

Changes in the Livelihood Mode of Chinese Farmers' Households under the Background of Working Economy

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[Abstract] *An empirical survey in Henan Fenfang Village shows that the livelihood mode of farmers has changed drastically with the rise of the working economy. The traditional livelihood mode of focusing on agriculture and semi-agricultural and semi-assisted subsistence has collapsed. Under the multiple influences of system, economy, and culture, part-time work has become the most important way of life for farmers. At the same time, the uncertainty of migrant income and the imperfection of the rural social security system make agriculture still play the role of guaranteeing the livelihood of farmers.*

[Key words] Working economy; livelihood model; change

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I. Introduction

After the reform and opening up, with the development of China's market economy, the shackles of rural-urban labor mobility were gradually broken. Rural laborers flocked to cities to work and do business on a large scale, forming a brand-new economic form in the vast rural areas, especially in the central and western rural areas—Working economy. The working economy (Zhou Daming, 2006) refers to rural areas that are dominated by agriculture. The number of migrant workers exceeds 30% of the total labor force. The income from migrant workers accounts for an important proportion of the economic structure and becomes the main source of cash income, that is, living by working. Data from the China Statistical Yearbook show that wage income in the income structure of farmers' households accounted for 41.8% of per capita disposable income in 2015, exceeding operating income as the primary source of farmers' income. It can be said that the working economy has profoundly changed the production and life of Chinese farmers. The traditional single agricultural livelihood model of farmers has been changed to varying degrees. The multiple livelihood model based on the working economy has become a sample of the rural economy in central and western China.

II. The Dynamic Evolution Of Farmers' Livelihood Model

Since the implementation of the household contract responsibility system in 1978, the changes in the livelihood model of farmers in Fenfang Village can be divided into the following three stages:

The 1980s: the semi-agricultural and semi-sideline stage. After the household production contract responsibility system, farmers' enthusiasm for production has increased unprecedentedly. However, due to inconvenient transportation and far away from the city, the main livelihood mode of farmers in Fenfang Village is still agriculture. Agricultural production relies on manpower, animal power, and organic fertilizers. Basically, all income from production after the "public grain" is used for household consumption, and the characteristics of a "self-sufficient small farmer economy" are obvious. However, due to the prominent contradiction between more people and less land, the limited arable land cannot meet the basic living needs of farmers. It is necessary to run sideline operations such as breeding, handicraft and commerce in addition to agriculture to solve the problem of food and clothing.

As a result, farmers have run sideline businesses to assist their lives. The main sideline business in Fenfang Village is vermicelli processing, which is said to be a craft handed down from generation to generation. Farmers plant sweet potatoes after the wheat is harvested, and then extract starch from the sweet potatoes in the fall, and then use the ancestral craftsmanship to make vermicelli. Since the income from selling vermicelli is about twice that of growing corn and soybeans, farmers are highly motivated. Except for a few traditional slaughterhouses, the rest of the farmers process vermicelli during the slack. Those with more labor do it alone, and two or three companies with less labor work together. When their starch is used up, they go to the market and buy as much vermicelli as possible for profit. Although it is very hard work, in the eyes of those farmers who have just solved the problem of food and clothing, having their own land and being able to feed themselves through their own labor is already "a good life." People reject working life away from the land and believe that "golden nests and silver nests are inferior to their own doghouses". Only if they "cannot get on in the village" will they be forced to go out to work. Research data shows that throughout the 1980s, only 4 people in Fenfang Village left the land

for joining the army and taking exams, and another 2 households immigrated to Xinjiang to avoid family planning. Farmers are completely tied to the land, full of boundless affection for the land, the village is the meaning world of farmers. This kind of livelihood model of focusing on agriculture and combining agriculture and sideline can be called "semi-agriculture and half sideline".

The 1990s: the rise of migrant workers. In the 1990s, the speed of China's industrialization and urbanization was significantly accelerated, and the demand for labor increased greatly. Farmers were exposed to more and more information and employment opportunities for migrant workers. In Fenfang Village, a "technical revolution" occurred in the traditional vermicelli processing industry. The application of electric machinery reduced the demand for labor and greatly increased the output. At the same time, market competition has intensified, so that some farmers who are not good at sales have no money to make. As a result, part of the idle labor force and those who mismanage the noodles are "forced" to set foot on the road of migrant workers. During this period, the main people who went out to work were young and middle-aged laborers. The main fields were construction and catering. Most of them went out of the slack and returned to the farm. The income of migrant workers was between 500 and 1,000 yuan per month, slightly higher than that of processing vermicelli.

