Village Collective Management of Rural Resources and Old-Age Income Security in China: A Comparative Case Study of Guangdong Province

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Abstract

In the pursuit of research aimed at "improving farmers' lives," and driven by the academic mission to find solutions to the universal issue of aging, it is necessary to adopt a global comparative perspective when considering measures for aging in rural areas.In China, there is a disparity in the pension system between urban and rural areas, making the economic power for farmers' post-retirement life a significant challenge. This study uses cases from Guangdong Province to examine whether it is possible to reconstruct the collective management capacity of village collectives and maintain sufficient village welfare capacity through collective management.The research focuses particularly on poverty-stricken areas while considering a comparison with economically developed regions. The aim is to empirically investigate the possibility of **"mutual assistance"** (*kyojo*) in villages that are prone to poverty due to a lack of rural resources. Continuing to explore mutual assistance to overcome the limits of **"public assistance"** (*kōjo*) and **"self-help"** (*jijo*) for old-age support is considered deeply significant.The on-site investigation, conducted using a case study approach, revealed glimpses of village welfare capacity through collective management—in other words, the potential for mutual assistance—in certain regions of Guangdong Province. Conversely, in poverty-stricken areas where the collective management capacity of the village collective is weak and rural resources like farmlands and forests are scarce, the reliance on young people's migrant labor and son's households for old-age life, which represents family self-help consciousness, was clearly evident. Furthermore, while the pension system for rural residents is being developed, resident satisfaction remains extremely low.Moving forward, the necessity of further strengthening the power of public assistance is being questioned.

Keywords: : Rural resources, Collective management, Old-age income security, Community welfare capacity,

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1. Introduction

The rapid economic growth in China, driven by marketization and globalization, has exacerbated the urban-rural divide, particularly within social security and healthcare systems. Coupled with three decades of population control policies, rural areas are facing an unprecedented demographic shift. As younger generations migrate to urban centers, the economic independence of the elderly has become a critical social issue. While the Chinese government introduced the "New Rural Social Pension Insurance" in 2009 and the unified "Resident Basic Pension Insurance" in 2014, benefit levels remain insufficient to provide true financial security. Consequently, there is a pressing need to re-examine the role of village collectives—which hold legal ownership of rural land-in providing supplementary welfare. This study investigates whether the "Mutual-help" capacity of these collectives can be reconstructed to bridge the gap between inadequate public support ("Public-help") and the increasingly strained family unit ("Self-help").

2. Literature Review

The following section reviews the existing literature relevant to this study, organizing the transformation of social structures in contemporary China into two primary dimensions: **spatial dynamics** and **social welfare**.

Spatial Transformation and Political Dynamics

Hsing (2010) argues that the "great urban transformation" in China is driven by the underlying political dynamics surrounding land and real estate. Her analysis reveals the processes through which local governments establish power bases via land development. She emphasizes that Chinese urbanization is not merely a demographic shift but a fundamental **institutional spatial restructuring**.

Evolution of Welfare Policy

In contrast to these spatial shifts, Huang (2023) examines the institutional design of elderly welfare policies in anticipation of a depopulating society. Facing rapid decline in birthrates and an aging population, Huang contends that a transition from traditional family-dependent care to an **institutional safety net** is essential for China.

Synthesis: The Intersection of Space and Welfare

While existing research discusses the dynamics of "development" and "social security" in China as separate entities, a significant gap remains. Specifically, there is limited discussion regarding the **intersection of space and welfare**—how the restructuring of urban space impacts the accessibility of welfare services and the transformation of community foundations. This study aims to address this remaining academic frontier.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study approach, utilizing individual interviews and local government surveys conducted in three socio-economically diverse regions of Guangdong Province:

• **Region A (Developed)**: T Village, Y Township, B County, H City, Pearl River Delta. Characterized by high industrialization and significant land value (Figure 1)

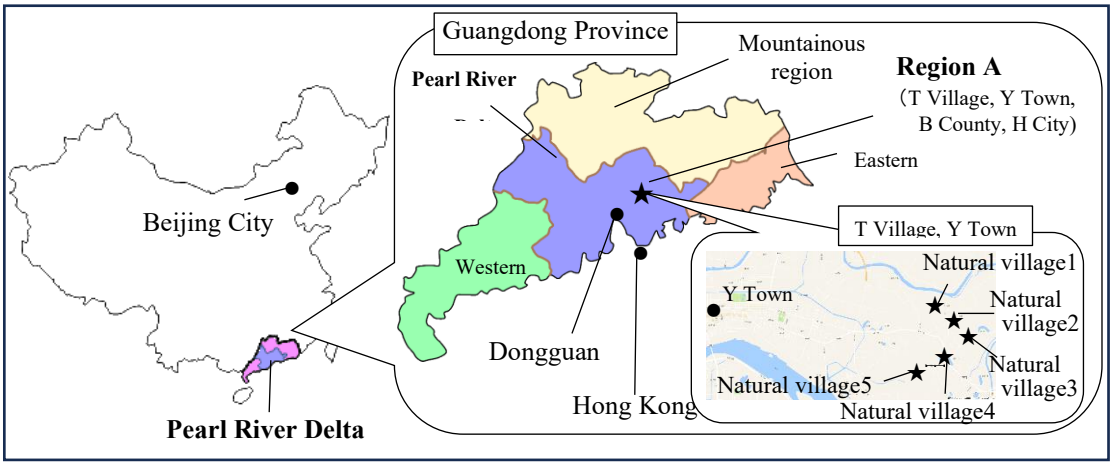

Fig 1. Location of Region A

• **Region B (Impoverished Hakka)**: Y Village, H Township, W County, M City, Northeast Guangdong. A region marked by resource scarcity and high youth out-migration (Figure 2).

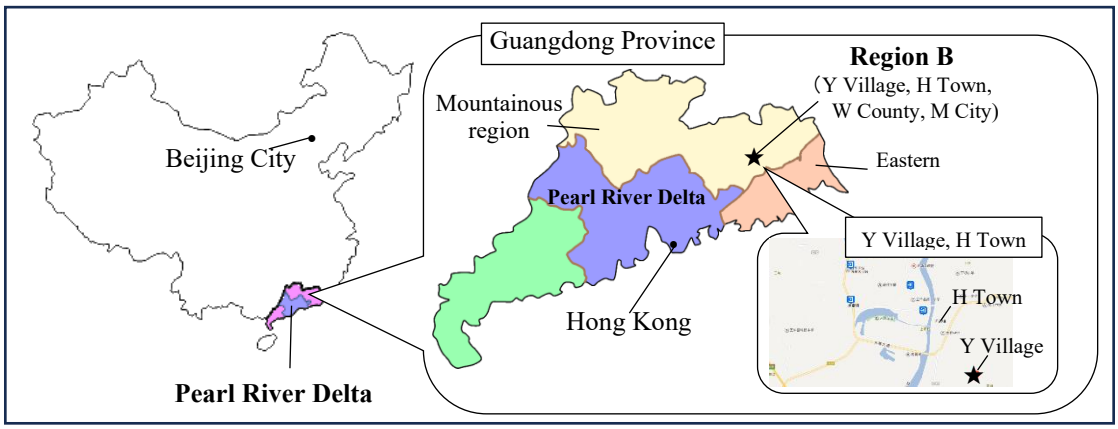

Fig 2. Location of Region B

• **Region C (Minority Group):** D Village, Y Township, R County, Sh City, located in the mountainous region of northern Guangdong Province. This is a Yao ethnic minority settlement currently undergoing government-assisted relocation to the plains due to the logistical difficulties of mountain life, despite the area's rich forest resources. While the villagers have been allocated new housing and agricultural land, their livelihood is characterized by a dual structure: leveraging forest resources while supporting their economy through off-farm income, including day labor (Figure 3)

