

Study on the Social Support Status of Empty Nesters in Rural Areas

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Abstract. This paper studies the social support status of empty nesters in X Village. Based on 20 interview records, I describe the social support status and identify the primary problems are low social security treatment, insufficient daily care and neglected spiritual comfort. And I analyze the reasons from three aspects: policy design, policy implementation and population outflow. Finally, I summarize the conclusions of this study and propose countermeasures. Above all, future studies are needed on the design of policies.

Key Words: Social support; Empty nesters; Social security.

1. Introduction

According to the "Seventh Population Data Census Communiqué", China's population aged 65 and above has exceeded 190 million, accounting for 13.50% of the total population, which is close to the "aging society" standard. In this context, the phenomenon of urban and rural inversion of China's aging population is prominent: the proportion of the elderly population aged 60 and above in the total rural population is 23.81%, which is 7.99 percentage points higher than that of cities. However, due to the uneven level of economic development, the dual endowment resources and a large number of rural population outflow, the social support system for rural empty nesters is obviously inadequate, which means financial support, spiritual comfort and daily care are structurally and quantitatively problematic in rural areas. Responding to the national call of "healthy aging" it's of great significance to paying attention to the construction of social support system for empty nesters in rural areas.

In Western society, empty nesting is only a stage of the family life cycle, and there is no big difference between the pension of empty nesters and non-empty nesters. The main reasons are the following two points: First, the social welfare system provides endowment resources and is relatively perfect. Second, the pension model is different from China, as Xiaotong Fei said, western is "relay mode", where children have no obligation to support their parents. As a result, Western scholars rarely recognize empty nesters as a separate field.

In recent years, a great deal of research has focused on the relationship between social support and well-being. Siedlecki found that social support can significantly predict life satisfaction and negative emotions. Moreover, family embedment has a unique effect on promoting positive emotions. ^[1]Studies have shown that impaired social support, role loss and reduced social interaction adverse seniors' physical health, and these indicators could significantly predict the mortality of seniors after 30 months (Burholt, 2018). ^[2]Similarly, social support has an important impact on the physical and mental health of empty nesters.

In terms of the main suppliers of social support, western scholars generally believe that family, state and market are indispensable. Kodwo argued that the state should provide welfare for people, but it is not the only provider. Families and the market should also take corresponding responsibilities, and only when the three coordinate and complement each other can welfare be maximized. ^[3]Djundeva suggested that the nation background influences individual social support networks. The welfare state has greater economic security and the elderly's social network is friend-oriented, while in child-oriented social network, there is a lack of trust and more elderly poverty. ^[4]Despite the shift in society to non-kinship support networks, kinship support network is still the primary provider of informal service. Older adults living alone in rural areas are generally accompanied by functional

disabilities, which means greater risk. Therefore, preventive social support and care needs assessment are necessary for them.^[5]

Empty nest families are the product of modernization. Zhenwu Zhai argued that the fundamental reason for this phenomenon is the change of family structure, which is caused by the modernization process.^[6] The key is that children lack enough time, energy and live far away from their parents. In the meanwhile, there are special reasons in China: the implementation of the household contract responsibility system, the outflow of rural labor and the imposition of one-child policy. (Yinshu Yao, 2006)

With this trend, the composition of social support network for the elderly also changes. Wenhong Zhang found that the proportion of spouses rose to 42.9%, while children accounted for only 8.8%. The reasons are as follows: the family structure in rural areas has become dominated by the nuclear family, which inevitably takes the spouse relationship as the axis; the improvement in women's economic and social status; the economic function of the family was restored, with the nuclear family as the production unit. In short, the rising status of husband-wife relationship is inevitably accompanied by the decline in the importance of parent-child relationship.^[7]

In the face of severe rural aging and empty-nester family pension form, many scholars study how to solve the empty-nester pension problem and offer suggestions. The first is to advocate the traditional virtues of respecting the old. The second is to create a horizontal care system. The third is to improve the social security system. Considering the poor health status of empty-nesters, Cheng Zimi suggested further building a rural chronic disease medical treatment model and stimulating the vitality of grassroots medical institutions.^[8]

In sum, western studies mainly focus on the relationship-based social support system of the elderly, while domestic systematic and integrated social support research is relatively scarce. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out a specific analysis of the special situations in different regions. Thus the main purpose of this paper is to provide results consistent with the actual situation of X village to supplement the existing research system.