Under this background, the "semi-agricultural and half-sideline" livelihood model began to change: first, the sideline income of some large vermicelli processing households gradually surpassed agriculture and became the main source of income. "Agriculture is a supplement"; the second is that migrant families obtain two incomes from farming and working through the division of labor, and the working income becomes the main income of the family. Despite this, every time the farming is busy, the processing of vermicelli is closed, and the laborers who go out to work return to their hometowns, agriculture is still regarded as the basic support of the family's livelihood.

Relatively speaking, during this period, the number of migrant workers was relatively small, but the various novel products, fashionable clothes and newly built houses brought by successful migrant workers after returning to their hometowns really attracted the attention of the whole village and people's views on migrant workers. Starting to change, from scornful, to full of expectations, and then to the rush, the number of migrant workers has increased year by year, and the era of working economy has really come.

Since 2000: part-time economic stage. In 2000, Li Shanliang, a villager in Fenfang Village, built the first two-story building in the village, which became the focus of attention of the whole village. Li Shanliang was originally a mason in the village. Since the 1990s, he has been a "big worker" in the construction team all year round and earns a lot of money. When the villagers were envious, they were suddenly "stunned": the houses built well are all "capable people" who go out to work, and those who grow vermicelli at home are "starved but can't support them". It is difficult to build a new house. This deeply stimulated the villagers who regard land as their lifeblood and are willing to stay in the village and rely on processing vermicelli to make a living. Gradually, "work is much better than making vermicelli at home" and "as long as you can go out and don't stay at home" have become the consensus of the villagers, and work has become a new symbol of hard work and wealth. As a result, young and middle-aged laborers entered cities one after another. The proportion of migrant labor in the entire village in the total labor force rose from 15% in 2000 to nearly 60% in 2016. Many families went out to work with their families, and the whole village set off a wave of migrant workers.

With the development of the working economy, the status of agriculture in peasant families has quietly changed. From the perspective of household income composition, agriculture has become "insignificant", especially for young and middle-aged families who go out to work throughout the year, agricultural income only accounts for about one-tenth of the total household income; from the perspective of labor distribution, agriculture has become a veritable name. "Left-behind agriculture" and "old-age agriculture", the elderly and women staying at home have become the main force in agricultural production; from the perspective of crop cultivation, agriculture is basically "convenient agriculture", and farmers often choose the most convenient option based on the ability of the left-behind labor. The types of crops planted are usually wheat in the first half of the year and corn or soybeans in the second half of the year. Farming and harvesting basically rely on machines. The change of agricultural status has also triggered the generational differentiation of farmers' land concepts. Young people believe that "not planting land has little impact on family income" and transfer the land to their parents or other relatives for farming; while the elderly who stay at home believe that Land is the guarantee of the family's livelihood. "Regardless of the development of the times, it is impossible for farmers not to plant land," said an elderly person. Because of this, there has been no land abandonment in Fenfang Village so far, and agriculture is still an important way of family livelihood.

III. Analysis Of The Reasons For The Changes In The Livelihood Model

The livelihood model is the result of human beings adapting to a specific environment. It follows the laws of adjustment, integration, change, reconstruction, and re-adjustment, and gradually changes with the change of the environment (Ma Haishou, 2010). The changes in the livelihood pattern of farmers in Fenfang Village have once again verified this law, vividly interpreting the rational choice of farmers' livelihoods under the comprehensive influence of culture, system, economy, and family life cycle.

One is the influence of farming culture. China is one of the world's three largest agricultural cradles. The farming culture is deeply rooted in the soil of rural life and is closely connected with farmers and land. In the eyes of farmers, land is a symbol of wealth and a way of life. Farmers' deep affection for land still affects their lifestyle, behavioral logic and even value orientation. After the household joint production contract management, farmers obtained the coveted land management rights, and agriculture became the main livelihood mode of farmers at that time. During the rise of migrant workers, most farmers still insist on cultivating land. They believe that migrant workers are a temporary and unstable livelihood choice. Only farming is a long-term and stable way of life. Even in the era of working economy, migrant workers have become the way of life and the main source of income for young and middle-aged laborers, but they are still unwilling to give up their land. Not only are they hard to leave their homeland, but they also want to guarantee their last livelihood. As Fei Xiaotong (1946) said: "The ground is there. You can see it every day. Robbers can't steal it. Thieves can't steal it. The land is still there when people die. Give farmers a sense of security." It can be said that land is the lifeblood of Chinese farmers, the starting point of all lifestyles, and profoundly affects farmers' livelihoods and their changes.

