

The Old-Age Plight of the Peasants and Herdsmen in the Mongolian Inhabited Poverty Area and the Countermeasures: A Field Investigation Based on 11 Villages (Gacha) in 5 Counties, Tongliao City, Inner Mongolia

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Supported by the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Social Sciences Planning Project (10B011); Funded Projects of Eastern Inner Mongolia Economy History Culture Research Base.

Received 28 November 2014; accepted 15 January 2015

Published online 26 February 2015

Abstract

Currently, the peasants and herdsmen in the Mongolian inhabited poverty area in Tongliao City, Inner Mongolia are facing the old-age plights such as traditional family and land supports for the aged continue to weaken; the poverty extent of the peasants and herdsmen is deep and their ability to resist risk is weak; the public pension service is inadequate, and the level of social security is low, etc. To resolve these problems, we should speed up economic development, increase peasants and herdsmen's income, and improve their pension security abilities; we should increase national investment in poverty counties, making efforts to enhance the development force of the Mongolian area; we should complete pension security system of the agricultural and pastoral area, improve basic public services, put traditional family support into good use, improve self-support ability of peasants and herdsmen, give full play of land efficiency, and improve the land support capacity for the aged.

Key word: Mongolian inhabited area; Poverty; Peasants and herdsmen; Old-age security

Yu, H. M. (2015). The Old-Age Plight of the Peasants and Herdsmen in the Mongolian Inhabited Poverty Area and the Countermeasures: A Field Investigation Based on 11 Villages (Gacha) in 5 Counties, Tongliao City, Inner Mongolia. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(2), 81-85. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/5894>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5894>

The social security issue of the ethnic minority regions is related to the economic and social harmony, stability and development of the ethnic minority regions. To understand the current pension situation and plight of the peasants and herdsmen in the Mongolian inhabited poverty area, the author has conducted a field investigation in 5 counties of 11 administrative villages where the Mongolian are relatively concentrated, including Kezuozhong County, Kezuohou County, Naiman County, Kulun County, and Zhalute County, and has concluded that currently the Mongolian inhabited area in Tongliao City does not shake off poverty as a whole. Compared with the developed areas, the pension dilemma faced by the peasants and herdsmen is more serious and complex, which has been a major livelihood issue requiring a special concern in the construction of new rural and pastoral areas.

1. THE POVERTY SITUATION OF MONGOLIAN INHABITED AREA

Tongliao City in Inner Mongolia is the area where the Mongolian nationality is the most concentrated in our country. At present the city has a Mongolian nationality population of 1.44 million people, taking 46 percent of the total population. The elderly population in the agricultural and pastoral area is 221 thousand, accounting for two-thirds of the city's elderly population.¹ Since the reform and opening up, although the Mongolian inhabited area in Tongliao City has achieved a rapid development with a consistent increase in peasants' income, a substantial increase in living standard, and a growing prosperity in various social undertakings, the Mongolian inhabited area in the city has not yet fundamentally been out of poverty.

¹ Data sources. Tongliao Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2011-05-27.

1.1 The Poverty Scale of the Mongolian Inhabited Area and the Impoverished Population Is Large, the Poverty Level Is Deep

Currently, there is an impoverished population of 320 thousand in Tongliao City, accounting for 10% of the city's total population, out of which the impoverished Mongolian population 219 thousand, accounting for 68% of the city's total impoverished people. The Mongolian population is more concentrated in the national and regional level poverty counties (banners) of Naiman County, Kulun County, Kezuozhong County, Kezuohou County, Zhalute County and other pastoral areas and agricultural-pastoral areas. Among them, Kezuozhong County has a poverty population of 109 thousand and 336 entire poverty villages. The Mongolian poverty population is 87 thousand, accounting for 80% of the county's total poverty population and representing 48.1% of the city's Mongolian poverty population (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region CPPCC, para. 4, 2012). At the end of 2010, the per capita net income of the peasants and herdsmen in Tongliao City is 6002.2 yuan, and the per capita living expenditure is 4264.23 yuan. Some impoverished peasants and herdsmen's sum of living expenditure, medical expenses, productive and operative expenses and their children's educational expenses are far more than their total income. Low savings rate and inflation risk also makes them exceed their income. Education, health care, pension, employment and other social undertakings in the Mongolian inhabited poverty areas develop relatively slowly, and problems such as too difficult to access to schooling, health services, pension and employment, etc., are prevalent. Due to the inconvenient transportation in the remote agricultural and pastoral areas and the extreme underdeveloped production and living conditions of the peasants and herdsmen, the impoverished Mongolians have become a vulnerable group whom requires special concerns in the new countryside and pastoral construction of the city (Tongliao Municipal Ethnic Affairs Committee, 2009).

