

The Culture of Poverty in China Rural Area: The Cases in Junxi Village

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One of the motivations in writing this paper is that the social problems in Chinese rural areas, which is named “San Nong” problem (“San Nong” means issues of agriculture, farmer and rural areas). It is a concept posed by a Chinese economist in 1996, and after that, it became popular in Chinese media and official language. In 2003, this concept was formally used in the governmental report. The economic gap between urban and rural areas is a reflection of serious social problems. Overall, issues of farmers include low income, obstacles to increasing income and the absence of civil rights among the rural population etc.; Issues of agriculture mean low interests in farming and low agricultural industrialization level etc.; Issues of rural areas include “underdevelopment” of the countryside e.g. infrastructural, economical, political and “cultural” underdevelopment), have been regarded, by the government and scholars, as the most significant aspect of social development in China. In recent years, the concept of “Cultural Construction” or “Building Culture” in “underdeveloped” rural areas has been placed on the agenda in governmental conferences (Councils of governments and National People Congress). Meanwhile, a number of Chinese scholars have started paying attention to the culture of poverty thesis. Culture of poverty has unique modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for the poor. Oscar Lewis¹ believes that the culture of poverty transcends the boundaries between nations and regions. However, Chinese sociological studies usually analyze this topic rural-urban separately², even though this thesis has been discredited in the past decades in western academic circles³. Under this social and academic atmosphere, as one of the members of the project “sociological intervention in Chinese poor rural area”, I conducted research about the culture of poverty in Junxi Village, a small village located in Zhangzhou, Fujian Province.

Another purpose of my study is to fill the voids of current discussions among Chinese scholars. Empirical research describing the culture of poverty in rural areas is absent. Also, the hypothesis of “poverty cycle”⁴ applied in almost every Chinese paper is still questionable. I will discuss these problems later in this paper.

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¹ Lewis, Oscar. 1998. “The Culture of Poverty.” *Society* 35(2): 7-9.

² Zhang, Zhanbiao, and Xiaodan Shang. 2009. “Analysis on Urban Workers' Poverty Culture in Street Labor Force Market.” *Journal of Changchun University of Science and Technology* (Social Sciences Edition) 22(3): 376-90. Xue, Shimei. 2009. “The Culture of Poverty: the Cultural Analysis of Rural Poverty Areas.” *Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University* 11 (3): 58-61.

³ Roach, J. L., and R. Gursslin. 1967. “An Evaluation of the Concept ‘Culture of Poverty’.” *Social Forces* 45(3): 383-92. Coward, E. C., R. Feagin, and A. Williams Jr. 1974. “The Culture of Poverty Debate: Some Additional Data.” *Social Problems* 21(5): 621-34.

⁴ Payne, R. K. 2005. *Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Highlands: AHA! Process

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY THESIS

The term “culture of poverty” first appeared in ethnography *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* by Oscar Lewis. He believed that these five families were useful for explaining “culture of poverty” because of their “remarkable similarities in family structure, the nature of kinship ties, the quality of husband-wife and parent-child relations, time orientation, spending patterns, value systems, and the sense of community”⁵. Lewis also made a conclusion about the characteristics that represent the culture of poverty. He pointed out that universally the people in the culture of poverty “have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging”⁶.

The Culture of Poverty Thesis in China

Explicitly or implicitly, a great number of Chinese writers assume that the “poverty cycle” does exist in poor rural areas.⁷ They have reached a consensus that (1) economic poverty is the beginning of the cycle; (2) persistent poverty generates the culture of poverty among the people living in poor conditions, and (3) the culture of poverty “constrains people’s minds, controls people’s behaviors” and exerts negative effects to economical development.

However, notion (2) is obviously problematic due to the lack of evidence proving that economic poverty is the only factor that produces the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty, as a subculture in poor areas or communities, can be seen as norms transmitted via interaction between parents and children.⁸ In fact, the process of cultural transmitting must go without significant influence from other cultures, e.g. the mainstream culture. Consequently, it is economically, politically and culturally closed areas where the culture of poverty exists. Only the poor have a closed “cultural system”⁹ can this subculture exist in their communities?

Roach and Gursslin argue that a main deficiency of the culture of poverty thesis is the failure of distinguishing culture as description and culture as cause. They state: “Culture as description places emphasis upon the common way of life of a group. Used in this way, culture is generally treated as a dependent variable rather than as an independent variable.” “Culture as cause places emphasis on a shared pattern of living and transmitted social learning in a society. The primary cause of the younger generation's behavior is the socially transmitted culture of the

⁵ Senior, C. 1959. Book Review, “Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty. by Oscar Lewis”, *American Sociological Review* 24(6): 909.

⁶ Lewis, Oscar. 1998. “The Culture of Poverty.” *Society* 35(2): 7-9.

⁷ Sun, Zhe. 2009. “The Culture of Poverty: Exploring the Roots of Poverty Vicious Circle in Rural Areas of Western China.” *Theory Horizon* 2: 164-65. Liu, Long, and Fengchun Li. 2007. “On Performance, Causes and Digestion of Rural Poverty Culture.” *Research of Agricultural Modernization*, 28(5): 583-85. Wang, Zhaoping. 2005. “Nature and Function of the Culture of Poverty.” *Social Sciences* 4: 125-28. Li, Denghao. 2007. “Performance and Influence of the Poverty of Culture and the Strategy of Poverty Culture Elimination: Examples in Yuexi Country, West Anhui.” *Journal of West Anhui University* 23(3): 40-42. Jia, Junmin. 1999. “Culture of Poverty: Aggravation of Poverty.” *Tribune of Social Sciences* 5-6: 68-70.

⁸ Roach, J. L., and R. Gursslin. 1967. “An Evaluation of the Concept ‘Culture of Poverty’.” *Social Forces* 45(3): 383-92.

⁹ Wang, Zhaoping. 2005. “Nature and Function of the Culture of Poverty.” *Social Sciences* 4: 125-28.

older generation.”¹⁰ The Chinese writer Wang Zhaoping believes that the transmitting of the culture of poverty only exists in a “closed culture system” lacking communication with the outside world, which is caused by a closed living environment, individual immobilization and social structure¹¹.

On the contrary, if the values of the poor were considerably affected by other cultures, the culture of poverty would seldom exist in their lives and world. Under these circumstances, the poor’s values or behavior patterns caused by lower economic conditions could only be “adaptive responses” to deal with poverty¹². The existence of a poverty subculture (or just adaptive responses) used to be the most controversial point about the culture-of-poverty thesis in 1960s and 1970s¹³.

To resolve this controversy, Rodman attempted to make a connection between those two sides. He finally achieved a compromise by introducing a “lower class value sketch”. He argues that the mainstream culture (regarded as middle class culture) is widely accepted by all classes in society, including the lower class. But he does not deny distinctive cultural characteristics in the lower class.¹⁴ Lesser levels of attainment are accepted by members of the lower class, generating a “wider range of values” than that in mainstream values¹⁵, which he defined as a “lower class value sketch”.

Although a number of Chinese rural areas may have economical, political and geographical characteristics of “closed” and “unaffected”, sufficient evidences that are absent in Chinese culture-of-poverty studies to indicate “closed or open”, are theoretically necessary.

The Chinese proponents of the culture-of-poverty thesis regard the culture factor as a “root cause” of poverty, which contradicts the notion that the poverty cycle begins with economical factors. Without clarifying the causal relationship between culture and economic poverty, the culture perspective in former Chinese poverty studies is unfortunately questionable. The choice between either culture factors or economic factors as the “root cause” seems to be in a dilemma: regarding eliminating poverty as a primary goal, Chinese researchers are prone to look for cultural factors generating poverty in certain groups. However, in many conditions, the causal relationship is reversed - culture itself becomes the consequence of poverty (For example, rich and poor gap generates different behaviors and psychologies of consumption).

This imprecise notion will induce opposite opinions easily. For example, some critics of the culture of poverty thesis argue that direct methods of support, such as providing the poor with more power, better job opportunities, and better wages are the better ways to fight against

¹⁰ Roach, J. L., and R. Gursslin. 1967. “An Evaluation of the Concept ‘Culture of Poverty’.” Social Forces 45(3): 383-92.

