



# Homelessness and the Universal Family in China

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ABSTRACT. Depending on how one defines homelessness, China has either a very tiny homeless population or an extremely large one. Compared to other countries, there very few vagrants: people living on the streets of China's cities without means of support. But if one counts the people who migrated to cities without a legal permit (*bukou*), work as day laborers without job security or a company dormitory, and live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions on the edge of cities, there are nearly 300 million homeless. Free market fundamentalism is responsible for the emergence of this sort of homelessness in China. We review China's recent new policies to tackle homelessness and offer suggestions based on the traditional Chinese wisdom, which includes the concept of the universal family (family - *tian xia*). Homelessness in China must be addressed as a cultural problem caused by the breakdown of ancient methods of social integration. Treating it merely as a housing deficit will fail.

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### **Introduction**

Is there a homeless population in the People's Republic of China today, and, if so, on what scale? The question is hard to answer because there are no official statistics. But we can make some conjecture from some clues released by the authorities.

According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, China helped 17.7 million vagrants and beggars from November 2012 to June 2019. That estimate constitutes only 1.2 percent of the national population, and it may include the same people counted multiple times. But if we expand the definition of homelessness to incorporate nearly 300 million peasant-workers living a marginal existence on the periphery of cities, the homeless population in China balloons to over 20 percent of the population. The vast majority of homeless people are in China's major cities, where they find work but lack a residency permit (*bukou*), leaving them unable to find decent living accommodations. In contrast to vagrants, they are not visible on the streets, but in contrast to citizens with permits, they are forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. If the opposite of "homeless" means having stable and livable accommodations, tens of millions of migrants live under precarious circumstances. They know their neighborhood could be demolished by the city to make space for high-end housing.

What has caused the formation of a huge homeless population today? Why did it not happen before? What is the Chinese government doing to tackle the homeless population issue? What are the limitations of the current approaches? Are there better ways to deal with the homeless population problem? This article will discuss these issues.

### **Homelessness as Structural Pathology**

In a developing country like China with a large population and relatively small amount of farmland, the opportunities of individuals have inevitably been squeezed in the processes of gaining national sovereignty, accumulating capital for industrialization, and undergoing various forms of modernization. The problem of homelessness is one extreme manifestation of what happens to marginal individuals when systemic change occurs. Modernization in China has undermined traditional family and village structures that protected individuals from

larger social forces. We can observe the formation of the conditions that gave rise to homelessness in three periods: the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the collectivization period from 1949 to 1978, and the period after 1978, when market reforms led to an opening up of China.

*Conflicts in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

In the wake of the Opium Wars in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, imperialist powers successively intervened in China's internal affairs through unequal treaties, the creation of colonial areas, and the imposition of high indemnities, all of which caused China to deteriorate into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. Nevertheless, the prolonged experience of outside interference solidified the Chinese resolve to create a strong nation that would never again be forced to be subservient to other nations. That has meant that national leaders in modern China have constantly been forced to invest in the survival needs of the nation ahead of the prosperity needs of households. Thus, one of the remote causes of homelessness in China is the continuing hostility of other nations, a situation that forces China to divert spending from domestic needs, including housing, to defense requirements.

The plunder of resources by powerful nations during the late Qing dynasty had an impact on society at all levels. Some families went bankrupt and the only way for these families to live was by theft or begging. The Qing scholar Xu Ke ([1916] 1986: 5472–5474) pointed out that there were six ways beggars could sustain themselves at that time: skills, labor, disability, treachery, coercion, and selling goods. The hope for an independent and smooth reform by the feudal monarchy fell through, as did the failure of the Westernization movement and the Hundred Days' Reform. China fell into a warlord period in the 1910s, so peasants had to flee the countryside. An economic crisis in the 1920s accelerated the exodus. The traditional rural economy was unable to maintain people's basic survival needs. Bankrupt peasants and poor urban residents moved to cities and ports in search of work. However, political instability led to large-scale unemployment, which gradually became an important source of violent revolution. In the 1930s, as Japan launched a full-scale war of aggression against China, the flames of war spread to most rural areas, which exacerbated the

trend of large-scale movements of peasants. On average, 4.6 percent of peasants left their villages in the 1920s, rising to 5.9 percent in the 1930s (Chi 2001: 12–13). During periods of upheaval, millions of people left war-torn areas and moved to relatively safe and economically developed areas. Since these internal refugees had no work, many of them became beggars.