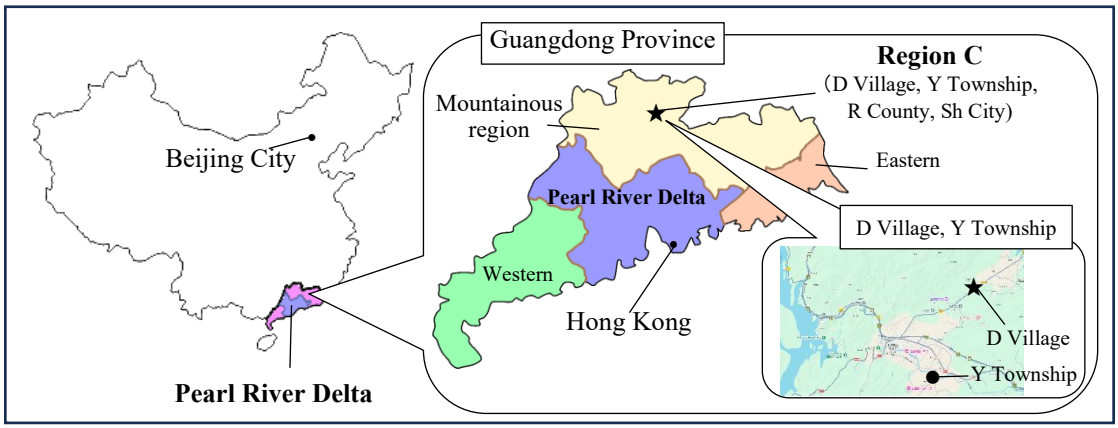

Fig 3. Location of Region C

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Region A: The "Mutual-help" Model through Collective Assets

Region A refers to T Village, located in Y Town, B County, H City, in the eastern part of the Pearl River Delta, Guangdong Province (Figure 1). Situated near the central hub of Y Town, the area has undergone significant industrialization, resulting in a decline in agriculture and a notable reduction in farmland. As small-scale farmers increasingly abandon their land, there is a simultaneous rise in large-scale operations. These include large-scale commercial farms, family gardens, and cooperatives known as "Hezuoshe" (Agricultural Cooperatives).

Land Ownership and Village Administration T Village administers five ziran cun (natural villages). The xingzheng-cun (administrative village) itself does not hold direct jurisdiction over land; instead, land is distributed among the respective natural villages. Consequently, rural land under collective ownership (including agricultural and forestry land) exhibits diverse forms of management.

The Impact of Urbanization on Collective Management Rapid urbanization and industrialization have led to the conversion of farmland into industrial parks, exacerbating the depletion of agricultural land. This study conducted interviews with individual households across three of the five natural villages within Region A (Table 1). Our analysis suggests that in natural villages where the village collective retains no land—due to variations in land resource availability and differences in the implementation of the household contract system—there is little to no room for the collective to exercise management power.

Conversely, in natural villages where the collective maintains control over substantial land resources, they utilize farmland as a strategic asset. By collectively managing the conversion of certain communal lands for industrial or commercial use, these villages have bolstered their finances (Figure 4- Allocated Farmland). This revenue is partially redistributed to farming households through village welfare programs, demonstrating a strengthening of "village welfare capacity." This suggests a potential for mutual aid, rooted in collective management, to provide economic security for villagers in their old age.

Individual Perspectives: Self-Help and Land Value From the perspective of individual households in the economically developed Pearl River Delta, the value of farmland is significantly higher than in impoverished regions. We identified cases—specifically in Tang Natural Village—where large-scale farmers are able to supplement their retirement income through land rent. These instances can be categorized as a form of "self-help" capacity for the elderly.

Public Support and Social Consciousness Regarding "public assistance," while public pension systems for rural residents are being established, the survey revealed low levels of satisfaction among farmers due to the low insurance payout rates.

Furthermore, the survey on attitudes toward aging indicated that while land remains important, respondents prioritized "financial support from sons (children)" over land or pensions. A clear preference was expressed by both men and women to "be cared for by children," specifically stating a desire for their sons to provide care (Figure 4-Preferred cohabitant in old age, Preferred caregiver in old age). Household visits confirmed a strong consciousness rooted in the presence of sons and a heavy reliance on them for support in old age.

Table 1. Summary of Interviews with Individual Farmers (Conducted in three natural villages of Region A)

Category	Number of Households	Number of Interviewees							Survey Method
		Gender		Age					
		Male	Female	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	
Tian	12	6	6	1	2	2	5	2	Questionnaire
Tu	11	7	4	1	5	2	2	1	Questionnaire
Tang	5	4	1	0	0	3	2	0	Individual Farm Visits

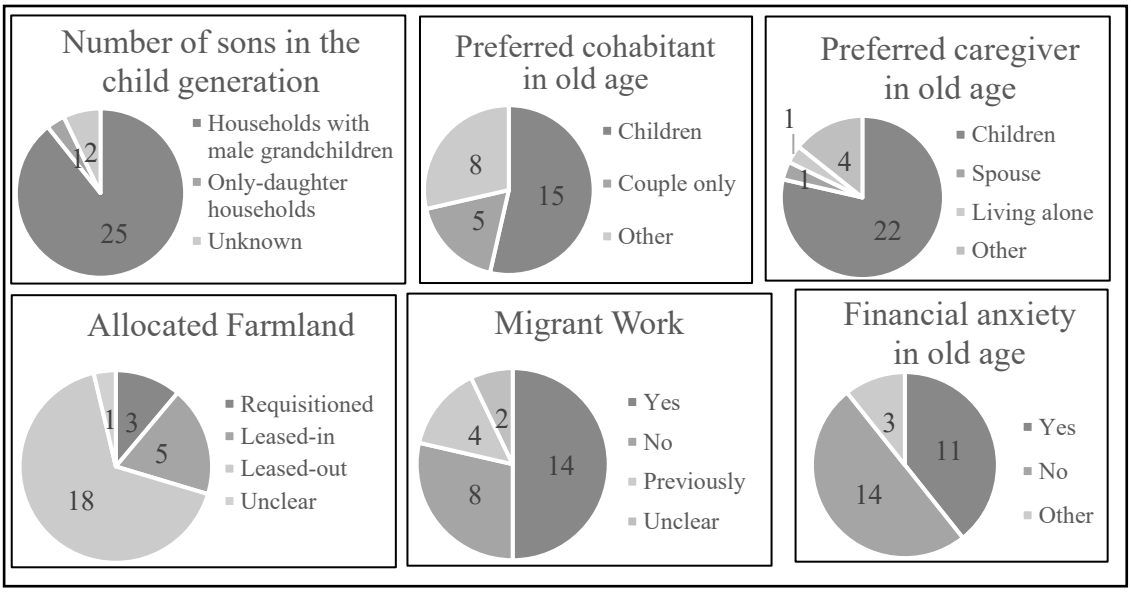

Fig 4. Results of door-to-door interviews with 28 households

4.2 Region B: The Persistence of "Family-based Self-help"

In the impoverished Hakka region, land resources are fragmented among individual households, leaving little for collective management. As shown in Table 2, the agricultural population in areas like W County remains high at 87%. Despite this, Table 2 reveals that "Household Business Income" (farming) is significantly lower than "Wage Income" (remittances), highlighting the economic vulnerability of those remaining in the village. Consequently, small-scale farming is economically non-viable, forcing the youth to migrate for work. Despite the availability of public pensions, satisfaction remains low, and the system is not viewed as a primary safety net.

This analysis deliberately utilizes statistical data up to 2014. This choice is informed by the fact that China's population policy underwent a significant shift after 2015, following which the long-standing restrictive population control measures were progressively relaxed.

As illustrated in Tables 4 and 5, even within the same administrative region of W City, both the proportion of the male population and the overall birth rate in W County are notably higher than in other surrounding areas. These figures serve as crucial data for statistically grasping the familial consciousness of the Hakka community. The implications of this data suggest a strong emphasis on male offspring, which may be closely linked to a high level of spiritual and economic dependence on sons for support in old age (Figure 5-Preferred cohabitant in old age, Preferred caregiver in old age). Ultimately, in an environment where community welfare is weak, the elderly rely almost exclusively on their children—a traditional "family-based self-help" ethos.

Table 2. Registered Household Population of M City (2014)

Unit: 10,000 Households / 10,000 Persons

Region	Total Households	Total Population	Gender: Male	Gender: Female	Agricultural Population	Non-agricultural Population
M City (Total)	138.2	528.6	270.4	258.3	402.2 (76%)	126.4 (24%)
District 1	10.8	35.6	18.2	17.5	11.1 (31%)	24.6 (69%)
District 2	16.3	60.1	30.2	30.0	46.6 (78%)	13.5 (22%)
City 1	31.9	119.6	61.6	58.0	86.9 (73%)	32.7 (27%)
County 1	8.2	26.5	13.5	13.0	18.0 (68%)	8.4 (32%)
County 2	7.3	23.5	11.7	11.7	17.1 (73%)	6.4 (27%)
County 3	16.7	55.9	28.6	27.3	43.9 (79%)	12.0 (21%)
County 4	16.3	71.2	36.4	34.8	60.6 (85%)	10.6 (15%)
W County	30.5	136.3	70.2	66.1	118.0 (87%)	18.3 (13%)

Source: 2015 M Statistical Yearbook

Table 3. Income and Expenditure Status of Rural Households in M City (2014)

Unit: Yuan (CNY)

Item	M City	District 1	District 2	City 1	County 1	County 2	County 3	County 4	W County
Per capita disposable income	10,786	14,556	13,237	12,284	11,533	11,873	9,484	9,585	9,387
- Wage income	5,048	7,819	4,898	4,913	5,486	5,805	3,520	5,706	6,199
- Net business income	3,525	3,767	5,890	3,591	4,133	3,119	3,068	2,235	2,122
- Net property income	44	350	132	94	48	19	49	15	14
- Net transfer income	2,168	2,620	2,316	3,685	1,867	2,930	2,847	1,629	1,502

Per capita consumption exp.	8,803	12,433	11,563	10,683	9,680	10,327	8,535	8,534	6,731
- Healthcare expenditure	658	599	1,116	947	638	674	1,074	628	117

Source: 2015 M Statistical Yearbook

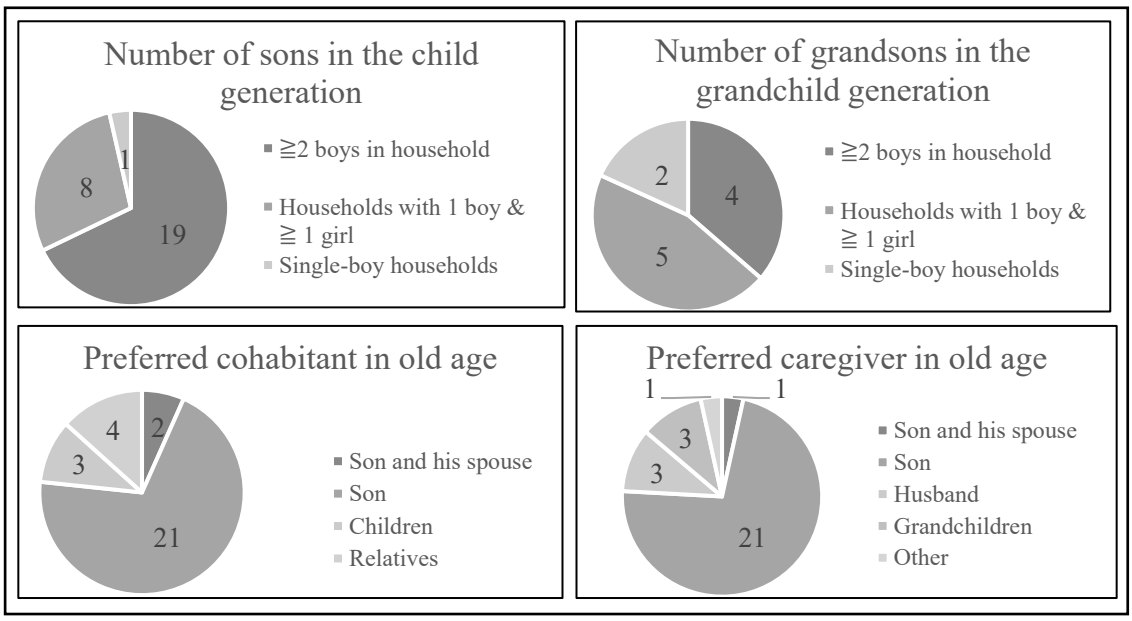

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Table 4. Changes in Population of M City

Year	Total Households (10k)	Total Pop (10k)	Male	Female	Birth Rate (‰)
1985	79.4	399.7	204.4	195.3	15.7
1990	91.1	433.5	222.3	211.2	23.3
1995	102.9	458.8	235.9	222.9	18.4
2000	117.1	485.2	250.1	235.1	12.6
2005	127.0	498.9	256.6	242.4	10.2
2010	134.6	514.8	263.6	251.1	10.9
2014	138.2	528.6	270.4	258.3	13.3

Source: 2015 M Statistical Yearbook

Table 5. Demographic Variations by Region in M City (2014)

Unit: Per mille (‰)

Region	Birth Rate	Death Rate	Natural Increase Rate
M City (Total)	13.3	5.8	7.4
District 1	9.8	6.2	3.5
District 2	12.1	5.5	6.6
City 1	13.1	6.1	7.1
County 1	11.6	5.7	6.0
County 2	11.7	6.1	5.6
County 3	13.9	6.5	7.4
County 4	14.3	5.5	8.7
W County	14.5	5.6	8.9

Source: 2015 M Statistical Yearbook

4.3 Region C: Dependency and Policy Transition

Region C, located in the northern part of Guangdong Province, is a poverty-stricken area inhabited by the Yao people, one of China's ethnic minorities (Figure 3). While the village farmers primarily relied on forestry in the mountainous regions, their living conditions remained extremely harsh. Under the "New Socialist Countryside" construction and poverty alleviation policies, entire villages have been gradually relocated to lowland areas since 1997. Residents were provided with new housing units in residential complexes—built to uniform specifications—along with small plots of farmland. Although the financial burden on each household for these houses was kept low, some interviewed farmers still reported feeling the weight of the cost.

While paddy fields and upland plots were provided in the plains, their limited size means that rice and vegetable cultivation are mostly restricted to self-consumption (Figure 6-Allocated Farmland). Nevertheless, because they can achieve food self-sufficiency, farmers recognize that this land is vital to their economic livelihood. Although agricultural income remains negligible, they continue to derive income from forestry management in the mountains over long-term cycles of 10 to 20 years.

A notable finding from the individual household surveys was the overwhelming proportion of respondents in their 30s and 40s compared to Regions A and B (21 out of 32 households) (Table 6). Many have experience as migrant workers; however, a significant number manage to remain in the village by engaging in multiple occupations (Figure 6-Migrant Work). This includes seasonal temporary non-farm employment in nearby urban areas combined with daily labor in the mountains. Compared to Region B, there were more young farmers who chose to stay in the village rather than migrate.

Some households, particularly middle-aged and elderly ones, continue to manage forestry operations. However, the commute between the lowlands and the mountainous areas is inconvenient and demanding. Consequently, since they are physically distant from their forest lands, there are many cases where elderly residents have abandoned management altogether. Furthermore, interviews suggested that the potential for collective management of village-owned resources was lost due to the relocation; however, individual households occasionally maintain their own forestry operations.

The cases indicate that the relocation has brought benefits, such as improved living environments and increased convenience. Regarding the support for the elderly, perhaps due to the specific characteristics of being in a poverty-stricken area inhabited by an ethnic minority, the expectation for public assistance—including enrollment in public pension schemes—was stronger than in other regions (Figure 6-Financial anxiety in old age). At the same time, the tendency to rely on the family unit, particularly on sons and their wives, remains as deeply rooted here as elsewhere, reflecting a consistent reliance on self-help (Figure 6-Preferred cohabitant in old age, Preferred caregiver in old age). As traditional village communities undergo dissolution and restructuring, the potential for mutual aid through collective village management requires further verification and continued research.

Table 6. Summary of Interviews with Individual Farmers

Number of Households	Number of Interviewees							Survey Method
	Gender		Age					
	Male	Female	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	
32	21	11	9	12	3	7	1	Questionnaire