¹¹ Wang, Zhaoping. 2005. “Nature and Function of the Culture of Poverty.” Social Sciences 4: 125-28.

¹² Valentine, Charles A. 1968. Critique and Counter-Proposal, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹³ Roach, J. L., and R. Gursslin. 1967. “An Evaluation of the Concept ‘Culture of Poverty’.” Social Forces 45(3): 383-92. Della Fave, L. R. 1974. “The Culture of Poverty Revisited: A Strategy for Research.” Social Problems 21(5): 609-21.

¹⁴ Rodman, H. 1963. “The Lower Class Value Stretch.” Social Forces 42: 205-15.

¹⁵ Della Fave, L. R. 1974. “The Culture of Poverty Revisited: A Strategy for Research.” Social Problems 21(5): 609-21.

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poverty than rehabilitative services such as raising the poor's motivations and providing them with training, tutoring and therapy¹⁶.

To solve this chicken-and-egg problem, we should break the shackle of poverty cycle hypothesis. Although some are convinced that economical poverty is the beginning of the poverty cycle¹⁷, I suggest that it is caused by other factors such as geographic factors and weather factors etc. Meanwhile, the effects of national policy cannot be overlooked, especially in China with big government and the dual structure in urban & rural society. Also, the culture of poverty generated from other factors (economical underdevelopment and geographically & culturally closed etc.) may aggravate the poverty condition.

Chinese Descriptions of the Culture of Poverty in Rural Areas

Most Chinese writers tend to regard the culture of poverty as an obstacle of rural economic development, yet Wang Zhaoping argues that generating the life style of the poor, the culture of poverty provides a mechanism for adjusting ideal and reality¹⁸.

Though there is divergence of views on the function, Chinese writers have developed a common understanding of the culture of poverty. They found that the poor in rural areas were pessimistic about their lives; they were content with their current situation; they were reluctant to leave their hometown; they lacked a work ethic (see below); they believed that their offspring's labor was the source of income when they grow old; and they possessed a chauvinistic dislike of all things outside¹⁹.

However, these descriptions are theoretically problematic. First, former studies conspicuously confound the culture of poverty with traditional Chinese culture. It is widely acknowledged that they have common substances, e.g. views of fertility (It is an aspect of Chinese traditional family values. It includes two aspects: one is the value of "the male child only" or "prefer sons to daughters"; the other one is the value of "the more sons, the better"), yet they should be realized in different theoretical frameworks. Second, empirical evidences to support these notions are absent. Hasty in generalization, the writers fail to rule out the possibility of the culture of poverty's temporal and spatial changes.

RESEARCH SUBJECTS

Poverty in Junxi Village

¹⁶ Rodman, H. 1968. "Review: Why the Poor Are Poor." Science, New Series 161(3872): 675-76.

Sayles, Marnie L. 1984. "Role Distancing: Differentiating the Role of the Elderly from the Person." Qualitative Sociology 7: 236-52.

¹⁷ Xue, Shimei. 2009. "The Culture of Poverty: the Cultural Analysis of Rural Poverty Areas." Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University 11 (3): 58-61.

¹⁸ Wang, Zhaoping. 2005. "Nature and Function of the Culture of Poverty." Social Sciences 4: 125-28.

¹⁹ Liu, Long, and Fengchun Li. 2007. "On Performance, Causes and Digestion of Rural Poverty Culture." Research of Agricultural Modernization, 28(5): 583-85. Xue, Shimei. 2009. "The Culture of Poverty: the Cultural Analysis of Rural Poverty Areas." Journal of Inner Mongolia Agricultural University 11 (3): 58-61.

Junxi is a small village located on the border of Fujian and Guangdong provinces with 768 local residents. In 2004, the average daily income among villagers was approximately 0.38\$, which was far below the daily international poverty line (World Bank 1.25\$). Under the governmental support from 2004 to 2007, the average daily income had been raised to approximately 1.47\$. However, a considerable portion (75%) of village residents are still living below the poverty line. The increasing of income was bottlenecked when the governmental support came to an end. According to my research, from 2006 when the governmental support stopped to 2009, the economical condition change very little.

A Semi-closed Culture System

Because of the trend of labor transfer from rural to urban areas²⁰, the values and norms of rural migrant workers have been affected by mainstream culture²¹. Additionally, the rural-urban migration not only affects the values of migrant workers in urban areas, but also changes the economic and social structure²² and the rural residents' values in labor-sending areas. Logically, as the result of economic and social changing, the traditional cultural system in rural areas is no longer completely closed.

On the other hand, as a labor-sending area constrained by inconvenient transportation systems and the dual structure in urban and rural society, Junxi Village has preserved a relatively closed culture system unaffected by mainstream culture. First, though the newly-built local highway has shortened the travel distance between the village and outside world, the disadvantageous location²³ still severely blocks economic communication²⁴. Second, the rural-urban household registration system, labor system, educational system, health care system and social security system, etc²⁵, generate a rural-urban divided society²⁶ in China.

This contradiction existing in changing Chinese society produces a semi-closed culture system in Junxi Village. Consequently, Junxi Village presents an interesting area for culture of poverty studies. As the manifestations of culture, the approbatory values and norms among villagers are not totally volatile, but partly stable result from limited influence from the outside world.

²⁰ Zhou, Yi. 1998. "Actuality and Countermeasures of Migration Movement in China." *Sociological Studies* 3: 83-91.

²¹ Li, Peilin, and Wei Li. 2007. "Migrant Worker's Economic Status and Social Attitude in the Transition of China." *Sociological Studies* 3: 1-17.

²² Zhu, Youhong. 1997. "Chinese Studies on Rural Social Change and Rural Sociology." *Sociological Studies* 6: 44-54.

²³ Xu, Chajin, and Mingzhi Liao. 2001. "Anti-poverty Measurement and Strategy in Minority Concentrated Region and Remote Mountainous Areas." *Rural Economy* 1: 28-29.

²⁴ Liang, Shuiyuan. 2002. "Causes of and Countermeasure to Backward Economic Development in Remote Mountainous Areas." *Rural Economy in Shanxi* 6: 63-66.

²⁵ Liu, Liang. 2009. "The Dual Structure in Urban and Rural Economies and Its Effects to Rural Economy." *Diaoyan Shijie* 8: 38-39.

²⁶ Zhou, Dequn. 2009. "An Analysis on the Trends of Dual Structure in Urban and Rural Societies." *Observation and Reflection* 3: 28-29.

The Cases in Junxi Village

During my research, I interviewed 25 villagers in 18 to 35 age range. All of them had migration experience to different extents. Five of them, between 20 to 25 years old, were unemployed and seeking other job opportunities at that time. The rests worked in surrounding areas and went home after work regularly.

It is almost impossible for them with low level of education (mostly junior high school) to achieve successful upward social mobility. With ideals of higher income but the reality of poor education, most of them unfortunately can only find casual jobs without labor contracts in secondary labor markets. In other words, knowledge poverty²⁷ leads to economic poverty.

THE CTURE OF POVERTY IN JUNXI VILLAGE

Identity Talk

Identification, which is an important aspect of subculture, is formed by interactions with other cultural groups²⁸. Furthermore, identity talk is a popular mechanism for verbally constructing identities among people in subculture²⁹. The thesis authored by D.A. Snow and L. Anderson illustrates three generic patterns of identity talk: distancing, embracement and fictive storytelling.³⁰ When people in certain culture group are interacting with those outside, they tend to distance themselves from the roles, associations and institutions³¹. Embracement, including role embracement, associational embracement and ideological embracement, refers to one's acceptance of and attachment to social identity. Fictive Storytelling involves stories about one's past, present or future with a fictive character, however it is undiscovered in my investigation.

Through the conversations with the people in Junxi Village, I found that the identity talk plays an important role in the personal identifying process. Some interviewees used the term "financial crisis" that frequently appeared in the mainstream media at that time, to find a common discourse in communication. This is a part of a dialog between the interviewer and a female villager (translated):

Interviewer: How much money can you earn in a year?

Villager: (hesitantly) not so much, you know my situation...

²⁷ Hu, Angang, and Chunbo Li. 2001. "New Poverty during the New Century: Knowledge Poverty." China Social Sciences 3: 70-81.

²⁸ Fine, G. A., and S. Kleinman. 1979. "Rethinking Subculture: An Interactionist Analysis." The American Journal of Sociology 85(1): 1-20.

²⁹ Howard, Judith. A. 2000. "Social Psychology of Identities." Annual Review of Sociology 26: 367-93.

³⁰ Snow, D. A., and L. Anderson. 1987. "Identity Work among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities." The American Journal of Sociology 92(6): 1336-371.

³¹ Goffman, Erving. 1961. "Role Distance." Pp. 84-152. in Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill. Levitin, T. E. 1964. "Role Performance and Role Distance in a Low Status Occupation: The Puller." Sociological Quarterly 5: 251-60. Sayles, Marnie L. 1984. "Role Distancing: Differentiating the Role of the Elderly from the Person." Qualitative Sociology 7: 236-52. Stebbins, Robert A. 1975. "Role Distance, Role Distance Behavior and Jazz Musicians." Pp. 133-41 in Life as Theater: a Dramaturgical Sourcebook edited by D. Brissett and C. Edgely. Chicago: Aldine.

Interviewer: Could you give me an accurate number?

Villager: (think for a long time)...I don't know...maybe several hundred a month. You know the financial crisis, earning money is too hard.

Considering the weak economical connection with the outside world stemming from poor geographical position and low education level, and the absence of this term in their daily expressions, I believe that this usage of language was a special method to distance themselves from their roles. Some scholars believe that this is a mechanism of managing the stigma of social inequalities³².

Another direction of identity talk is embracement or acceptance of social identity. In this small village, the phenomenon reflecting the gap between the interviewer and the interviewees are ubiquitous. Particularly, some of the interviewees regard university students (like me) as a "knowledgeable person" who possess intellectual authority. As a result, they tell me about their income frankly (although hesitantly sometimes), which regularly is personal privacy; when I provide them employment information in a certain industrial area, they immediately say that it is "worth a shot". They use certain discourses e.g. "smart", "high education level" and "have a lot of money" to label me with mainstream values, while using opposite words and terms e.g. "do poorly in study" and "have no money" to evaluate themselves. They are prone to regard the interviewer as "person totally different with them" or "person who has a lot of knowledge" without questioning, which reflects their embracement toward their identity. This is the following part of the conversation between the interviewer and the female villager mentioned above (translated):

Interviewer: Financial crisis is our common obstacle, even university students have to face unemployment after graduating from school.

Villager: (surprised and suspicious) No way! You university students are much better than us! You gonna be sitting in an office in the future!

Distancing and embracement expressed by identity talk often occur together and almost synchronously, complementary to each other.

Work Ethic

Another aspect of the culture of poverty is the work ethic accepted by the villagers, which is economically related to their poverty situation. Work ethic, or employment ethic, is often regarded by scholars as willingness to work³³, or work inclination in various incomes³⁴. In

³² Howard, Judith. A. 2000. "Social Psychology of Identities." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 367-93.

³³ Gilder, George. 1987. "The Collapse of the American Family." *Public Interest* 89: 20-25.

³⁴ Mead, L. M. 1993. "The Logic of Workfare: The Underclass and Work Policy." Pp.173-86 in *The Ghetto Underclass*, edited by W. J. Wilson. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

addition, some writers use interviewees' attitudes toward "work hard" spirit to measure the work ethic³⁵. The villager's work ethic involves three aspects.

Firstly, because of the dual structure in urban and rural societies and the hierarchical relationship between them, the villagers usually treat urban residents as people of a higher social status and regard urban values as mainstream values accordingly. They have dreams of being urban residents with urban values, and prefer working in urban area. This aspiration encourages many of the villagers to hunt jobs far away from homeland in the cities.