#### *Tensions After Liberation*

Under the leadership of the Communist Party, China achieved national independence and national liberation. But that meant the new government inherited all of the economic problems of the previous regime. In 1949, there was an urgent need to industrialize China in order to regain a secure position in the world that would not be subject to foreign interference. But accumulating the capital necessary for industrialization required China to forestall the chance for individuals to pursue a better material life.

The economic blockade imposed by developed countries prevented China from receiving foreign aid or technology. China also lacked the opportunity to extract the surplus from backward countries in the way Western powers had done. Therefore, China's industrialization had to be accomplished through internal accumulation. Socialism enabled China to concentrate efforts on major tasks and to raise capital by setting a low price on agricultural products and a high price on industrial products, which subsidized industry at the expense of agriculture. As shown in the Figures 1 and 2, despite severe natural disasters and political unrest, China's GDP increased almost five times from 1952 to 1977: from ¥68 billion to ¥325 billion (NBS-China 2019a). That growth required a transition from an economy dependent on primary extraction to an economy focused on secondary production. Industry thus played an important role in the increase of GDP. Industrial output rose from 20.8 percent of GDP in 1952 to 46.7 percent in 1977, indicating that the transition to a semi-industrialized country was completed.

As China became more prosperous, the focus of individuals changed from survival needs to the pursuit of a higher standard of living. From 1949 onward, China's leaders struggled with the conflict between internal accumulation for the country's security and future

Figure 1  
China's GDP from 1952 to 1977 (in hundreds of millions of CNY)  
Source: NBS-China (2019a).

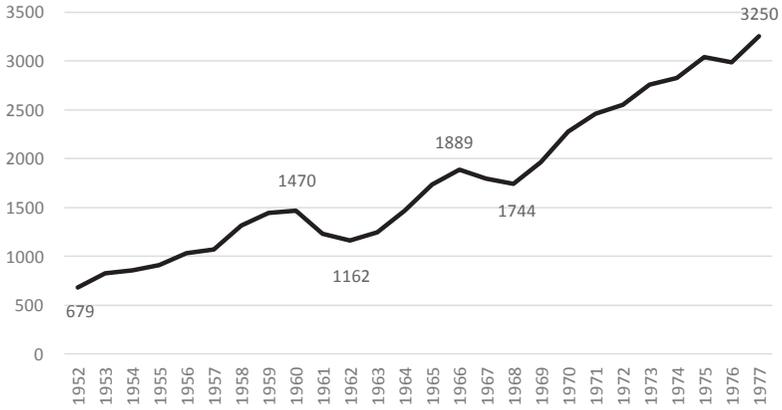
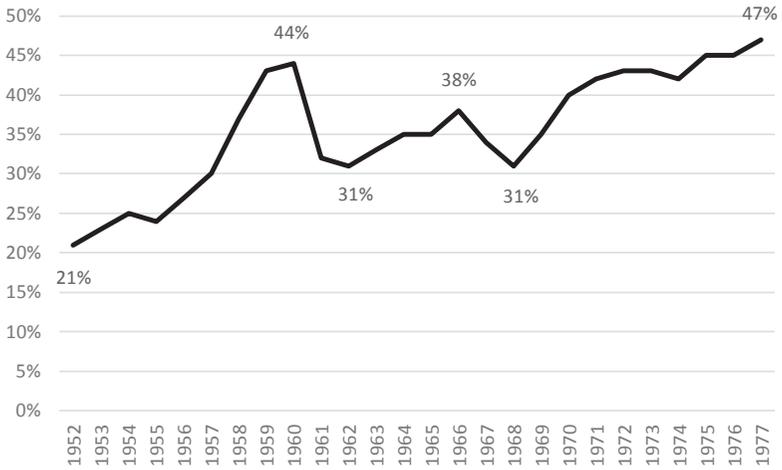


Figure 2  
Industrial Output as Percent of GDP, 1952–1977  
Source: NBS-China (2019a).



development and current consumption to satisfy the legitimate desires of the public for a more comfortable life.

