

Left behind

Zhou Xun says more than 50 years after the Great Leap Forward, parts of rural China that survived the famine continue to live in poverty, seemingly untouched by the country's spectacular boom

While the coastal cities of China and its people have benefited from the economic reforms of the past three decades, in many parts of rural inland China, peasants continue to live in dire poverty.

Between 2006 and 2010, I travelled across the Chinese countryside to interview survivors of the Great Leap Forward famine. The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) was Mao Zedong's (毛澤東) dream for leading China into a communist utopia. Like all utopian projects of the 20th century, it was doomed to fail.

It led to a devastating famine throughout China, which was to last three or more years, claiming millions of lives. It also led to mass destruction of agriculture, industry, trade, and every aspect of human life, leaving large parts of the countryside scarred forever by man-made environmental disasters.

To a large extent, the destruction of the Great Leap Forward continues to exercise an influence on everyday life in the countryside even to this day. I was often struck by the level of poverty in rural China.

More than 50 years after the famine, the lives of those who survived have improved very little.

In 1958, the rural population in China was forced to sacrifice homes and possessions in order to build socialist collectives, but today many survivors of the famine are still left without homes, health care and, sometimes, food. It may be hard to believe in today's China that there are still a fair number of people suffering from starvation.

For many living in the remote rural villages, the economic boom of the cities is simply beyond reach. On a number of my trips, the modern highway suddenly disappeared into dust.

In particular, my trip to a Sierbao village in Luliang county, Yunnan (雲南) province, left a deep impression. Luliang is about 135 kilometres northeast of the provincial capital Kunming (昆明).

This is one of China's major tourist routes, served by a brand new national highway. It took me just two hours by bus from Kunming to Luliang county. The next part of the journey, into the village, was only 10 kilometres but it took me over an hour. The narrow road was so bumpy that



at one point I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest.

The villages along the way looked poor. A number of old folk sat by the side of the road breathing in the dust while a few minivans passed by. China's modernisation has brought these poor villagers nothing except filthy air.

Luliang county holds a special place in the history of the Great Leap Forward famine. Fifty-four years ago, wide-scale famine and death occurred there as a direct result of the movement. To achieve the "great leap", hundreds of thousands of Yunnan farmers were forced to work for over 10 hours a day, sometimes all night long, at physically exhausting tasks with insufficient food.

By August 1958, at the height of the Great Leap Forward, some 169,000 cases of oedema had been reported in Luliang and nearby counties and nearly 24,000 people had died. Many families fled the famine.



The modernisation of China has brought these poor villagers nothing except filthy air

This was the first major incident of mass starvation and death during the period.

Today, while a large proportion of the rural population in Luliang remains poor, according to official announcements, the area is now one of Yunnan's most prosperous granaries. "We don't see any of the prosperity, it's all lies," some villagers told me, "the cadres get all the glory and put all the cash and rewards into their own pockets, but we get nothing. Things have not changed much." Riding back on the dusty, bumpy road, the sheer discomfort forced me into agreement.

A few days later, I embarked on another journey, to Huilong village in Jianyang county's Yucheng township, Sichuan (四川). Yucheng is close to Sichuan's popular tourist destinations, the Shipan and Sancha reservoirs.

I started in Chengdu (成都) by taking the long-distance bus. Half way there, the traffic was diverted to a country road as the highway was closed. As I sat inside the bus, I was amazed to see a Rolls-Royce race past a man pulling a cart full of ducks waiting to be slaughtered. It was like experiencing different centuries and different countries all at once.

From the village bus stop to villagers' homes up in the hills, there is only one small, narrow road. The only way to get up there is to walk or ride a scooter. With some help, I found a man who was willing to give me a ride for a modest fee. On the way I was

told that, on a rainy day, it's impossible to get up to where I wanted to go as the road turns into a mud pit. To get out or to get back in can be very hazardous. As I listened, I looked up at the sky and was very thankful for the fine sunny weather that day.

A few villagers told me that the area had a very high death toll at the time of the Great Leap Forward famine, and 70 per cent of children born between 1958 and 1962 suffered from Kashin-Beck disease – a chronic degenerative ailment that destroys the growth cartilage and joint cartilage in childhood. Known locally as "big bone disease", the victims were unable to stretch their knees or to walk. Because of this, others in the area called the village "Dwarfs' Village".

On my last visit there, a number of villagers suffering from the disease told me they continued to experience chronic pain, and they received very little help from the government.

Like Sierbao, the Dwarfs' Village feels incredibly remote. The rapid modernisation in cities seems to have had no effect on life there, although it is only about 55km southeast of the provincial capital, Chengdu. Sitting on top of a hill in Huilong village, the modern highway is nowhere to be seen.