1.2 The Natural Environment in the Mongolian Inhabited Area Is Poor and Natural Disasters Are Frequent

Tongliao City is located at the main part of Horqin sandy land, and has more than 20 million acres of sandy land and nearly 4 million acres of sandy farmland. The 68% of poverty villages of the 5 counties where the Mongolians are relatively more concentrated are located at Horqin sandy land, sandy areas and the remote ecologically fragile rocky mountains, where the precipitation is little, most areas are drought, windy and sandy with frequent natural disasters. In 2009, Tongliao City encountered a devastating drought. Food production was sharply reduced and some herdsmen even lost everything. In November 2012 a snowstorm hit Tongliao City, some counties suffered heavy rains to rainstorms. The average snowfall

reached 21.3 mm, and the largest snowfall reached 44 mm. The average snow depth reached 10 cm, and the deepest snow depth reached 30 cm, causing a serious damage to agricultural production. According to statistics, the snow caused a total of 960 vegetable greenhouse collapsed and 890 vegetable greenhouse severely damaged. 218 houses were collapsed, 996 livestock and 17,200 poultry died, a large number of trees were broken, causing a direct economic loss of 150 million yuan (Wang, 2012).

1.3 The Agricultural and Animal Husbandry Foundation Is Weak, and the Economic Developmental Level Is Low

“The basic economic developmental characteristics of the Mongolian inhabited area is led by traditional agriculture. The industrial developmental level is relatively backward, the per capita income is low and production condition is relatively backward.” (Wuriliga, 2011) Due to the underdeveloped agricultural infrastructures and the influence of traditional Mongolian productive and living habits, the production and management method of the Mongolian inhabited poverty area is extensive, the production method and production means is primary, and the agricultural efficiency is not high. In agricultural areas, rainfed agriculture is still the main mode of production and main source of income of the Mongolians. Take Kezuozhong County for example, there are existing 1.58 million acres of irrigated land in the county, accounting for 51.5% of the total arable land, while there are only 0.165 million acres of irrigated land in the Mongolian poverty area, with 1.5 acres per capita. Due to successive years of drought, there are over 60% of farmland wells have dried up which cannot play its due role. Currently, the Mongolian poverty area is dominated by farming, while the livestock breeding with strong ethnic characteristics has been relegated to a secondary position. The small size of market, single agricultural structure, weak infrastructure, inconvenient transport facilities, poor information and natural conditions, serious ecological imbalance and poverty has become major obstacles to the economic and social development of the Mongolian inhabited area (R. Zhang & B. C. Zhang, 2011).

1.4 The Impoverished Mongolians' Sci-Tech and Cultural Quality Is Low and Their Ability to Get Rid of Poverty Is Poor and the Pension Security Ability Is Weak

Due to the poor economic developmental foundation and the weak overall strength, the basic educational level of the Mongolian inhabited area is relatively low, and the residents cannot receive a higher level of education. Some peasants and herdsmen have not received much education, and due to their conservative idea, communication barrier and constrained understanding, some peasants and herdsmen in the poverty and backwardness areas have inadequate capability to accept new ideas and new information. Technological knowledge is difficult

to spread, which impairs the peasants and herdsmen to get rid of poverty. Further more, some people lack entrepreneurial spirit. They're satisfied with the existing living state and are reluctant to move forward, or due to the poverty caused by illness or poor education, a considerable part of the peasants and herdsmen cannot solve the old-aging problem, which results in a pension plight.

2. THE PLIGHT FACED BY THE TRADITIONAL PENSION MODEL OF THE PEASANTS AND HERDSMEN LIVING IN THE MONGOLIAN INHABITED POVERTY AREA

Currently, the traditional family support mode for the aged of the peasants and herdsmen living in the Mongolian inhabited poverty area is facing a number of challenges: the weakening land endowment, low income, weak capability to resist risks and a social security system which urgently awaits to consummate.