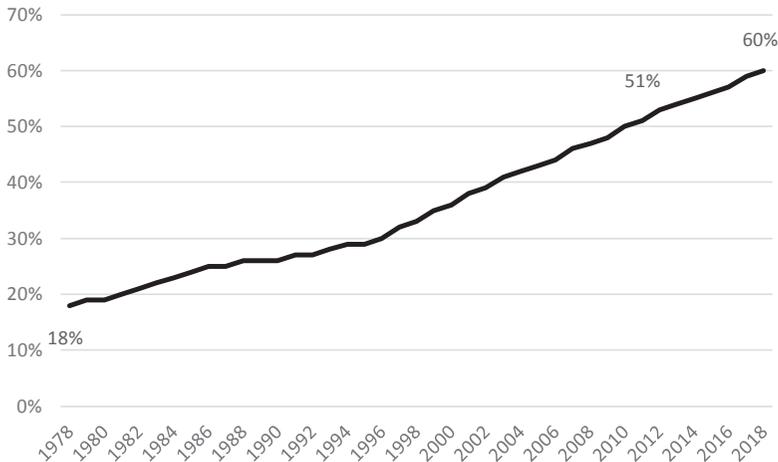
The problem of homelessness was part of this conflict. Ensuring the country's stable development and minimizing the number of homeless people required the state to reinvest any surplus in future output. But the investments in new industries attracted workers from the countryside, which was the source of the homeless problem in liberated China. So-called wandering vagabonds entered the cities without a permit in search of work, to avoid family planning restrictions, or to escape marriage or debt. In 1953, *People's Daily* estimated that more than 50,000 peasants migrated into large cities within a few years after liberation, a situation the government tried to curb with regulations ("Instructions on Persuading Peasants to Prevent Wandering into Cities") (Wang and Wang 2001: 3). Nevertheless, there were few poverty-stricken homeless people; the homeless population derived from national policies that mobilized people through military recruitment, political campaigns, and a 1958 call to peasants to move to cities for the Great Leap Forward. In the 1960s, there was a reversal of that policy, when educated youths were sent to mountainous areas and the countryside to reclaim land in frontier areas (Dong 2019).

#### *Market Reform and Opening of China*

In 1978, China began a series of market-oriented reforms and started to participate in global commerce. The annual rate of GDP growth rose to an average of 9.4 percent from 1978 to 2018. The expansion of production and sales of consumer goods required a large number of workers. Millions of peasants moved to cities to work in factories, as the economy shifted from primary production to secondary and tertiary production (manufacturing and services). The city became a gathering center of various resources (Dong 2019). Peasants mainly flowed into cities in the Yangtze River Delta, the Pearl River Delta, and other large and medium-sized cities. As shown in Figure 3, the percent of China's population living in urban areas increased from around 18 percent in 1978 to around 60 percent in 2018. The tipping point came in 2011, when the urban population exceeded half the total population.

In the initial tide of migrant workers in the 1980s, only a small number of the peasants who arrived in cities were unable to find

Figure 3  
 Level of Urbanization in China: 1978–2018  
 Source: NBS-China (2019b).



work and instead turned to begging. In 1985, 636 shelters were set up around China. Around 628,000 people were assisted and sent back to their homes in the countryside; in 1989, the number grew to 940,000 (Wang and Wang 2001: 241). From 2016 to 2019, taking Guangdong as the province with a large migrant population as an example, the aid system helped to save beggars about 150,000 times and helped 5,388 long-term stranded people find their relatives successfully (Guangdong Province 2019). The number of homeless people, according to the narrowest definition (visible vagrancy), is still very small.

### The Ambiguous Meaning of Homelessness

The much larger source of homelessness was the tremendous number of migrant workers who entered cities to find work (NBS-China 2019c). The number of migrant workers in Chinese cities increased from 225.4 million in 2008 to 288.4 million in 2018, but the rate of increase slowed from 5.4 percent in 2010 to 0.6 percent in 2018.

The hundreds of millions of workers who came to cities from the countryside are homeless only in a very specialized sense. They have a place to live, but their living conditions are crowded and substandard. Above all, they are precarious. With little warning, officials may deem their area suitable for the construction of modern housing, and their tenements will be demolished, forcing them to find other urban accommodations or return to worse poverty in the countryside. Because they have no legal claim to live in the city and have not signed a lease agreement for the land they occupy, they are technically squatters. Perhaps they are not literally homeless until the bulldozers come to destroy their meagre homes, but they are constantly on the edge of homelessness. They live in a gray zone in which it is virtually impossible to build the sort of stable life that middle-class legal residents take for granted. If this is not homelessness, then another term needs to be invented to encompass precariousness on this level.

