods have particular names and stereotypic representations that distinguish them from other kinds of cadastral gods, but all are included in the eclectic Benzhu religion. In West Brook, these mountain water sources historically have been claimed by people in a particular *chong* (or village neighborhood in the Bai language) who were entitled to use the forest where the spring was located. The flow of water from the mountain springs also delineated the sloping lanes and watercourses of the village *chong* and their particular fields in the valley bottom. In the village, each *chong* was identified with a particular well. There were, by our count, seven wells in the village with long-term associations with village neighborhoods. Each well had a god, just as in the mountains. Sometimes these

cadastral (territorial) gods associated with water resources, whether in the mountains or the village, are called *tudigong* (in *Putonghua*). The latter are familiar cadastral gods in popular religion among Han villagers. However, in West Brook the *tudigong* are not spiritual bureaucrats reporting to higher-ups on the affairs of local society (their primary function in many Han communities), but are responsible for protecting the people, water sources, and other natural resources in their territory, such as trees.

To be sure, villagers' relations with mountain forests and mountain gods have changed as the village economy has become more commercialized. Villagers no longer need mountain woods for subsistence, although as we observed, their grassy slopes continue to provide pasture for village herds of sheep and cattle. As noted above, the phrase, *kao shan chi shan*, meaning to "rely on the mountains and eat the mountains," describes the thick connections of the past between mountain resources and West Brook people (Li 2012: 204–205). Concomitant with a decline in *chong* identity, as opposed to village identity, not all villagers today pay respect to the local cadastral gods to whom they "belong." Yet no well or spring is without offerings, and the water continues to flow between the mountains and the village, its springs and streams still significant for daily use and farming. These days, village water sources are more protected than before as trees and vegetation regenerate in the hills behind the village, and a new almost-completed sewer system carries household wastewater into wetlands for recycling near Er Hai Lake.

Remittances and Their Role in Constituting Community

Debates within the migration literature tend to focus on whether or not remittances are beneficial forces for communities (e.g. Chami et al. 2003; Durand et al. 1996; Morrison et al. 2008). The issues are far too complex to characterize remittances simply as positive/negative or as productive/nonproductive. It is clearer, however, that rural-to-urban migration and non-farm incomes play an increasingly important role in sustainable development and poverty reduction in rural areas worldwide (Morrison et al., 2008; Zhu and Luo 2008; Rose and Shaw 2008). By 2003, after a series of policies basically restraining rural-to-urban migration, the Chinese government recognized migration's role in alleviating previously intractable rural poverty (Li 2010: 6). Many people we interviewed in West Brook, both cadres and

others, also pointed out that labor migration promotes higher education levels and what they described as a "broadened" outlook.

While West Brook is located along the old southern Silk Road and has a centuries-long history of trading and resultant population mobility, the first instances of contemporary labor migration began in 1990–1992, with large-scale out-migration from the village/town by 2008. As a result, remittances now contribute substantially to local incomes. Exactly how much, however, is not easy to determine. The *zhen* official we interviewed about out-migration was able to give us average incomes for local residents versus those who work outside the village, as we reported above (see Field Site and Methods). From the county yearbook we learned that for 2015, the *zhen* total income from those working outside the local villages was 156,000,000 yuan, compared with the total income from *all* residents (year-round residents and migrants) of 420,440,000 yuan (*Eryuan County Yearbook 2016*, no page number). Obviously these are simply income figures rather than reflections of remittances per se. The figures do indicate, however, that 37 percent of *zhen* income is generated from work outside the local villages.

One of the difficulties in collecting information on remittance incomes at the village level is not only how local governments collect and aggregate data, but also where the data are. We know from our personal contacts with friends in banking that remittances have come into the village via bank transfers, as well as phone-to-phone and hand-to-hand transfers. Even for banks and other nation-wide systems for funds transfers in China, the magnitude and multitude of fund transfers that could specifically be identified as remittances would be difficult to track. In West Brook, remittances were being used to support families, household expenses, and to some degree, collective projects such as temples and festivals, confirming recent research from Liang and Song (2018) that migrant incomes are significant to community life. Many new shops and restaurants (both small storefronts and larger restaurants) emerged in the last few years along with a new hotel. New houses were being built, many with beautiful wood carvings and traditional Bai paintings adorning them. Some were in new areas of town; others were built right next to older family houses in or near the village center.

Figure 1: New house being constructed next to an old stone one.

The house above was being built by a family of four who left for work in the city ten years ago (**Figure 1**). Rather than moving to a new area of town, they were building the new house right next to their old house. And the village center was intact, with some new shop houses. We interviewed the owner of another big house – his status in West Brook has risen since he migrated to Shanggelila and established his own restaurant there. He now lives in Shanggelila with his wife and two children but returns often to West Brook where he harvests his own red peppers and dries them all over the courtyard and floors of the house. He then transports the peppers to the city where he uses them in his restaurant, selling the excess.

Research in other parts of the world demonstrate that sending and receiving (destination) communities are being transformed. While much of the remittance literature focuses on transnational migration, many of the same patterns can be found in rural-urban migration within countries. In today's China, the nearly instantaneous communication facilitated by WeChat, affordable cell phones, e-mail, and other applications, as well as the accessibility of transportation, has meant that people stay more connected and are able to move more fluidly between rural and urban areas. The roads between West Brook and the major cities of Dali (just over

a couple of hours away by car) and Kunming (six hours) enable easy access with reasonable travel times.