Zhou Xun is research assistant professor of history at the University of Hong Kong

A turn-off

Joyce Man says a porn film's portrayal of Hong Kong women as demanding and materialistic sadly reflects a social stereotype too many believe

The film *Due West: My Sex Journey* opened this week and if the massive turnout for last year's *3D Sex and Zen: Extreme Ecstasy* – by the same producer and with some of the same actors – is anything to go by, this soft-porn flick will be bagging movie-goers by the dozen. On the face of it, the film offers exactly the kind of light-hearted, unabashed conversation about sex that the city sorely needs. After all, our fertility rate stands at a paltry 1.2 children per woman, and a survey last year showed men and women were satisfied with having sex just 1.9 and 1.6 times a week, respectively.

It's a pity, however, that the movie does so at the expense of Hong Kong women. The movie follows the exploits of Frankie, an average twentysomething in marketing who, after being repeatedly thwarted in various sexual encounters in Hong Kong, heads to Dongguan, to seek out a prostitute.

The movie does well in replicating the earnest, no-holds-barred contemplation that is the winning quality of the original online posts, on which the film is based. But it falls down in its portrayal of Hong Kong women. All are self-absorbed, demanding and materialistic – archetypal "princessy" *kong nui*. And there is nothing coy about the way the writer-director presents Hong Kong women as the root of the problem; they might as well be blamed for the city's low fertility rate and sex drive as well. As such, the movie stands as the perfect apologist for the 29 per cent of Hong Kong men who admitted infidelity in a recent survey.

Writer Yeeshan Yang says in her book, *Whispers and Moans: Interviews With the Men and Women of Hong Kong's Sex Industry*, that Hong Kong men "find little sexual release in dealing with these cold, passionless angels" that are Hong Kong women. In this movie, the women are cold and passionless, but are not angels. By contrast, the Dongguan prostitutes are soft-spoken, buxom and ready to please.

If the premise that women are responsible for the city's lack of sex life only existed in the movie, it would not matter so much. What's disturbing is that this perception is widespread.

The *Due West* story became popular because it rang true. Luk Kit-ling, vice-chairperson of the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, says the idea that a woman should shoulder the burden for disharmony in bed is a thread that runs through many local movies, novels and TV shows. Online forums abound with assertions like "going to a prostitute is better than going for a *kong nui*".

Men visit prostitutes. According to a 2006 study by Chinese University, 12 per cent of respondents in Hong Kong had done so over the previous six months. If they do, they should not blame the women, just as women who pay for sex – and signs are that more and more of them do – should not blame the men.

Blaming the women is an easy way to displace responsibility and ignore an unsettling possibility: that the men might not be masters of seduction, either. The movie concedes as much. Frankie is a buttoned-up, overgrown man-boy who begs his parents to let him buy his own underwear. Blaming women also takes us back to the dated assumption that women have no sexual needs. It takes two to tango, and society should expect the men to step up.

Joyce Man is a freelance journalist based in Hong Kong

Immature handling of islands dispute leaves Sino-Japanese relations stranded

Kevin Rafferty says both sides are hurting their hard-won co-operation over a miscommunication

The most depressing aspect of the continuing spat between China and Japan over the ownership of uninhabited rocky islands in the East China Sea is the wretched name-calling, along with a dangerous nationalism which could destroy Asia's rapid economic progress.

With China's political handover in the offing and elections on the horizon in Japan, the timing of the latest row could not have been worse. Even so, looking at the personalities who will be in charge next year, it is hard to see a bright new dawn across the China seas.

China's president-in-waiting Xi Jinping (習近平) lectured visiting US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta that Japan must stop its troublemaking behaviour. So Xi has a sense of humour: this was a cheeky display of chutzpah, given that Beijing and other Chinese cities were cleaning up the mess from days of carefully orchestrated anti-Japanese demonstrations that saw leading Japanese companies – like Canon, Nissan, Panasonic, Uniqlo and Seven & I – shut factories and stores in China for fear of violence.

It came as Chinese vessels prowled the area to make China's claims, and as air tickets for Chinese tours to Japan were cancelled en masse as Beijing encouraged a policy of "sensible patriotism" to squeeze Japan.

What had Japan done to deserve Xi's condemnation? The hapless Yoshihiko Noda, Japan's prime minister, was trying to calm things down by buying the

disputed islands from their private Japanese owners, thus preventing maverick nationalist Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara from buying them to wreak who knows what new mischief.

Evidently, there has been a breakdown in communications between Beijing and Tokyo.

Recent events suggest that China's new leaders and the old are agreed on a more assertive policy over disputed territories in the seas around the country.



Looking at the personalities who will be in charge, it is hard to see a new dawn

Apart from barrages of statements and increasing Chinese naval presence, Beijing took the novel step of announcing baselines formally to demarcate its territorial waters around the Senkakus/Diaoyus. In Chinese law, this places the islands under its sovereignty and obliges the country to assert its jurisdiction. It is a demarche from its previous policy of seeking joint exploitation of the sea resources.

In addition, China rebuffed Washington's suggestions of mediation, telling the US to stay out of the dispute. Beijing cannot have forgotten that the US is bound by the 1960 treaty to go to Japan's aid if the Senkakus

are attacked, so this must be an effort to drive a wedge between Washington and Tokyo.