2.1 The Traditional Family Support Mode for the Aged Is Being Challenged

For a long time, the Mongolians have kept to the traditional virtue to respect the seniority between the old and the young, and respect the old and take good care of children. The peasants and herdsmen in the Mongolian inhabited poverty area in Tongliao City mainly rely on the traditional family support mode for the aged, depending on land and children support to solve the old-age problem. According to survey, however, in recent years of the reform and opening up, development of market economy and implementation of family planning policy, the value and life style of Mongolian area residents have changed a lot. Excellent national traditional culture and the virtue of respecting the old and caring for the young has been dramatically impacted. Traditional idea of family ethnics is increasingly weak. Family size tends to be smaller, nuclear families appear and young labors shift to cities and towns. Elderly population in the surveyed area is over 12.34% of the total population. The aging of population in the agricultural and pastoral areas has become increasingly serious. Some families have fallen into the dilemma of "no money, no supporter and nowhere for the aged".

2.2 The Security and Employment Function of Land Is Getting Weaker

The survey finds that, with the accelerated process of urbanization, the per capita arable land and number of pasture of the Mongolian inhabited poverty-stricken area in Tongliao City is declining, and a large number of young labor are migrating. The labor of agricultural and pastoral areas presents a trend of aging. Agricultural and animal husbandry cooperative organizations develop

insufficiently, arable land and pasture transfer are not standardized, and the transfer efficiency is low. Some arable lands and pastures have been abandoned due to peasants and herdsmen's inability to cultivate and manage. Continuing to increase income is getting more difficult. Relying solely on the land revenue is difficult to solve the pension problem of peasants and herdsmen, and the social security and employment function of land show a trend of continuous weakening.

2.3 Public Pension Service Is Inadequate, and Social Security Level Is Low

Survey shows that if to view the Mongolian inhabited poverty area as a whole, the minimum living security coverage is too narrow and the security standard is still low. The peasants and herdsmen who currently can enjoy the minimum living guarantee are less than 5%, most of who belong to class B or class C. 60 yuan monthly basic pension for the over-60s is totally insufficient; imperfect legal system of social insurance, absent confidence and trust in the old-age insurance system, and inadequate awareness in pension social welfare have greatly influenced their enthusiasm in insurance. There are many problems in the pension of migrant and landless peasants and herdsmen. In addition, due to the small population density of Mongolian inhabited area, scattered residence, inconvenient information and transportation, poor medical conditions in remote agricultural and pastoral area and low medical level, the new cooperative medical care system in the agricultural and pastoral area needs to be further improved. In short, the contradiction between the growing living and pension service demand of peasants and herdsmen in the Mongolian inhabited poverty area and the serious shortage of public pension resources becomes increasingly prominent.

3. MEASURES TO SOLVE THE PENSION PROBLEM OF PEASANTS AND HERDSMEN IN THE MONGOLIAN INHABITED POVERTY AREA

To solve the pension predicament of peasants and herdsmen in the Mongolian inhabited poverty area, we should accelerate the local economic development, increase national poverty reduction investment, improve the pension system in the agricultural and pastoral area, change peasants and herdsmen's pension concepts, improve land security capability, complete laws and regulations, and strengthen traditional virtue education, etc..

3.1 Accelerate Economic Development and Increase Peasants and Herdsmen's Income

In order to get rid of poverty of the Mongolian inhabited area, the only way is to accelerate the pace of development

of the local economy, and effectively improve peasants and herdsmen's income. At present, we should speed up the adjustment of industrial structure, fully mobilize the development enthusiasm of the Mongolian peasants and herdsmen, change the production and operation mode of animal husbandry, and vigorously develop the stall-fed livestock breeding with national characteristics. We should guide peasants and herdsmen to break through the traditional small and all-inclusive planting structure, and improve the level of agricultural industrialization; actively promote the peasants and herdsmen to move into towns and secondary and tertiary industries, and increase their labor income. "Accelerating economic growth is the basis to develop and improve the new rural social pension security system in the minority concentrated region." (Zhang & Liang, 2012) Thus, only when economy of the agricultural and pastoral areas is to be developed, income of the peasants and herdsmen continues to increase, poverty is to be shaken off and prosperity is to be achieved, the pension security capability of peasants and herdsmen can be effectively improved.