Secondly, according to the interviews, almost every young person (Most of the interviewees are males, first because many young women have migrated to urban areas with their husbands; also, those living in the village with their families lack of right to speak) ever experiences a distance between ideal and reality. With great aspiration, at the beginning of their careers, they are willing to work for better incomes despite other hardships e.g. poor working condition, long working hours (ten to twelve hours) and lower wages than their expectation. However, over a period of time, the continued difficulties made some of them retreat to their hometown and do part-time jobs with lower income. An extreme condition is that some young villagers, who find it difficult to realize their former expectation in urban area, break the labor contracts (Many of the interviewees have experience of migrating to urban areas. Those who found jobs in formal industries worked with labor contracts before my research. During the research, none of them have jobs in urban areas. They work informally without contracts in surrounding areas (of the village) and quit the jobs.

Conversely, some of the migrant workers are still willing to keep working hard in urban areas, although their wages are relatively low and made little contribution to raising their living standard. I interviewed an elder villager (translated):

"Many young people who are working outside the village were not good at studying in school; some of them even hadn't graduated from the middle school before work. They work outside all year round and only come home in Spring Festival. They can't earn much money... They always spend all their salaries in the places of job. Some kids even have to ask for money from their parents!"

Faced with poor work conditions and payments, some of the younger cases (18 to 25 years old) decide to acquire different job skills to change their career directions. One of the interviewees has a rich experience in his career: he went to Zhejiang Province far away from home to learn handcrafting leather shoes when he graduated from the middle school, but he failed to find a job in shoe factories. Afterward he tried to learn long-distance driving and was recruited by an individual transportation enterprise, while he kept looking for another job opportunity. In October, 2008, he migrated to an urban area again and engaged in heat-protecting glass manufacture. But he quit the job and came home after two months because of the poor work conditions and low payment, continued his ordinary transportation work.

All of the interviewees have experiences of employment-based migration and job changing. However, even though it is possible for them to improve their job prospects to some

³⁵ Jones, Rachel K., and Luo Ye. 1999. "The Culture of Poverty and African-American Culture: An Empirical Assessment." *Sociological Perspectives* 42(3): 439-58.

extent; they are still limited to lower status employment because of their comparatively low levels of education³⁶.

Lastly, according to the interviews, unlike younger villagers who have strong desire for seeking job opportunities, older, married villagers (rural tradition believes that people must get married in a certain age) prefer stable jobs providing a regular source of income. This is part of a narration of a 34 year-old male villager (translated):

“I was crazy in looking for jobs when I was young... I ran a restaurant with my friend but failed... Afterward I engaged in pig farming but I lost money in it. Now I raise about two hundred rabbits and plant some grapefruits on the hill. I hope they could bring me benefits... I don't want to migrate; I mean I'm too old to work far away from home. You know, I have family to support. That would take a long time for me to learn a new skill, plus during the learning I can't do other jobs... It is a risk and I don't want to take it.”

Under the responsibility to support their families with stable incomes, married villagers regard the stability of their career as the primary concern. Consequently, even they meet obstacles in jobs, they tend to tolerate and hold the jobs. This is a part of a narration by a long haul truck driver, whose employer was in arrears with the payment (translated):

“I didn't think that there would be problem because it was my friend who brought me in and he knew the boss. Then he (the boss) said that he didn't have money to pay my wage... This wasn't the first time and I've urged him many times. I want my money but I don't have labor contract...I'm gonna find that guy again tomorrow and teach him a lesson if he doesn't give me my money!”

Due to the absence of labor contract, he could not fight for his right by legal means. Under this tough situation with unpaid wage, he suffered a strong dissatisfaction. He was angry so much so that he wanted to make some trouble, which indicates that he had no choices but kept working for this employer (otherwise he could find another job).

Ideology of Education

Education, as a broader concept, includes self-education (or autodidacticism), education in school setting (formal education) and informal education. The ideology of education has a great deal to do with economic condition³⁷, which thereby is a significant aspect of the culture of poverty. Ideology of education involves complex structure and content, while I tend to investigate villager's educational will and expectation.

³⁶ Lu, Xueyi. 2004. Social Mobility in Contemporary China. Beijing: Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House.

³⁷ Hu, Angang, and Chunbo Li. 2001. “New Poverty during the New Century: Knowledge Poverty.” China Social Sciences 3: 70-81.

Some Chinese researches indicate that due to influence from the outside world, the educational will among rural residents is rising, resulting from the cognition of the human capital theory³⁸. The interviews in Junxi Village confirmed this notion. Younger interviewees mentioned above express their strong aspiration to acquire new skills, to offer another direction in the careers. The older and married ones also believe that learning knowledge can “change one’s life”. Hence they consider that children’s education is very important for the future; all of the interviews’ children are receiving formal education (primary & high school) in the village or in surrounding areas.

However, the educational expectations toward the cases’ children are varied: the younger the villagers are, the higher expectation they hold. All of the cases in 30 to 35 years old tell me that children’s levels of education depend on children themselves. If their kids are good at study and intent to achieve higher academic goals, they will spare no efforts to support them; on the other hand, if their kids perform badly in school and showed no interests in study, they will “let it go”. I interviewed a father who had a son at school age:

“My son stinks in school; he often fails in exams and cannot finish the homework. I was kind of disappointed... But what can I do? I mean, if he was good at study, I would, definitely economically support his further education... But I have to accept the reality, just let it go. Maybe he would be able to support himself by working after graduating from high school.”

On the other hand, younger villagers have higher expectations about the education of the next generation. All of the younger villagers (18 to 29 years old) regard supervising the children’s study as the parents’ responsibility. This is a part of conversation with a 23 year-old villager (translated):

Interviewer: what’s your expectation about education level of your child?

Villager: I think my children should be a university student in the future, as you guys... But I think in the future, competition will be fiercer than today, it would be the best if I could send my kid to the universities in foreign countries!

Interviewer: But your kid must be good enough at study to be admitted into university.

Villager: yeah, of course. Every kid likes playing and doesn’t like studying, as I do (laugh). Sometimes I regret that I didn’t learn well when I was young...and now I have to work hard to make a living. I don’t want my child to follow my way...

Interviewer: But it seems very hard to make a naughty child sit quietly and read the book.

Villager: yeah, but I will try my best to supervise the study. Maybe I can get help from the teachers.

Interviewer: why is your expectation so high?

³⁸ Zhang, Hong, Shuqian Li, and Chunxia Shi. 2007. “Influences on the Notion of Rural Education from Out-going Peasant-workers.” *Ecological Economy* 1: 373-76.

Villager: I had been working in a city for a year. As a matter of my experience, children and parents in urban area are pursuing higher educational levels, I mean, parents exhaust any methods to send their children into universities or college. They have better teachers, better schools and more money for education. Students from rural areas have no advantage in competition with city kids. I don't want my child to lose.

This conversation indicates that the younger villager's educational expectation is affected by that among urban residents. He decides to struggle against the inequalities between rural area and cities, when he realizes the unfairness of educational resources.

SUMMARY

The culture of poverty in Junxi Village reveals the semi-closed cultural system mentioned above. The villagers used identity talk to interact with people in outside culture; some aspects of work ethic among the interviewees are counterexamples of "lack of work ethic" notion offered by formal Chinese studies; the ideology of education is changing, result from the communication with outside world.

On the other hand, the boundary between the culture of poverty and the mainstream culture is conspicuous. Due to the dual structure in the economy, policy and society, the villagers had their personal identity in their cultural system. In addition, the job-hunting of the villagers confirms Rodman's hypothesis that lower-class person have a wider ranger of values and a lesser degree of success³⁹. Furthermore, the educational expectation in the villager is relatively lower than that in mainstream culture.

It needs other studies to reveal the functions of the culture of poverty in the war on poverty. However, it may be confirmed that in the semi-closed cultural system, the culture of poverty is not entirely detrimental in economical development.

³⁹ Della Fave, L. R. 1974. "The Culture of Poverty Revisited: A Strategy for Research." Social Problems 21(5): 609-21.