The second is the promotion of institutional changes. As a code of conduct that people abide by, the system permeates all aspects of social life. Since the reform and opening up, the changes in China's political and economic systems have affected all aspects of rural society, and farmers' livelihood models have also changed with them. Before 1978, the state imposed a strict urban-rural dual economic and social system to imprison rural labor on the land, and agriculture was the only way for farmers to survive. After the reform and opening up, the implementation of the household contract responsibility system increased agricultural productivity and released a large amount of labor; the commodity economy system and various policies to encourage the development of industry and commerce have mobilized farmers' enthusiasm for agricultural and sideline operations; the household registration system has gradually relaxed. The control of population movement has promoted the transfer of employment of rural labor. In this context, farmers have transformed from a single agricultural livelihood to a diversified livelihood, and migrant workers have become the main source of income for most families.

Nevertheless, due to the urban-rural differences in China's household registration system, migrant workers cannot equally enjoy the various social benefits attached to urban household registration. Migrant workers can freely enter the city for employment, but it is difficult to settle in the city. Without a sense of security, land is still regarded as the last livelihood guarantee. Therefore, most rural households adopt a half-work and half-farming livelihood model, and even those who already have the conditions to settle in cities are still unwilling to give up their land.

The third is the guidance of the market economy. After the reform and opening up, China began to transform from a planned economy to a market economy, the original urban-rural dual system was broken, and the rural economy and society gradually moved towards marketization. The impact of the development of the market economy on the livelihoods of farmers is mainly reflected in two aspects: First, the rapid development of urban industrial economy has provided a large number of jobs, which has stimulated the transfer of rural labor to cities and towns, and has changed the single-agricultural livelihood model of farmers. Especially after the 1990s, with the rapid development of labor-intensive industries and tertiary industries, the number of rural laborers entering cities has increased year by year. Second, the development of market economy has awakened farmers' market awareness. With the active rural market economy, farmers who have been confined to the agricultural livelihood model for many years have gradually abandoned the conservative "small farmer consciousness" and established an open "market consciousness". Farmers rationally realize that the comparative income of agriculture is low, and they must find better market opportunities if they want to get rich. Farmers' livelihood patterns are gradually diversified.

IV. Conclusion and Inspiration

The working economy has profoundly changed the production and lifestyle of Chinese farmers. If we regard the surveyed villages as a microcosm of rural society in central and western China under the working economy, and by peering at the behavior of the 326 farmers in them, we will realize:

First, the livelihood of farmers is a complex process of constant change. It is the behavior process of farmers based on the changes in their living environment and constantly reflecting and adjusting under different scenarios, and then finding the most suitable livelihood mode. It is the embodiment of the survival wisdom of Chinese farmers.

Second, the livelihoods of farmers are characterized by diversity. The changes in the system and the development of the market economy have allowed Chinese farmers to have multiple livelihood options for the first time. Working, agriculture, sideline jobs, and any combination between them have become options for farmers. However, the differences in labor structure, family responsibilities, and cognition of individual farmers make livelihood choices diversified. Even in the same family, its livelihood pattern will be adjusted as the life cycle changes.

Third, agriculture is still an important means of livelihood. The uncertainty of income from part-time work and the imperfect social security system in China's rural areas have made farmers dare and unable to give up their land, especially for many elderly farmers who cannot go out to work. Agriculture still plays the main role of livelihood. In the context of the country's vigorous promotion of urbanization, the phenomena of "virtual urbanization", "semi-urbanization", and "new dual structure" in the process of peasants entering cities all reflect that the simple working economy cannot allow peasants to stay in cities. To lead a decent life, the countryside is still the main life aspect of farmers. Only when the worries about the safety of farmers' livelihoods are eliminated, can farmers realize the complete transformation from agricultural livelihoods to non-agricultural livelihoods.

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