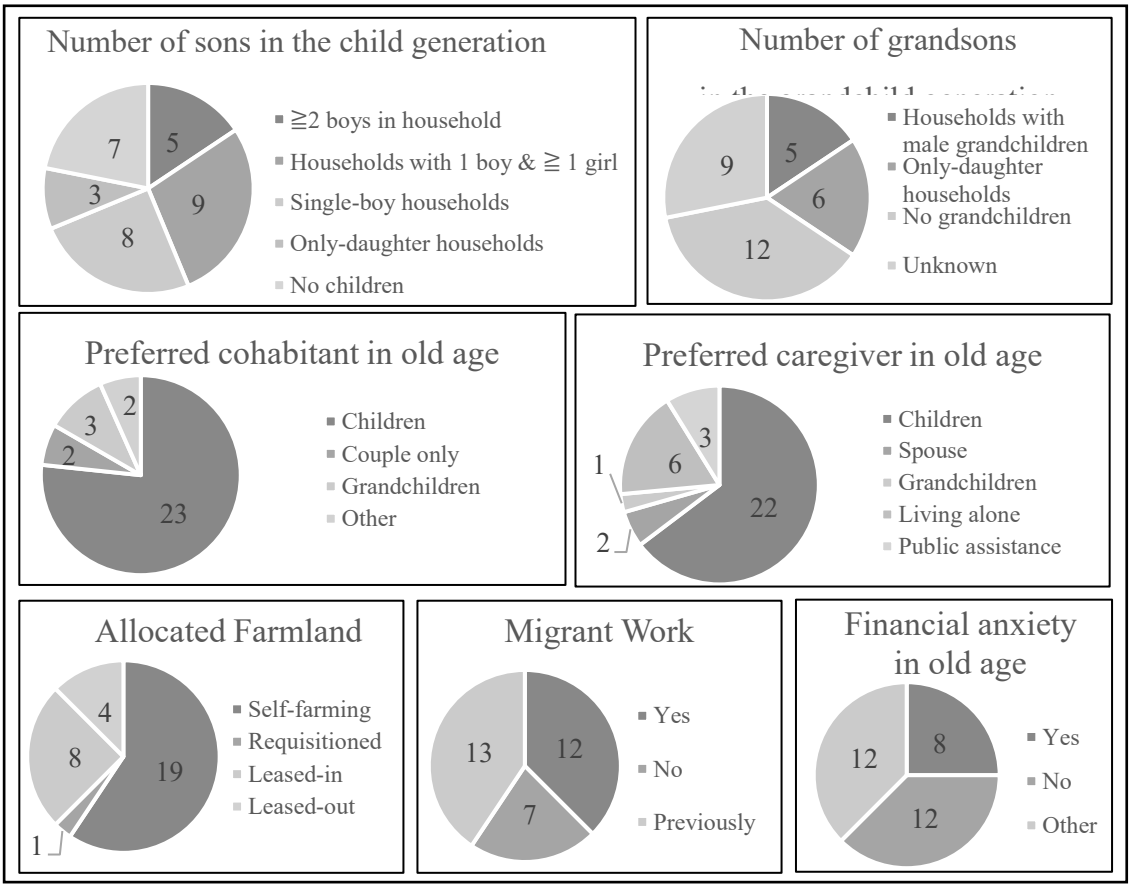

Fig 6. Results of door-to-door interviews with 28 households

5. Conclusion

This study examined the structure of elderly life security in rural societies through a comparative survey of three regions—A, B, and C—from the perspectives of "self-help, mutual aid, and public assistance". The findings are summarized as follows:

5.1 Limitations of Public Assistance and Regional Disparities

Regarding public assistance, while the introduction of the New Rural Social Pension Insurance (NRSP) has received some positive evaluation, it still fails to function sufficiently as an economic foundation for old age, exposing the limitations of public aid. Particularly in Region C, the low pension participation rate among the younger generation was observed, reflecting a reality where they are forced to prioritize medical insurance due to a lack of financial resources. On the other hand, although relocation policies from mountainous to plain

areas embody social welfare through public assistance, it is noteworthy that the content of support differs between Region B and Region C, despite both being impoverished areas.

5.2 Resources as a Determinant of Mutual Aid

The primary focus of this study, the functionality of mutual aid, correlates strongly with the volume of resources held by the village collective.

- **Region A**: By sharing the value of farmland owned by the village, residents maximize the benefits of mutual aid through collective ownership, establishing a relatively stable livelihood base.
- **Region C**: Abundant forest resources provide opportunities for cash income through day labor, and this dependence on resources serves as a factor encouraging the younger generation to remain in the village.
- **Region B**: The village collective lacks resources, resulting in a fragile foundation for mutual aid. Consequently, the current function of mutual aid is limited, and the potential for future development is extremely low.

From these comparisons, it is evident that the resource base of village collective management is a decisive variable that influences the migration or residence of inhabitants, thereby dictating the viability of mutual aid within the local community.

5.3 Reliance on Family Support as Self-Help

In the aspect of self-help, specifically intra-family support, a pronounced tendency toward dependence on children (especially sons and their spouses) was observed across all regions (Figure 4, 5, 6- Preferred cohabitant in old age, Preferred caregiver in old age). This trend is most distinctly manifest in Region B, where there is a strong "son preference" aimed at maintaining the lineage and securing old-age support; this influence is also reflected in the number of children (B > C > A) (Figure 4, 5, 6-Number of sons in the child generation). The high expectations placed on sons and their spouses in the next or subsequent generations are inferred to be an extension of traditional self-help efforts in rural society, intended to complement incomplete public security.

Summary

The analysis in this paper highlights the reality that life security in rural areas is sustained through the mutual complementarity of "family-based self-help," which compensates for inadequate public assistance, and "community-based mutual aid," which is determined by the volume of available resources. In particular, how to overcome the dual challenges of a lack of mutual aid and the limitations of public assistance in resource-poor regions remains a critical policy issue for the future.

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