Senior US generals are sceptical whether the rocks are really worth a war with China. But Washington does have to worry about what a clear Chinese victory would say about US prestige, and about its commitment to freedom of international navigation to protect its own international trade and investment.

There is not much chance of a pleasant surprise from Japan. Noda's government is moth-eaten and does not know where it is going. There will be relief when elections are announced any week now. Not that the Japanese electorate has much of a choice. The opposition Liberal Democratic Party fancies its chances of regaining power and holds its leadership contest next week. But the candidates range from nationalist to rabid nationalist.

A new party hopes to set Japan on fire – the Japan Restoration Party, formed by the telegenic mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto. The "Restoration" in the party's name has echoes of the Meiji Restoration, which saw 19th-century isolationist feudal Japan begin its journey to become a modern industrial country. Hashimoto does not want to restore the emperor to power, but he wants to make Japan great again, a concept with difficult and troubling connotations.

Hashimoto and his party are still very much a work in progress, but he has generally taken a right-wing position, and

is seen as close to former prime minister Shinzo Abe. Such is his personal appeal that the Japanese media predict he may win up to 100 seats in the 480-member lower house.

Sensible commentators believe wiser heads will prevail and both China and Japan will see the immense benefits of their multibillion-dollar co-operation. Victorian reformer Richard Cobden declared: "Free trade is God's diplomacy, and there is no other certain way of uniting people in the bonds of peace." But the great peace and prosperity of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was followed by the bitter nationalist war of 1914-1918.

Every commentary says the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are useless uninhabited and uninhabitable rocks, except that they are in the middle of rich fishing grounds believed to contain valuable oil and gas resources. If so, the sensible thing is to jointly explore them and increase co-operation and prosperity, not indulge in slanging matches over the past and concepts like "sovereignty" over rocks, which cannot be eaten or banked.

Children, stop squabbling. But is there any grown-up in charge in Beijing or Tokyo?

Kevin Rafferty is a political commentator

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China must ensure the financial health of its elderly

Yang Tao says innovative products should supplement the state system

As China's population ages, finding ways to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of the elderly is becoming its greatest challenge. The usual measures would be to use fiscal and financial instruments. But in a country where the state financial system cannot adequately meet demands, more innovative financial services and products will be needed as a supplement.

A well-established financial system for the elderly should meet their demands for security, consumption and investment.

First, in terms of security, there is an urgent need to improve the various types of contractual savings institutions, including insurance and fund providers. Furthermore, new financial products need to be developed, such as reverse mortgages, where senior citizens can get loans from banks or other financial institutions by using their property as collateral.

Admittedly, considering the defects in the Chinese housing system, the real estate bubbles, as well as cultural factors such as the fact that houses are traditionally handed down to children, there are many practical difficulties in launching reverse mortgages in China. Still, the ageing population brings new opportunities for financial institutions, and governments and regulators should guide institutions and agencies to provide a wide range of banking and non-banking products.

Second, the "silver" economy will have a profound influence on worldwide consumption patterns and product structures.

Given China's gradual shift to being more reliant on domestic demand for growth, consumption by senior citizens will become a focus for the real economy.

Consumer finance has always been a weakness of the Chinese financial system. For example, one kind of product, operated mainly by insurance companies that target older people, has proved controversial: it offers a "rebate" transferred into a person's pension fund when they buy it. However, the scheme can be confusing as not everyone realises they will receive the "refund" only after they retire. But as long as such products are reliable and regulated, they should be seen as innovative.

Third, pension investments must be a focus for financial innovation. During different phases of their life, investors' appetite for risk and philosophies change, creating ongoing demand for new products. Both long-term institutional investors – who make investments with pensions and annuities – and elderly individual investors need stable returns. China needs to develop fixed-income products, such as bonds, and make them an important component of the financial markets.

Senior citizens also have huge wealth management needs. Services provided by Chinese financial institutions rarely emphasise customer relations and there is a dire shortage of specialised products. Because senior citizens have a small sphere of financial activity,

they require increased convenience to encourage them to choose financial products; they have higher requirements for security, liquidity and easy access to cash; they are very sensitive to service prices; and, they require more psychological and emotional care than younger investors.

Thus, the financial sector must tailor-make "silver" investment products. For example, employee stock ownership plans currently being promoted by the regulators will enable retired employees to gain stable returns if the listed company performs well, thus better serving their investment needs.

Policy-based financial institutions and commercial institutions both need to provide financial support for the elderly. Policy-based finance should dominate when it comes to providing security, while commercial finance can act as a supplementary service, by being responsible for consumption and investment.

Both types of institutions will need to work together to tackle financial issues, risk management and other pressures brought about by an ageing society, in order to create a silver financial system that matches the caring culture for the elderly that already exists in China.

Yang Tao is chief economist at the publication China's Economy & Policy, and director general of the research base for industrial finance at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences