

# Plight of Elderly Women Living Alone in Rural China: Based on the Theory of "Field-Habitus"

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**Abstract:** China's aging population is increasingly studied. There are a considerable number of elderly women living alone in rural areas, but less attention has been paid to this group. This study is based on Bourdieu's "field-habitus" theory, the research methods of questionnaire survey and in-depth interview were used to investigate the pension situation of 126 rural elderly women living alone in the triple disadvantaged position of region, age and gender. It is found that their pension situation is the result of the co-variation of the rural field, habit shaping and capital accumulation. The plight of the elderly women living alone in rural areas is mainly due to insufficient economic support, inadequate life care providers and lack of spiritual comfort. The reason lies in the limitation of the rural old-age care field: the limitation of the existing national policy, the heavy household expenditure, the decline of traditional filial piety and Vulnerability of rural elderly women living alone; The drag of the old age habit: the habit of raising children for old age, the habit of "exchange of upbringing and support" between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and the habit of "valuing the young over the old"; Lack of capital in the pension field: economic capital and cultural capital are ignored, emotional capital is unstable, social capital is lacking and symbolic capital is weakened. So we need to find a way out from improving the rural pension field, changing the habitus that is not conducive to pension and increasing the personal capital of pension.

**Keywords:** Plight, "Field-Habitus", Elderly Women Living Alone, China

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## 1. Introduction

China is the country with the largest elderly population in the world, and the degree of population aging is becoming more and more serious. According to the seventh national census in 2020, the elderly population aged 60 years and over accounted for 18.7% of the total population in China, and there were 29.938 million elderly people living alone over 65 years in 2020, including 15.333 million elderly people living alone in rural areas and 8.726 million elderly women living alone in rural areas [1]. In this context, changes in lifestyle and family values, the increasing nuclearization of the family and the movement of young people mean that living arrangements are changing. The number of elderly people living alone is increasing year by year. The number of elderly people living alone in China increased from 7.835 million to 14.439 million between 2000 and 2010 [2], especially in rural areas. Because

of the survival advantage of women, the elderly female population is always more than the male elderly population, showing the feminization characteristics of the elderly living alone [3]. According to CLHLS (2014), nearly 90% of rural elderly women live alone [4]. What is the pension situation of such a large number of elderly women living alone in rural areas? In this study, the elderly women living alone in rural areas, who are in the triple disadvantaged positions of region, gender and age, are taken as the research objects. Pierre From the perspective of Bourdieu's "field-habitus", this paper investigates their pension situation, which makes rural elderly women living alone have more sense of gain in the development of co-construction and sharing, and has positive social significance.

The research on elderly women living alone mainly focuses on four aspects: economic status, life care, spiritual comfort and life satisfaction. The poverty level of elderly women living alone is deeper than that of elderly men living alone, and the role of

poverty is more obvious [5]. They can get less life care support from their families, and are prone to mental poverty and health poverty [4]. An analysis based on data from the National Health Survey of the United States found that elderly people living alone had higher needs for care services and long-term support than those living with children [6]. The elderly living alone are at a disadvantage in terms of spiritual support and daily care, and rural elderly women living alone rarely receive spiritual support from their daughters-in-law [7]. Studies have shown that among all the elderly groups, rural, female, elderly, living alone and disabled elderly people have the highest degree of loneliness [8]. Compared with elderly men living alone, elderly women living alone have lower life satisfaction and stronger loneliness [9, 10]. Loneliness mediates the relationship between solitary life, lack of close friends, and mental health. When solitary life leads to loneliness, solitary life becomes harmful. It is suggested that the loneliness of elderly women living alone should be alleviated through satisfactory interpersonal relationships, emotional and spiritual support [11].

This study will take rural elderly women living alone as the research object, use empirical research methods, draw lessons from Pierre Bourdieu's "field-habitus" theory, and establish an analytical framework of pension practice, focusing on the impact of social and family environment and rural elderly women living alone on their pension practice. Then, the paper discusses the deep background of the rural elderly women's plight—the rural society in transition, and analyzes the formation mode of the plight under the joint action of the local field and the actor's habitus, in order to promote the academic research on the rural elderly women living alone.

## 2. "Field-Habitus" Perspective and Data Sources

### 2.1. "Field-Habitus" Perspective

Bourdieu is a famous contemporary French sociologist, philosopher and anthropologist. His "Field-Habitus" theory is a practical structural theory, which connects behavior with macro-elements such as culture, structure and power, and connects different capitals to analyze the practical logic in real life through the two concepts of field and habitus. According to Bourdieu, from an analytical point of view, a field can be defined as a network of objective relationships existing between various locations, or a configuration [12]. Possession of different types of power (capital) in various positions determines their actual and potential situation of interest acquisition and distribution in this field, as well as their objective relationship with other positions. Bourdieu pointed out that in order to understand the complex interactions between people or explain certain social phenomena, it is far from enough to focus only on what people say and what happens. What is really necessary is to examine the field in which these interactions and events occur [13]. The practice process of rural elderly women living alone must be embedded in a specific social "field", which involves national policies, families, neighbors and other secondary fields. Each

secondary field has different degrees of influence on the operation logic of the large "field" in which the old-age pension is located. The so-called habitus is a system composed of the classification schema of perception, evaluation and action, which has a certain degree of stability and can be replaced. It comes from the social system and resides in the body of the actor [12]. Habitus is always limited by the historical and social conditions in which it is generated, and has a certain tendency of temperament. In this study, habitus is the "disposition tendency" of the elderly women living alone in rural areas, including themselves, their families, neighbors and other actors. In the field of rural elderly women living alone, capital refers to the capital owned by rural elderly women living alone and their family members. It includes economic capital, cultural capital, emotional capital and symbolic capital.

The "field-habitus" theory, which emphasizes the relationship, provides a new perspective for the study of rural elderly women living alone, which combines the factors such as individual actors, family and social policies involved in the elderly care of rural elderly women living alone, that is, to interpret under the "action-structure" framework and integrate many theories about the elderly care. It not only includes different levels of analysis (individual, family, government), but also accommodates different interpretation orientations (habitus and capital of actors), and at the same time, it also reflects the theoretical concern of "structure-action", which provides a new perspective for better understanding the pension problem of rural elderly women living alone. To sum up, this study introduces Bourdieu's "field-habitus" theoretical framework to interpret the pension practice of rural elderly women living alone, and mainly explores the following issues: how does the pension field of rural elderly women living alone relate to other fields? What are the main factors affecting it? What is the interaction between these factors? What strategies should be adopted to solve the plight of rural elderly women living alone and improve their pension quality.

### 2.2. Sources of Information

The survey was conducted in M village in the west of Shandong Province in January 2022. By the end of 2021, the total population of the village was 1,907, including 126 elderly women aged 60 and above living alone. This study conducted a questionnaire survey on all of them. It was once a poverty-stricken county in Shandong Province more than ten years ago. Although it has now taken off the hat of a poverty-stricken county, its economic development is relatively slow compared with other areas of the same level in Shandong Province. There is a lack of enterprises with better benefits in cities and towns. The per capita arable land in the village is about one and a half mu. Due to the mechanization of land cultivation in recent years, the vast majority of young and middle-aged men and some women choose to go out to work, and the income from working has become the main income of the family.

In this study, 126 elderly women living alone in rural areas were investigated, all of whom lived alone because of the

death of their spouses. In terms of age, 21.4% were 60 to 69 years old, 54.8% were 70 to 79 years old, and 23.8% were 80 and over. In terms of education, 90.9% are illiterate, 7.4% have primary school education, and 1.7% have junior middle school education or above. In terms of health, 11.9% were disease-free, 27.8% had a single disease and 60.3% had multiple diseases. In terms of children, the average number of children is 3.9, of which the average number of sons is 1.9 and that of daughters is 2.0. The reasons for living alone were active living alone (67.5%) and passive living alone (32.5%). Passive living alone mainly refers to living alone because of bad relationship with children (mainly daughter-in-law) or because children go out to work.