3.2 Increase the National Poverty Reduction Investment and Enhance the Development Impetus of the Mongolian Inhabited Area

"Actively support the Mongolian inhabited area to accelerate the pace of poverty eradication, increase the policy support and financial transfer to former revolutionary base areas, areas inhabited by minority nationalities, remote and border areas and poverty-stricken areas." (China Net, 2011) We should actively implement the main functional area strategy, and focus on the implementation of regional poverty eradication. We should strengthen the protection and construction of key ecological functional area of Horqin grassland, increase the control of sandy deserts and soil erosion, and seek to get projects such as ecological migrants, ex-situ removal poverty eradication, immigration and town expansion poverty eradication in order to fundamentally improve the production and living condition and environment of the peasants and herdsmen. We should build Tongliao regional integrated transport hub, take the area in Tongliao where the Mongolians are relatively more concentrated as the main battlefield of poverty alleviation, and fully implement the preferential policy for ethnic minorities. We should strengthen the infrastructure construction in the agricultural and pastoral areas, solve the safe drinking and electricity problems, and strengthen the postal facility and information network construction in the agricultural and pastoral areas. We should endeavor to seek an increased support from the state and autonomous region, improve compensation mechanism, and fully implement the peasant-benefiting and herdsman-benefiting policies such as food subsidy, and subsidies of returning farmland to forests and animal breeding grounds for pastures.

3.3 Improve the Old-Age Security System in the Agricultural and Pastoral Areas and Improve Basic Public Service Capabilities

We should improve the minimum living security system in the agricultural and pastoral areas, fairly determine the residents entitled for low income subsidies, and expand the basic living allowance coverage in order to cover all entitled residents. We need to increase financial support, make plans for long-term goals, strengthen standardized management, improve the pension insurance system, increase policy publicity, encourage peasants and herdsmen to actively participate in old-age insurance, develop preferential policy for one-child family of minority nationalities, and establish and improve old-age insurance system for agricultural and pastoral workers and landless peasants and herdsmen. We need to further improve the new cooperative medical system in the agricultural and pastoral areas, improve the medical and health care service network and medical conditions, and enhance the public medical and health care service capacities. We should establish and complete the natural disaster relief system, provide temporary relief and help to peasants and herdsmen who have difficult lives, improve community old-age service system in the agricultural and pastoral areas, improve basic public service capacities, integrate resources, and establish the mutual old-age institutions to encourage peasants and herdsmen to take care of each other's old age.

3.4 Give Play to the Function of Family-Based Support for the Aged, Change the Pension Concept of Peasants and Herdsmen, and Improve Their Self-Support Capabilities

The Mongolian compatriots have followed the glorious tradition of respecting the elderly from generation to generation, which ought to be more valuable when filial piety appears to be on the wane today. Therefore, we should vigorously carry forward the traditional Chinese virtue of respecting the elderly, continue to play the function of family-based care for the aged, and develop appropriate incentive policies to encourage people to consciously assume the obligation to support the elderly. At the same time, we need to guide peasants and herdsmen to change the old-age concept, reasonably control and effectively use personal properties, improve self-support capability, complete relevant laws and regulations, and strengthen the awareness of rights of peasants and herdsmen.

3.5 Give Play to Land Efficiency and Improve the Old-Age Security Capacity of Land

Currently, peasants and herdsmen in the Mongolian inhabited poverty area still need to improve land support function for the aged based on the basic industries. We should establish and improve the circulation system of arable land and pastures, and based on the principles of legality, voluntariness and compensation, standardize

the circulation of land contractual management right, establish agricultural and animal husbandry specialized cooperative organizations, guide peasants and herdsmen to actively participate in circulation of arable land and pastures, support and encourage large-scale production and operation, reduce the cost of agriculture and animal husbandry, and develop national characteristic industries and modern high-tech agriculture and animal husbandry. According to the investigation, some agricultural and pastoral areas have used subcontracting for land circulation, which is a feasible way to realize the value of land and solve the old-age problem of peasants and herdsmen.

CONCLUSION

The social security level and structure construction of a country and a region is a major project affecting people's well-being, which is related to the economic and social harmony, stability and development of the country and region. The social security level is influenced and constrained by natural, historical, and economic development and scientific, cultural and educational level. For the poverty-stricken ethnic minority areas whose natural environment is poor, economic, scientific, cultural, and educational development is backward, and social security capability is weak, we need to increase the national poverty alleviation investment, accelerate the pace of economic development, and enhance the development potential of the poverty areas. We should complete the social security system, improve basic public service capability and the scientific and cultural quality of peasants and herdsmen, increase their income in order to eradicate poverty as soon as possible, and improve their

self-protection capability against pension risks so as to ensure support in their old age.

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