Another aspect of homelessness that eludes statisticians is the social relationships that represented the long-term population displacement that Chinese peasants have undergone since 1978. Homelessness involves shattering of human relationships just as much as it means exposure to the elements, broken sewer pipes, or indefensible space. In most countries, the loss of social relationships is the beginning of the path that ends with a person sleeping on cardboard. Although China has few visible street sleepers, there are tens of millions of households torn apart, just as there were in times of war in the last century. In the countryside, there are 60 million children growing up without adequate care because their parents are working in a city and the grandparents are too old to provide for the children in the absence of a supportive community. Thus, the absence of a "home" in China is different from the absence of a "house." A home is a place of belonging that provides identity and security. The left-behind children of China are thus homeless, even if they are not houseless.

To understand the situation today, we must return to 1978 to examine the disintegration of the people's communes and the reform of the *danwei* system. Those events marked the transition to a new type of homelessness in China.

From liberation in 1949 until the reform era that began in 1978, every citizen of China was assigned to a *danwei*, a collective unit

that was responsible for all of its members. This was not so much a socialist invention as an extension of the traditional clan system. The market played little role during this period, because basic needs were met through the *danwei*. The individual was not the basic unit of society; the *danwei* was. The only way to get food, housing, and medical care was through this collective institution. It was the source of each person's identity. This system provided security at the cost of individual freedom.

Thus, when the reform era began, a small, but growing, number of people sought to become self-reliant as small-scale entrepreneurs, leaving behind the security of the collective. Those who chose to live outside the *danwei* system had to face the challenges of urbanization and globalization alone. They no longer had a safety net of family and village. Young adults who moved from village to town in search of a higher standard of living faced big obstacles. As migrant workers, they mostly found labor-intensive and dangerous jobs in construction, assembly, and textiles.

For those who remained in villages, the loss of strong members of a *danwei* weakened its capacity to serve its members. Nevertheless, millions of young farmers left the land to earn money in a city. Initially, these migrants saved the money they earned in the city and sent it back to their families to build a better house and to buy furniture. When they saved enough, they moved back to the village. Nowadays, most migrants stay in the city. They have no "home" in the countryside to which they can return.

The collapse of rural communities is perhaps the crucial story of Chinese homelessness today. It explains why migrant workers are reluctant to return to the villages they came from. The exodus of the past three decades has left villages devoid of working-age adults. That is the crux of modern homelessness—the absence of a village "home" to which migrant labor can return after working in cities.

In addition to the tens of millions of "homeless" workers who are caught in a zone of detachment on a national scale, there is a smaller population of people who fit into that in-between condition that qualifies as homelessness in modern China. There are around 1 million college graduates who have no interest in rural life but who are unable to find suitable work in cities (China Business News 2010). They

have been dubbed “urban ant families” because of their extremely dense and poor housing conditions. They live in urban villages, but they do not have a sense of belonging either in the countryside or in cities (Wang 2006). Their lack of social connections makes them “homeless,” even if they have a place to sleep at night.

After the global financial crisis in 2008, China’s general economic development slowed down. At the same time, industries began to replace human labor with machines. Therefore, the situation of migrant workers and “ant families” who barely survive in cities has become more severe.

Modernization is an irreversible social trend. For some citizens, individualism may represent a gain in freedom. But for many poor migrants from the countryside, individualism means being detached from a supportive collective unit. For them, modernization is oppressive. It causes people who wander between urban and rural areas to feel helpless. They are evolving into a new type of homeless population.

### **Government Responses to Homelessness in China**

Let us now consider the different ways in which successive Chinese governments have defined homelessness and applied remedies accordingly.

#### *Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to 1949*

Disasters were the primary source of homelessness in this period. Some were natural; others were political, such as invasion and war. The Qing government limited migrants from entering cities with restrictions on wages, employment, delays in land grants, and provision of farming loans. Relief agencies aided the homeless with food subsistence, minimal healthcare, burial assistance, and the chance to work in special factories where they were taught crafts to make them self-reliant (Chi 2001).

In the Republic of China period, the Guomindang promoted modern education, launched a new life movement, and enhanced the resilience of “small families” in cities. It also regulated displaced populations and offered cultural and vocational education. In 1943, the government promulgated and implemented the first national

law on poverty alleviation in China's history, the "Social Relief Law," under which the government offered a variety of forms of assistance (Qin 1983).

The Communist Party in the 1930s advocated the integration of all parts of society, with an emphasis on the rural revolutionary areas. The Party sought to enhance the level of agricultural production and strengthen the construction of rural organizations. As Mao Zedong ([1926] 1966: 8–9) said:

There are still a large number of wandering proletarians who are landless peasants and unemployed handicraft workers. They are the most unstable people in human life. ... These people can fight bravely but destructively, so they can become a revolutionary force if guided well.

Aiming at the goals of production and self-reliance, Party organizations emphasized ideological and political education for wandering people. Mao ([1933] 2011: 559–560) pointed out:

The main way to win the masses of ordinary wandering proletarians is to bring them back to production. Allocate land and work according to the example of ordinary revolutionary people and grant the right to vote. However, only allocate land to the people who need to live in a village and are able to cultivate themselves.

In addition, the establishment of farming teams, mutual labor cooperatives, and cattle cooperatives to promote the development of productive forces also effectively educated and assisted poor farmers (Mao [1933] 1982: 309–313).

During this period, the government did not have enough power to assist people in distress. As in other countries, social relationships were the primary source of protection for people who had lost the basis of stability. Clan elders, gentry, and other protective agents dealt with the homeless population (Duara 1988; Fei [1948] 2011). Typically, they urged individuals to maintain the idea of "working for a living" rather than giving in to despair and complete dependence. Local leaders also provided temporary relief to the homeless population by permitting them to use idle fields to grow crops. Additionally, foreign churches also carried out rescue activities on the basis of humanitarian impulses.

*Communal Life from 1949–1978*

Under Mao Zedong, China established a public ownership economy. This amounted to a “total society” in which the individual was constantly responsible to neighbors in meeting collective goals (Sun et al. 1994). A new household registration system effectively required all households to work toward the common goal of accumulating the capital needed for industrialization. Because everyone in China was part of that system of mutual responsibility, the auxiliary cost of homelessness was entirely avoided.

Initially, the household registration system applied only in cities, but by 1953, it was fully extended to rural areas. The “Regulations on the Household Registration in the People’s Republic of China” were finally issued in 1958, which marked the formal beginning of the household registration system in new China. Household registration was related to land, family, and clan, forming two categories: agricultural and nonagricultural. In essence, the Chinese people were divided into rural and urban populations.

The urban-rural separation of household registration structure facilitated the extraction of surplus materials from the countryside and effectively prevented peasants from flowing into the cities aimlessly for several decades. However, after the reforms of the late 1970s, the flow of peasants into cities became increasingly apparent. The government changed from giving temporary residence permits to the inflowing population to allowing people in if they met certain conditions (collected enough points). This amounted to a transition from blocking to screening.

The household registration system was an important means of social governance in China. Through the system, individuals were subject to unified management, but they were provided with basic services such as education, housing, and medical care. It played a positive role in stabilizing various contradictions caused by the uneven development of the urban and rural dual structure. Except for natural disasters, the household registration system enabled China to have very few homeless people. The institutional arrangement had some inconveniences, hierarchies, and social exclusion. It curbed the occurrence of slums in cities, but it also left peasants vulnerable and the countryside full of poverty (Lu 2003).

The household registration was complemented by the people's commune and the *danwei* system. Rural institutions gradually transformed from loose mutual aid groups to junior communes that used land for shares and carried out unified management. A high-level commune made the means of production public through its connections with the people's commune at the highest level. All means of production and public property belonged to the commune and were deployed by the commune. The commune set up subordinate committees like agriculture, forestry, supply and marketing, and health, as well as production brigades and squadrons in order to integrate peasants' production, military service, and life. Under the overall planning of the people's commune, large-scale water conservation projects and roads were constructed in the countryside, surplus labor was rationally organized to effectively enhance production efficiency, and the living of peasants was significantly improved.

The people's commune bundled individuals, families, land, and village community into an ultra-stable social structure that laid a good foundation for national capital accumulation. In cities, government inherited the management experience of the "public family" during the revolution and launched the *danwei* system. Individuals were managed by basic-level *danwei*, which were supervised by higher-level *danwei*, to achieve effective implementation of national directives (Zhou and Ma 2014: 60–62). The *danwei* system provided individuals with cradle-to-grave services. It was a strong source of social integration. In a "*danwei*-dominated society," individual development was integrated into the *danwei* system and the organizational structure of the people's commune, which gave people a sense of belonging and limited the problem of homelessness to very rare cases.

#### *Reform and Partial Response to Homelessness: 1978–Present*

We have already seen how the homeless problem grew enormously after 1978 in terms of the huge flow of rural migrants to cities that were not prepared to accommodate them or provide them with normal urban services. Chinese cities needed the labor of these migrants and lifted the usual *hukou* (permit) requirements, but that situation persisted only for a few decades, as the cities were being built.

The urban economy offered wages for day labor in building construction and other dangerous jobs that exceeded what farmers could make in their home villages. But after the majority of workers in a village abandoned their homes for a number of years, there was no village to reabsorb them when the city no longer required their labor. Thus, tens of millions of Chinese day laborers lie outside the supportive social networks of rural villages or major industrial *danwei* or urban middle-class life. They are homeless in the sense of lacking secure social attachments.

The government has not ignored the problem. But it has responded only to the superficial problem of vagrancy, which is only a tiny portion of the population under stress. The government now provides services to beggars who live on the street through rescue centers. It can provide physical necessities (clothing, food, accommodation, medical treatment, and bus tickets) to those facing immediate crises.

On a broader level, China has proposed a comprehensive fight against poverty in the form of a national policy measure to eradicate the root cause of homelessness in rural poverty. In terms of basic necessities, including education and medical care, China has reduced the rural poor population from 100 million in 2012 to 16.6 million in 2018 under the current measure of poverty, and the incidence of poverty dropped from 10.2 percent to 1.7 percent (Huang 2019). These local solutions have effectively addressed the problem of homeless begging, but they have not achieved a significant reduction in the “unaffiliated” status of the new homeless population.

### **A Deeper Chinese Approach to Homelessness**

Thus far, the response to visible homelessness (vagrancy or transiency) is modeled on a Western concept of homelessness. The state provides necessities to those who lack them as individuals. But Chinese culture has never been individualistic, so this type of response is inadequate to resolve the deeper problem of homelessness in China.

To fashion a culturally appropriate response to homelessness in China will require the government to consider the roots of the current crisis in relation to Chinese character. In China, the core of identity does not rest with the individual; it rests with the family and with the

universal family (family - *tian xia*). In ancient times, it consisted of a series of concentric rings that emanated outward from the emperor to encompass the known world. Since the time of the Emperor Da Yu (ca BCE 2200), Chinese culture has held the ideal that “all people belong to one family” as brothers and sisters *tian xia*—literally, [all under heaven] (Chen 2012). Originally, this referred to the idea that the emperor was the father of this extended family and that the family belonged to the emperor. But it also had a cosmological meaning that was not tied to the imperial system. When the ties that hold this cultural family together are broken and each individual is forced to operate alone, social disorder will result. This is an ancient concept that precedes Confucius, but it has a new meaning today.

As Fei ([1947] 2009: 34–35) points out, the concept of family in the West has definite boundaries, but in the Chinese context it is more flexible.<sup>1</sup> It can be as small as a nuclear family or as large as a country or even the world. For people socialized by Chinese culture, the “self” is not self-contained but continuously expands to the outside world in relation to family, friends, and strangers. Therefore, Chinese action strategies are based on kinship and distance. The essence of the continuous social relationship network is about the creation of harmonious relations through traditional self-cultivation.

The social actions of Chinese people are also determined to some extent by the social network nodes in which they are embedded: family, collective, country. Liang Shuming ([1949] 2018: 102–103, 188–192), known as the “Last Confucian,” believes that the Chinese “home” is special, occupying an important position in the ethical culture of moderation. Individuals are expected to strive for the well-being of the family, but that includes the clan or township. Everyone is responsible for social harmony, not just for their own behavior. However, the concepts of “country” and “society” are modern imported products. Chinese prefer the expansive concept of *tian xia*, which is manifest in “taking care of yourself and your family as a nobody; promoting the common good as a somebody.” The country melts into society, which melts into family in a “home-country isomorphism.”

Yu Yingshi (1995) explains that the Chinese form a “home” based on natural relationships, and the concepts of “clan,” “country,” and

“*tian xia*” are expanded versions of “home.” Stability is the normal condition, and conflict arises from allowing relations to fall into decay.

Individuals learn through belonging to a family to subordinate to the *tian xia*. The realization of individual self-worth is tied to organizational development and the achievement of balance in the larger social system. Thus, the “family - *tian xia*” concept plays a positive role in balancing tensions. Under normal circumstances, it holds in check the number of homeless people by expanding a social net to encompass all people. That is why President Xi Jinping has been promoting the concept of “family - *tian xia*” as an advocate of common feelings that unite home and country. President Xi observes:

The country’s prosperity and national rejuvenation must ultimately be reflected in the happiness of numerous families, and continuous improvement in the lives of numerous people. If families are in good condition, the country and nation can be in good condition. (*People’s Daily* 2018)

Rural communities and clans were the classic units of affiliation of Chinese people. Rural communities interconnected geographically to provide protection for their residents (He et al. 2014). Psychologically and socially, Chinese people are tied to the place of their ancestors and of their birth through love and loyalty. The village and the clan were the primary sources of personal identity. One member’s achievement rewarded all members of the clan (Fei and Wu [1948] 2014). The highest recognition went to those who entered the ancestral hall after death.

The household registration system, people’s communes, the *danwei* system in modern China, and even the increasingly common “family migration” are the products of the “family - *tian xia*” concept (Sheng 2013). In contrast to Western individualism, the foundational basis of Chinese culture is a mentality of belonging. The family is the most basic organizational unit, which integrates itself into the clan, village community, region, country, and even the world. While individuals have always maintained a certain degree of freedom, personal development has always been embedded in the development of larger units of organization, and that has effectively reduced the possibility of wandering.

### Resolving Homelessness Within Chinese Culture

The preceding discussion explains why homelessness is an inherently social phenomenon in China that cannot be understood in strictly individualistic terms. In Western societies, each person is expected to act alone and take full responsibility for him- or herself. The individual is expected to leave home in early adulthood and find a new path in the world. The Chinese worldview inverts that expectation by treating “home” as the social center around which individual life revolves. The idea of leaving home to start life on one’s own is unthinkable because that would entail the annihilation of the social bonds that create “home.”

In the past few decades, the unthinkable has occurred and the result is widespread homelessness that was never possible before in Chinese history. The social center created by village and clan has been disrupted, and nothing has replaced it. That is why the hundreds of millions of farmers who have moved into cities are lost. There is no home for them in the cities, and the rural home they came from has disintegrated. The only possible solution to this cultural crisis is to re-integrate city and countryside. To that end, we offer three suggestions: 1) Focus on village revitalization; 2) Cultivate community rationality with the urban community system; 3) Mobilize multiple social forces to participate in urban-rural integration.

The urbanization strategy of China since 1978 allowed most working-age peasants to leave home and move into a city to earn money. Although their original purpose was to send money back to the village, the influence of city life eventually overcame that. Most workers became part of the city and lost their connection to their homes. The transition to a market economy aggravated the situation, which resulted from the decline of the rural collective economy, the weakening of clans and villages, and the reform of the urban *danwei* system, leaving migrants as “exiles” or a “floating population.” President Xi Jinping has recognized the structural homeless population as one cost of modernization. He has begun the process of using the inherited concept of “family - *tian xia*” to explore new types of urban-rural integration mechanisms as a way to restore a sense of “belonging” to the “homeless people” who have lost the ties to their social and cultural roots.

*Village Revitalization Strategy*

Since 2017, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made its “village revitalization strategy” a major national priority. The strategy consists of three elements. First, the state seeks to promote traditions based on family customs, ancestral counsel, and ethnic regulations in order to rebuild an organic relationship within families, clans, and villages. Second, to strengthen the collective economy, land contracts will run for 30 years. The Party will help build cooperatives, unions, and collective enterprises. Third, preferential policies will be developed to enhance the attractiveness of returning home. Those who are eager to return to the village can find effective support in the village community.

*Creating an Urban Community System*

China’s urban governance system has shifted from the *danwei* system based on work affiliation to a community system that emphasizes organic connections. For migrant workers, “ant families,” and other groups living on the social periphery, this represents the possibility to feel human warmth and kindness and to develop an active public life. In effect, it means the state is seeking to find a way to replicate the sense of being “at home” in the city for all who feel displaced. This ambitious venture will be realized in three ways. First, residents will be provided increased opportunities to participate in public affairs at the neighborhood level. Second, residents will be encouraged to establish various organizations that promote self-help and mutual assistance among community members. Third, the government can use its procurement power to pay for services offered by collective neighborhood providers. This will support the government’s original welfare system by creating incentives for members of a local community to work together toward common ends of self-support and self-management. This process will help transform residents from individuals with lists of problems to contributing members of a common effort to achieve recovery. Ultimately, a community with power, responsibility, and a capacity for reciprocal benefit-sharing can be established, so that those who desire to stay in cities can gain a new identity and a new home as part of an active local community.

*Urban-Rural Integration*

The work of revitalizing rural communities and promoting urban neighborhood self-governance systems will ultimately fail unless the government can devise methods of connecting the two end points of the new system. The government will actively promote urban-rural integration by 1) encouraging college students to go to the countryside, 2) setting up a system of village officials and first Party secretaries, 3) guiding young people to return to their hometowns in order to start a business, 4) enticing people with outstanding skills to return to the countryside to benefit villagers with entrepreneurial activity that can help alleviate rural poverty, and 5) helping construct mutual aid platforms for citizen to participate in various integrative activities. In this way, organic circulation of talent, funds, technology, and other resources between urban and rural areas can be realized, whereby both urban and rural life can be restored to the place of "home" for those who live there.

**Conclusion**

The world has marveled at the rapid transformation of China from a poor, rural nation to a thriving metropolitan society in just a few decades. But that transition has come at a huge human cost. The most visible aspect of that cost is the large number of migrants from the countryside who are relegated to crowded, inadequate housing on the urban periphery. But the deeper aspect of this crisis of the human spirit is the homelessness that afflicts hundreds of millions of Chinese who have been culturally displaced and have nowhere to call "home."

The implementation of market-oriented institutional change created the homelessness problem in China. The government has no choice but to face this problem because it is leading to social unrest. Thus, the government is seeking ways to restore roots to a rootless population that finds a home neither in cities nor in the countryside. China inherited the "family - *tian xia*" concept that has provided a sense of belonging to the Chinese people for millennia. The government has implemented various systems that are based on that principle:

household registration, people's communes, and *danwei* institutions. Those systems have been allowed to atrophy within the migrant population in an effort to accelerate the construction of modern cities.

For Chinese people, development is not a process carried out by individuals. Rather, the spiritual core of the Chinese people is development on the basis of belonging. The government has begun programs that will reintegrate city and countryside. In the process, it will provide a home for those who have been left behind in isolation in villages and for migrants who have never fit into the culture of cities. To have a home—to belong—requires more than just enough food and shelter. It also requires a chance to participate in building one's own culture. That is the governance path now being followed to enable homeless people to transform their lives together into new forms of settlement. Since the homelessness that arises from large-scale migration to cities is a problem in many other developing countries, China's answer may help other countries find a solution to homelessness associated with urban development.

#### Note

1. Editor's note: The work of Xiaotong Fei is exceptionally important in understanding Chinese society and its rural roots. As Hamilton and Zheng (1992: viii) explain the title *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (which they translate as *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*) of Fei's best-known work:

In writings about Fei and his works, the book's title is usually rendered in English as "rural China," but this rendering is inexact. *Xiang* means "countryside," and *tu* means "earth"; but the combination, *xiangtu*, is a set phrase meaning "one's native soil or home village." By using *xiangtu* to modify *Zhongguo* (China), Fei is conveying a subtle meaning to his readers: that Chinese society has grown out of its ties to the land.

Since the authors of the present article conclude that the problem of homelessness in China arises from a broken connection to ancestral traditions and village life, Fei's title suggests that this also means a broken connection with the earth or soil. The closest English equivalent of "*xiangtu*" is the little-used word "autochthonous," which literally means, from its Greek origins, "people who are sprung from the earth itself." Since modernization involves severing ties to the economic, cultural, and linguistic connection to the soil, Fei's analysis is a critique of modernization, along the lines of the *Gesellschaft/Gemeinschaft* duality in early German sociology.

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