2. Methods

This study adopts the method of investigation, mainly using interview method and case analysis method. There are 22 interviewees in this interview, among which 20 are empty nesters in X village and 2 are village cadres. The basic information of the interview sample is as follows:

Table.1 Basic Information of the Interviewee

Features	Group	Percentage
Sex	Male	65%
	Female	35%
Age	60-69 years	30%
	70-79 years	55%
	80+years	15%
Livelihood	Spouse	85%
	Alone	15%
Participation in the labor	Yes	60%
	No	40%

The site of this study is X Village, which faces a serious problem of elderly care. X village has entered the "ultra-aging society", the proportion of the elderly population aged 65 and above has reached 27.9%.It is facing a urgent pension situation due to the rural pension resources scarcity. In terms of economy, X Village is located in a mountainous area, whose main industry is agriculture and economic development level is lower than that of other districts. Because of the increasingly stringent environmental protection requirements, many small stone processing plants have been forced to shut down and employment opportunities have decreased, so young and middle-aged laborers have gone out to make living.

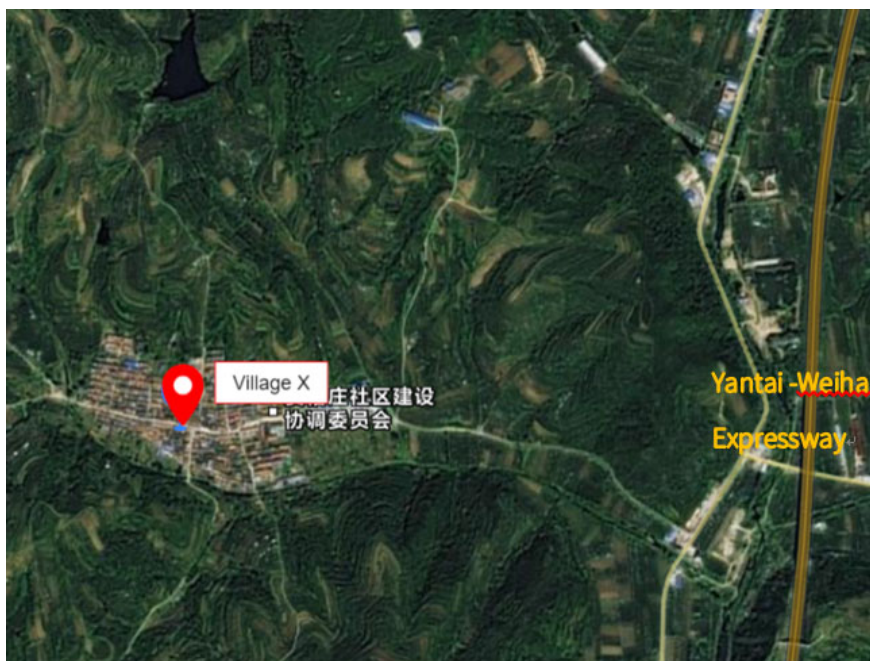


Fig.1 Geographical Location of X Village

3. Results

Supporting the elderly involves economic support, life care and spiritual comfort. Zhang Youqin divided the basic channels of personal social support into formal institutional support and informal non-institutional support. [9] Therefore, this study describes the current situation of social support for empty nesters from five aspects: formal economic support, formal service support, informal economic support, informal service support and informal spiritual comfort.

3.1 Formal economic support: Social security covers a wide range, but the level is low

The formal support that empty nesters can obtain mainly include: basic endowment insurance, basic medical insurance, five guarantees, minimum living allowance and old-age allowances. At present annuities standard differs from districts, X village's foundation annuities is 1740 yuan, a level above the average. According to the Regulations on Old-age Services of Shandong Province, the elderly over the age of 80 can have the old age allowance system. Yantai City stipulates that the treatment standard for the elderly aged 80 to 89 is 200 yuan per year, 500 yuan per year for the elderly aged 90 and above. In terms of social assistance, the standard of minimum living allowance for rural residents in Yantai has been raised to 5,280 yuan per year, and five guarantees is 7,392 yuan. The data shows that nearly 87% of the empty nest elderly in X Village participate in endowment insurance, of which 5 elderly people enjoy five insurance treatment and 2 elderly people enjoy minimum living allowance.

The data shows that nearly 87% of the empty nesters in X Village participate in endowment insurance, of which 5 pensioners have five guarantees and 2 elderly people have minimum living allowance. However, none of the elderly over the age of 80 in the village receive the old age allowance.

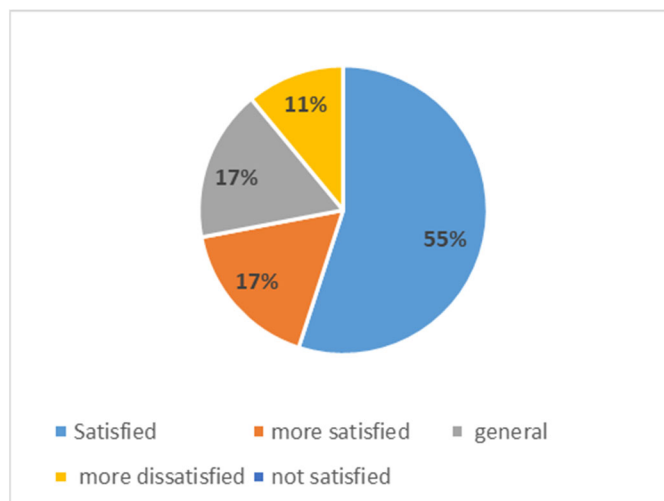


Fig.2 The Main Source of Income for Empty Nesters

There were different satisfaction of empty nesters with different social security types. More than half of empty nesters were satisfied with the social security, of which pensioners have social assistance are all satisfied with social security payment levels. Except them, most of the satisfied people are elderly people, because they can get a pension without payment; the opposite says that 145 yuan is only enough for daily expenses, not to mention the cost of medical expenses.

3.2 Formal service support: Utilization rate is low and service levels are limited

Social security provides basic financial support for empty nesters, but services such as pensions and medical care are also essential. At present, Village X lacks old-age service facilities, and the infirmary provides a single type of medical service.

In terms of old-age service facilities, since 2018, the district where X Village is located have begun to promote the improvement of them. However, there is a phenomenon of focusing on hardware facilities and ignoring the type and quality of services. There are 7 one-star rural happiness homes, which provide double rooms with separate washrooms. And there are two public televisions and fitness equipment. The services it provides are mainly daily services such as accommodation and catering, and lack nursing services and cultural activities. In terms of fees, due to the government's operating subsidies and social donations, each elderly person only needs to bear their own expenses--400 yuan per month. However, the occupancy rate of the happiness home is not high. After visiting a rural happiness home .I found that the hospital set up a total of 20 beds, but only 4 elderly people stayed and another elderly person only enjoyed catering services, the occupancy rate was only 25%.

In terms of medical services, in 2019, the X Village Clinic was converted from private to public, with two village doctors, who are also the family doctors of the elderly. Although the family doctor system has been implemented, nearly 70% of the elderly in the interview denied that they have a contracted family doctor. On the other hand, due to the low level of the clinic, medical insurance reimbursement is not supported for the time being and the drug price is higher than that of the township hospital. Limited by distance and the use of transportation, most empty nesters choose to buy medication in the health room.

3.3 Informal economic support: self-provision is the mainstay and children's support is insufficient

The informal economic support of empty nesters mainly includes personal labor income and child support. And the child support is affected by the subjective and objective situation of children.

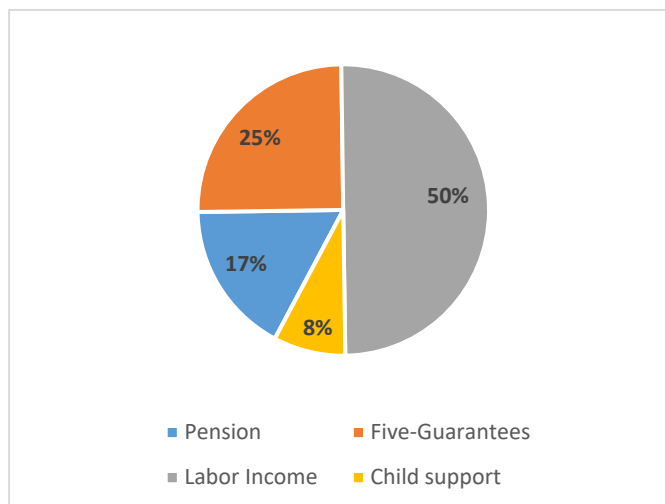


Fig.3 The Primary Source of Livelihood

Labor income is the pillar of empty nesters. In addition to the traditional "land pension", the young old can obtain income through engaging in the construction industry or going bagging. The survey by interviews shows that 50 percent of empty nesters are still working in agricultural or industrial areas to support life. Farmers generally plant fruit trees, peanuts and corn, with an average annual income of between 5,000 and 15,000, which is equivalent to the income of five guarantees, of which fruit tree growers have higher incomes and are mainly the young old; others average annual incomes are less than 5,000. There are 3 construction workers, with an average age of 63 years old and an annual income of 30,000 or more. According to the 62-year-old man, construction workers have bus transfers every day, can earn 4,000 yuan per month and have accident insurance.

At the same time, only 8% of the elderly with child support as the main income. That means the traditional family pension model has weakened. And the form of child support is generally a combination of cash and physical goods, and cash support is characterized by instability and small amounts. An old man said that his children generally do not give cash, but generally buy him food, clothes and health care products

3.4 Informal service support: Single daily care provider and stronger dependencies on others

In terms of informal service support, considering that Village X is located in a mountainous area and is less subject to security threats from the outside world, the main types of life care can be divided into daily service and agency service. ^[10]The provider includes individuals, spouses, children and neighbors.

Daily service includes meals and cleaning. According to the data, empty nesters generally rely on themselves or their spouses. Among the 15 empty nesters with children, only 3 elderly people's children visit their parents once a month, more children prefer to return every six months and the average stay time is less than three days. Considering the frequency and timing, children are limited in providing daily care. At the same time, many elderly people are worried that when they are sick, their children will not be able to take care of them in time.

Agency service is mainly for payment of fees and purchasing of supplies and medicines. According to interviews, electricity bills need to be paid in town or online, so empty nesters generally entrust their children or neighbors to help pay; village cadres said that from 2020, the village collective can't pay social insurance fees uniformly, which can only be paid by the elderly themselves or their families through smart phones. Among the interviewees, only 6 people use smart phones, but they can't operate it well and just handed over to their children to pay social security. The data shows that the number of pension insurance participants in X Village in 2021 is 10 fewer than in 2019. Therefore, from the perspective of agency service, the dependence of empty nesters on children and neighbors has increased.

3.5 Informal spiritual comfort: family is preferred, and peer groups are the main source of support

Humans are social animals, and everyone needs enhance self-satisfaction in social interactions. This essay describes the spiritual comfort of the empty nesters in X Village from the two aspects of annoyance sharers and leisure activities.

Empty nesters with children or living with their spouses make family members the main object of conversation, followed by friends. However, due to the separation of residence, the emotional support given by the children is limited. Elderly people who have no children or live alone more depend on their friends. In addition, there is more communication between the elderly in five guarantees and village cadres, which means village cadres are also one of the sources of emotional support.

4. Discussion

At present, the social support status of empty nesters in X Village mainly has the following problems: the treatment level of social insurance is low; the utilization rate of happiness homes is not high, the level of primary medical care and family care are insufficient; the spiritual support is neglected. Therefore, this paper mainly analyzes the causes of existing problems from three aspects: the design of social policies, the implementation of grass-roots policies and labor outflow.

4.1 Insufficient coherence of social policies affects the quality of economic support

For a long time, China's rural areas have relied on land and children to provide for the elderly, and cities have relied on social security for the elderly. The crowding out effect of social policies is reflected in the fact that the one-child policy "squeezes out" the family pension, but the level of social security benefits as an alternative is low.

The one-child policy objectively threatens the traditional family pension in rural areas. In terms of supply entities, the number of children who can provide old-age support is directly reduced, and the risk of losing their only child is increased. In terms of supply resources, the family structure of "four two one" and "four two two" leads to increased economic pressure on children, plus the intergenerational tilt, the support for the elderly gives way to their own development and child-rearing, which means the resources allocated to each elderly are reduced.

Table.2 Partial Social Security Treatment Standards (yuan/year)

	Years					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Five-guarantee	3900	4400	4400	6636	7400	7400
Minimum living Insurance	2710	4020	4260	4740	5280	5280
Pension	900	1020	1200	1416	-	1740

In this context, the "new agricultural insurance" has made up for the shortcomings of family pension to a certain extent, and the "five guarantees" assistance has also provided old-age security for families who have lost their only child. However, there is a "cliff effect" between the basic pension and social assistance. The level of basic pension security as an inclusive one is low, which is difficult to meet the needs of the rural empty nesters in addition to food and clothing. At present, the basic pension is only 145 yuan every month, which is 32.9% of the minimum living insurance standard and 23.5% of the five guarantee standard, and it is necessary to independently bear the medical insurance. The comparison shows the cliff effect on the level of different treatment.

Secondly, in the payment method of social security, in order to avoid the problem of leakage of payment by the village committee, a one-size-fits-all payment policy has been implemented. Village cadres said that from 2019, social security will be paid by the insured themselves, and can be through three channels: online service system, WeChat public account and lobby window. On the one hand, empty nesters are unable to pay offline at township banks; on the other hand, the elderly cannot

complete online payment on their own. The cancellation of payment objectively increases the difficulty of the elderly to participate in insurance.

4.2 Poor performance of grassroots policy publicity and implementation weakening service effectiveness

Policy publicity is related to the influence of policies. For instance, the lack of publicity for happiness homes will lead to ignorance or even misunderstanding, affecting the occupancy rate of rural old-age service facilities. The implementation of grass-roots policies directly affects the effectiveness of policies, and "family doctors" are only paperwork, weakening the prospective efficacy.

In terms of policy publicity, the release channels do not take into account the particularity of the elderly group. X Village mainly publishes information through online WeChat groups and offline bulletin boards, while the elderly in the village have limited literacy levels and low use of smart phones, resulting in interruptions in information transmission and reducing their possibility of accessing elderly care services and medical services. For example, most of the elderly do not understand the "rural happiness home", confuse it with private nursing homes, and think that its pricing is high and they cannot afford it.

At the same time, the implementation of grass-roots policies has been formalized, which has damaged the interests of the elderly. Nearly 90 percent of the elderly deny having a family doctor, while doctors say villagers lack awareness. The family doctor system requires each elderly person to undergo a physical examination twice a year. The reality is that doctors only sign contracts, but do not achieve regular home visits, health guidance and initial diagnosis of common diseases. Therefore, the difficulty of implementing grass-roots policies is an important reason affecting the elderly's access to medical services.

4.3 Labor outflows have led to fragmented living spaces and weakened informal support

The settlement of migrant workers in the city leads to the separation of living space with the elderly, directly forming some empty nesters, and indirectly leading to a decrease in the informal support available to empty nesters.

The fragmentation of living space has led to the lack of child care for the elderly in their daily lives, and they can only rely more on themselves and their spouses. Occupational groups form living spaces around production and plus the poor transportation systems, children who earn a living in towns return to their hometowns not very often. This leads to the delay in the practice of filial piety, and caring parents more reflected in the care of the elderly in advanced age or when their health is poor. In the meanwhile, the spiritual comfort and service of the young elderly are neglected.

On the other hand, due to the outflow of labor, the permanent population of the village is dominated by the elderly group, which indirectly reduces the availability of informal support. In terms of daily care, the help of young adults available to empty nesters is reduced, which is not conducive to improving their living standards; in terms of spiritual comfort, the daily communication of empty nesters is limited to the elderly group, the topics discussed and the leisure activities are single.

5. Conclusions and implications

Overall, the main problems faced by the social support of the rural empty nesters are as follows: economic support can only sustain the basic life; the daily support is insufficient; the absence of spiritual comfort. Therefore, this paper mainly analyzes the reasons for social policy design, grass-roots policy publicity and implementation, and labor outflow.

Based on the analysis of the above problems and their causes, the following countermeasures are proposed:

Improve payment and reimbursement mechanisms to promote convenience.

Strengthen policy publicity and increase the occupancy rate of old-age service facilities.

Establish a reasonable performance evaluation mechanism to improve service quality.
Promote the development of rural industries and attract talents to return to their hometowns.

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