Better infrastructure, including communication systems and roads to nearby cities, may be one of the reasons we did not witness the phenomenon of "hollowing out" as a characteristic of West Brook. We did find positive and negative effects of labor migration. On one hand, remittances have helped support family members who stayed behind, in many cases raising their standard of living. With support from the national government, another positive includes development of a new sewer system for the town with approximately 80% of households now having flush toilets. This has improved sanitation and health conditions. While many of those left behind, especially elderly women, continue to engage in small-scale farming, most are no longer working long hours in the fields. Food is abundant. New shops and houses are not just located in new areas or on the periphery of town, but are also in the town center and older neighborhoods, along with new houses and businesses built right next to older ones. Activities celebrating heritage culture and specifically religion appear vibrant and benefit from local donors who work in urban areas (**Figure 2**). According to the middle-school principal, more children are now speaking Chinese as well as Bai and may be able to more easily move into other communities and jobs.

Figure 2: Temple to the Dragon King under construction. Our conversations with workers building the new Black Dragon King temple said they were paid 130 yuan a day (approximately $22.50). Volunteers also helped with the building. The workers revealed that their wages and the repairs overall were financed by people working outside the village.

The downsides to labor migration of the young to middle-aged parents' generation include the absence of parents felt by the children who are left behind, often in the care of grandparents. Many children board at the local middle school and return to their grandparents on the weekends. Educators spoke of an increase in behavioral problems with left-behind children acting out and becoming more likely to defy authority, both of grandparents and teachers. One of the main reasons for parents' out-migration is to get a better education for their children, but a number of teachers indicated that there is less supervision at home and that grandparents don't emphasize the importance of education as much as a child's parents would. Locals also commented on how the left-behind children had to work less with more access to spending money, which they spend on snacks, clothes, phones, and video games. A number of the elderly also spoke of their loneliness with so few people in the household, although groups of elderly women would gather for exercise, dance, and conversation.

Conclusions

We conducted three weeks of research on hollowing out in a community where one-third to one-half of its residents have migrated to urban areas for wage work or for starting their own businesses. Our fieldwork in West Brook revealed scant evidence for the stereotypic characteristics of hollowing out so prominent in much of the research on China's migrant labor. The village center was physically intact, and included new buildings constructed in the past three years, as well as a main street lined with small shops. While there were new houses built on the village periphery, we also observed new houses erected on old house sites in the village's older neighborhoods.

Community life was surprisingly robust, judging from religious and other cultural activities, including a calligraphy club composed of elderly men. The leadership of local cadres—those who defined and fostered the new local heritage culture—was significant to the maintenance of village cultural life and also the middle school, which was clearly integrated into village culture.

The local farming ecology also seemed well adapted to the new realities of out-migration. For example, agricultural work, although clearly less lucrative than work outside the village, provided some income and sustenance for village families, especially for the elderly. And as our Dickinson farmers observed, local labor in family fields and gardens was efficient and sustained by animal manure and hard labor, not chemical fertilizers. Although the blueberry company was using commercial fertilizer and paying lower wages than working outside the village, it nonetheless provided wage work for stay-behinds in the village, mostly women, as well as laborers from surrounding villages. Chemical pollution of local water sources, including the river that ultimately connected West Brook village water to Erhai Lake, was somewhat ameliorated by the new sewer system described above, as well as the re-creation of wetlands around the Erhai catchment system to help filter out agricultural and human waste.

In a larger context, our work, which focused on the sending community in the migration loop, has become a significant source of insight into the impact of labor migration's effect on mountain ethnic groups often excluded from China's new wealth. For example, data on local incomes in West Brook and its surrounding communities indicated that work outside the village raised local incomes. It suggested that out-migration is one way of effectively addressing intractable poverty in China's peripheral areas, consistent with findings from other areas in China (e.g. Zhu and Luo 2008).

In closing, we believe we have strong evidence of community sustainability from our research on the area's farm ecology, its religious activities, and remittances, which help sustain both of the other dimensions. We would have liked more time to explore the role of stay-behind youth in the community. Against the background of villagers' perceptions of problems with this group of youth, we wonder, will new family wealth in out-migrant households ultimately translate into young adults with higher aspirations and the wherewithal to achieve them? These children of the village's higher-income families may be key to the village's current economic and cultural viability, and to its future.

Acknowledgements

Our work in West Brook village was supported by the Freeman Foundation Student-Faculty Fellow program (facilitated by ASIANetwork), as well as Dickinson's Community Studies Center and R & D Committee. One author's previous work in the vicinity of West Brook was supported by the Luce Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment. We are extremely appreciative of the help of colleagues at Yunnan University: Prof. Donghong Li, Prof. Limei Yang, and Zerun Shi. Thanks to the community leaders and residents of West Brook. And to our student team (Bossakov, Gross, Lesure, McBride, Tashi and Zhang), thanks for your good data and insights.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Hill, Ann Maxwell, Jinji Wei, and Susan Rose. 2020. In Search of Community in Rural China. *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 27(1), pp. 127–149. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.321

Published: 27 July 2020