### 3. Old-Age Predicament of the Rural Elderly Women Living Alone

#### 3.1. Insufficient Economic Support

Less economic sources and lower income. The economic source determines the economic income, so this study will combine these two aspects to explore. The main economic sources of elderly women living alone in rural areas are: basic pension, labor income, child support, state assistance, and survivors' allowance. The survey shows that the distribution of economic sources is as follows: basic pension accounts for 61.1%, child support accounts for 15.1%, labor income accounts for 12.7%, survivors' allowance accounts for 7.2%, and government assistance accounts for 3.9%. Among them, the basic pension accounts for 60% of the daily economic sources, which shows the importance of the basic pension for the elderly women living alone in rural areas. Since the implementation of the basic pension policy for the elderly over 60 years old in 2010, Shandong Province has increased from 55 yuan per person per month at the beginning to more than 140 yuan in 2021. Generally speaking, due to the low starting point of the basic pension level, although the growth rate is relatively large, the basic pension is still at a low level.

Child support accounts for 15.1% of the income, and the main objects of support are elderly women living alone in poor health or in advanced age. The form of support is generally food or cash. In the gender division of child support, 75.5% of the children are the main providers. It can be seen that the habit of raising children for old age is still deeply rooted in rural areas, but with the progress of the times, this habit of providing for the aged has changed, and daughters have gradually joined the ranks of providing for the aged and become participants in economic support.

Labor income accounts for 12.7% of the economic source, unlike the urban elderly, in the rural field, the elderly do not have a fixed retirement time, as long as they can move, they have been involved in labor. For rural elderly women who are in good health, they generally choose to continue to cultivate the land. The local per capita income is about one and a half mu, and the annual net income of the land is about 2000 yuan.

Survivor's allowance accounts for 7.2% of the economic

source, and the level of survivor's allowance in 2021 is about 940 yuan per month. Rural elderly women living alone who receive survivors' benefits have the highest income levels of all elderly women living alone.

Government aid accounts for 3.9% of the economy. Mainly elderly women living alone in rural areas with only daughters and no sons. In 2021, the local government relief fund is 300 yuan per month. Among the elderly women living alone in rural areas, they belong to the category with higher income, but the proportion is lower.

To sum up, the economic sources of rural elderly women living alone are relatively small, focusing on the basic pension for the purpose of guaranteeing the basic life of rural elderly. Survivors' subsidies and government assistance with higher income levels account for a smaller share, and the overall level of economic income is low.

#### 3.2. Inadequate Living Care

Lack of care providers in the event of illness. For most of the elderly women living alone in rural areas, daily care is not a problem, and they have strong self-care ability because of the division of family roles for many years. However, for those elderly women living alone who are in poor health, especially the elderly, daily self-care is often inadequate. The lack of care for elderly women living alone in rural areas is more reflected in the fact that when they are sick, they live alone, and once they are sick, they really need someone to take care of them. In addition to taking care of their grandchildren, the children of the elderly also have some younger children who go out to work because they are busy making a living, so there seems to be a trend that no amount of children is enough to take care of the elderly.

Dependence on Daughter in Life Care. Shandong, as the birthplace of Confucian culture, is deeply influenced by Confucian culture, especially in the division of labor in providing for the aged, the most typical one is "raising children for old age", and sons play a major role in economic support. In terms of life care, the daughter bears the main responsibility, which inclines to the daughter, leading to the problem of the old man's life once the daughter can't get away to take care of the sick old man. For those elderly women living alone in rural areas without daughters, the situation of life care is more difficult when they are ill.

#### 3.3. Lack of Spiritual Comfort

There is less family interaction in social interaction. Rural elderly women who live alone usually have less interaction with their families, and their children and grandchildren usually visit the elderly more during the holidays. The survey shows that 21.4% of the elderly women living alone in rural areas have frequent interaction with family members, 55.5% have general interaction, and 23.1% have less interaction. Although the elderly women living alone in rural areas do not live with their families, their families are still their spiritual sustenance, and the living arrangement of living alone makes it difficult for them to get full spiritual comfort from their

family members.

Single leisure activities. Elderly women living alone in rural areas work around their families all their lives and have fewer interests and hobbies. Because of their low education level, they can not use reading, reading newspapers, surfing the Internet and other ways to relieve loneliness. Entertainment and cultural facilities in the village are very scarce. There is no special activity center for the elderly in the whole village. Their main leisure activities are watching TV at home and chatting with their neighbors. Compared with the city, in the rural area, there are more contacts between neighbors, and the relationship is more harmonious.

## 4. Analysis of the Reasons from the Perspective of "Field-Habitus"

The plight of rural elderly women living alone is not caused by unilateral reasons. To comprehensively analyze the causes of the plight we must consider the social space involved in the pension field, that is, the rural pension field, the habitus of actors and capital from the perspective of "field-habitus".

### 4.1. Limitations of Rural Old-Age Care Field

The field of rural endowment mainly includes the limitations of the existing national policy, the heavy family burden, the weakening of traditional filial piety and the weakness of rural elderly women living alone.

#### 4.1.1. Limitations of Existing National Policies

This study found that the rural elderly women living alone in the form of economic stress is the imbalance of income and expenditure, low level of stable income, unlimited expenditure. Whether it is the income of basic pension, the support of children and the income of labor; They are all at a low level. Unlimited expenditure is reflected in the expenditure of medical expenses, especially the high threshold of reimbursement of medical expenses for chronic diseases, which makes it difficult for most elderly people to get reimbursement of medical expenses. For the elderly who suffer from chronic diseases for many years and can not stop taking medicine, the cost of medicine aggravates the plight of economic tension.

#### 4.1.2. Heavy Household Expenditure

At present, China is undergoing a profound social transformation, and the rural field has become a market-oriented rural field. Compared with previous years, the household income of farmers has indeed increased a lot, followed by more growth in household expenditure. There are two main expenditures, the education of children and the marriage of sons. Especially the latter, since the strict family planning policy in the 1990s, many families have adopted selective fertility, resulting in a long-term abnormally high sex ratio at birth. Over the past two decades, the phenomenon of marriage squeeze between men and women has become more and more serious, and families with boys have realized their

desire to start a family by increasing the bride price. The soaring bride price in rural areas has brought a heavy financial burden to male families at the age of marriage. The elderly women living alone in rural areas, mainly in families, are also deeply affected. Most of the family's expenditure is spent on the marriage of grandchildren, and the expenditure for the elderly is very limited.

#### 4.1.3. The Decline of Traditional Filial Piety

With the further development of market economy, the rural endowment field has undergone profound changes, weakening its original value. For elderly women living alone in rural areas, they often feel that the world has changed, which is totally different from the intergenerational family relationship when they were young. In the past, daughters-in-law were not filial to their parents-in-law, and the engagement of their children would be affected in the future. Nowadays, the focus of young men's engagement is on their own comprehensive situation and family's economic situation, and the binding force of filial piety on people is weakening.

#### 4.1.4. Vulnerability of Rural Elderly Women Living Alone

For a long time, China has been a cultural model centered on patriarchy and husband's power, especially in the local countryside, deeply influenced by Confucian culture, the idea of male superiority and female inferiority is deeply rooted, the traditional family division of labor model of "men work outside, women work inside", women are more positioned in running housework and taking care of their families, and they are engaged in unpaid housework for a long time. As a result, their pension economic reserve capacity is very poor. In the rural field, their education level is very low, and they can not enjoy a higher pension in old age, so it is difficult to meet the higher pension needs.

### 4.2. The Drag of the Old Age Habitus

According to Bourdieu, habitus is a structural shaping mechanism, whose operation comes from within the actor himself and is realized through behavioral expression. This habit is mainly manifested in three aspects: the habit of raising children for old age, the emphasis on the transmission of family incense, the habit of "raising and supporting exchange" between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and the habit of "valuing the young and neglecting the old".

#### 4.2.1. Habit of Raising Children for Old Age

Chinese society is a society that pays attention to face, especially in rural areas. The habit of raising children for old age is deeply rooted. Some elderly women living alone in rural areas mortgage all their wishes to provide for the aged on their sons, believing that they should mainly rely on their sons to provide for the aged, and that their daughters will be laughed at by outsiders.

#### 4.2.2. Habit of "Exchange of Upbringing and Support" Between Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law

In the local countryside, the reason for the tension between

mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is more due to the habit of exchange of upbringing and support. Some daughters-in-law think that because there is no relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, other conditions need to be attached to the support of mother-in-law. This condition is mainly the help given by their mother-in-law when their children are young, that is, the support and support between generations, and if the condition exists, the support and support can be exchanged.

#### **4.2.3. The Habit of "Valuing the Young and Despising the Old"**

From childhood to old age is a necessary stage in the course of human life, and in different periods, the treatment is different. Compared with the two, people like to take care of the small, raise the small, and the more important factor is the sense of achievement. Care for the elderly, in addition to obligations, the sense of achievement is very low, good physical function can maintain the status quo is not easy, more is that even if the caregivers pay more patience and labor, it is likely that the body of the elderly is still declining in front of people. Borrowing the push-pull theory of population mobility, children are a kind of pull for their parents, while the elderly are a kind of push for their children. Under the push and pull, the form of expression is "heavy small light old".

#### **4.3. Lack of Capital in the Pension Field**

The field is a space of conflict and competition. Participants compete with each other to determine the initiative of all kinds of capital that can play an effective role in the field. The chips in the field are the accumulation of capital: Bourdieu divides capital into cultural capital, economic capital, social capital and symbolic capital [12]. The endowment capital involved in the endowment field of rural elderly women living alone mainly includes the capital of rural elderly women living alone themselves and the participants of this field-children (including daughters-in-law, grandchildren, etc.). The capital of the former mainly includes economic capital, cultural capital, emotional capital, social capital and symbolic capital.

##### **4.3.1. Neglecting Economic and Cultural Capital**

When the elderly women living alone in rural areas are in good health at a young age, their ability to work is a kind of capital, which can provide some indispensable help for their children, such as taking care of their children, and even obtaining economic income through personal labor to subsidize their children. When they are old, even if they have some income, they need to be taken care of by others. At this time, the limited economic income is offset by the need for other people to take care of it, so the economic capital is negligible. In addition, due to the low level of education of elderly women living alone in rural areas, cultural capital is almost non-existent.

##### **4.3.2. Emotional Capital Instability**

Rural elderly women living alone usually help their children take care of their grandchildren when their

grandchildren are younger, and for those children who pay more attention to their emotions (mainly daughters-in-law), this early help will be transformed into emotional capital for the aged in the later period, to some extent, it is the capital for rural elderly women living alone to obtain their support for the aged. But there are also some daughters-in-law who take the help given by their mother-in-law for granted.

##### **4.3.3. Lack of Social Capital**

Bourdieu defines social capital as "a collection of actual or potential resources that are closely related to a network of relationships that are more or less institutionalized" [14]. In this study, the social capital of rural elderly women living alone mainly refers to the interpersonal network closely related to them, mainly including family, relatives, friends and neighbors. Living alone is a living arrangement that leads to a decrease in the frequency of daily contact between rural elderly women living alone and their families. Only the social capital from the neighborhood continues to play its due role in the rural field, especially in the spiritual comfort and support for the elderly women living alone in rural areas. Generally speaking, the social capital of rural elderly women living alone is insufficient.

##### **4.3.4. Symbolic Capital Weakening**

As the saying goes, "An old man in the family is like a treasure", the old man himself represents a kind of value. In today's social transformation period, the status of the elderly in the family is declining, so the value of the symbolic capital of the elderly is decreasing, and many families regard the elderly as a burden. Studies have shown that the power of daughters-in-law in today's families has increased, but the power of women as a whole has not: young women gain power from the transfer of power from older women rather than men [15]. In other words, the power of mother-in-law in the family is transferred to daughter-in-law, which also shows that the symbolic capital of elderly women living alone in rural areas is gradually weakening.

To sum up, whether it is economic capital, cultural capital or symbolic capital, the pension capital of elderly women living alone in rural areas is relatively scarce, and the only emotional capital they have, whether they can play their role depends on the emotional recognition of their families.

## **5. Conclusion and Discussion**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

This study found that the plight of the elderly women living alone in rural areas is the result of the co-variation of the rural field, habit shaping and capital accumulation. It is mainly due to insufficient economic support, inadequate life care providers and lack of spiritual comfort. The reason lies in the limitation of the rural old-age care field: the limitation of the existing national policy, the heavy household expenditure, the decline of traditional filial piety and Vulnerability of rural elderly women living alone; The drag of the old age habit: the habit of raising children for old age,

the habit of "exchange of upbringing and support" between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and the habit of "valuing the young over the old"; Lack of capital in the pension field: economic capital and cultural capital are ignored, emotional capital is unstable, social capital is lacking and symbolic capital is weakened. So we need to find a way out from improving the rural pension field, changing the habitus that is not conducive to pension and increasing the personal capital of pension.

## 5.2. Discussion

Improve the rural pension field. James Anderson, an American public policy expert, pointed out that "the task of government is to serve and promote the public interest" [16]. Improving the basic pension level of the rural elderly is the most important step to improve the rural pension field. How to make the stable income source of pension really play a role, we need to further improve the level of pension. At the same time, it is necessary to further reduce the high threshold of reimbursement of medical expenses for chronic diseases for the elderly in rural areas, so that more elderly people can enjoy the reimbursement policy of medical expenses for chronic diseases.

Change the habits that are not conducive to old-age care. Some deep-rooted habits, to a certain extent, have seriously affected the pension situation of rural elderly women living alone. The habit of "valuing the young over the old" is equivalent to the family putting the elderly in a weak position in the family, which seriously deepens the disadvantage of rural elderly women living alone in obtaining family pension resources. Chinese law clearly stipulates that parents have the obligation to support their minor children, and children have the responsibility to support their elderly parents. Support and support involve the relationship between parents and children. However, many children now refuse or cannot wholeheartedly support their elderly parents on the grounds that their parents have not helped or helped too little to raise their grandchildren. The above pension habits that are not conducive to the elderly women living alone in rural areas must be completely abandoned, which is not only beneficial to the elderly women living alone in rural areas, but also beneficial to other people who will enter the old age in the future.

Increase personal capital for retirement. To some extent, in order to encourage the introduction of policies, more and more research focuses on supporting the elderly. The way to increase personal capital for retirement is different. To be exact, it is a preventive measure. It is necessary for rural elderly women living alone to start preparing before their old age, that is, to make their own "time bank" in advance. For the majority of women, for example, by improving the level of personal education, improve the ability to obtain economic, so as to lay the material security of personal future pension. In view of the reality of the general lack of spiritual comfort in old age, the most reliable solution is to make psychological preparations in advance and self-psychological adjustment. Objectively speaking, personal efforts can only be one aspect, and all we can do is to shorten the time of dependence on the

outside world in old age as much as possible. With the decline of physical function, the strength of the individual will be weaker and weaker, in this case, all aspects of the elderly women living alone in rural areas must depend on the state, society and family.

To sum up, through the analysis of the pension plight of rural elderly women living alone, this study chooses field-habitus as an analytical tool to discuss the realistic implications of the pension plight of rural elderly women living alone, and then find a way out of the plight from the connotation of field theory. In short, providing for the aged is not "waiting for death", but to enable the vast rural elderly women living alone in the triple disadvantaged position of region, age and gender to feel decent and valuable life. It is not only to solve the problem of food and clothing, but also to let them have more sense of acquisition, happiness and security, so that their quality of life can be improved, and their life in old age can be more substantial, more secure and more sustainable, which is the real purpose of discussing old-age care.

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