

S U I C I D E

# The Dying Fields

Economic pressures have spawned a tragedy in rural China—women are killing themselves at an alarming rate

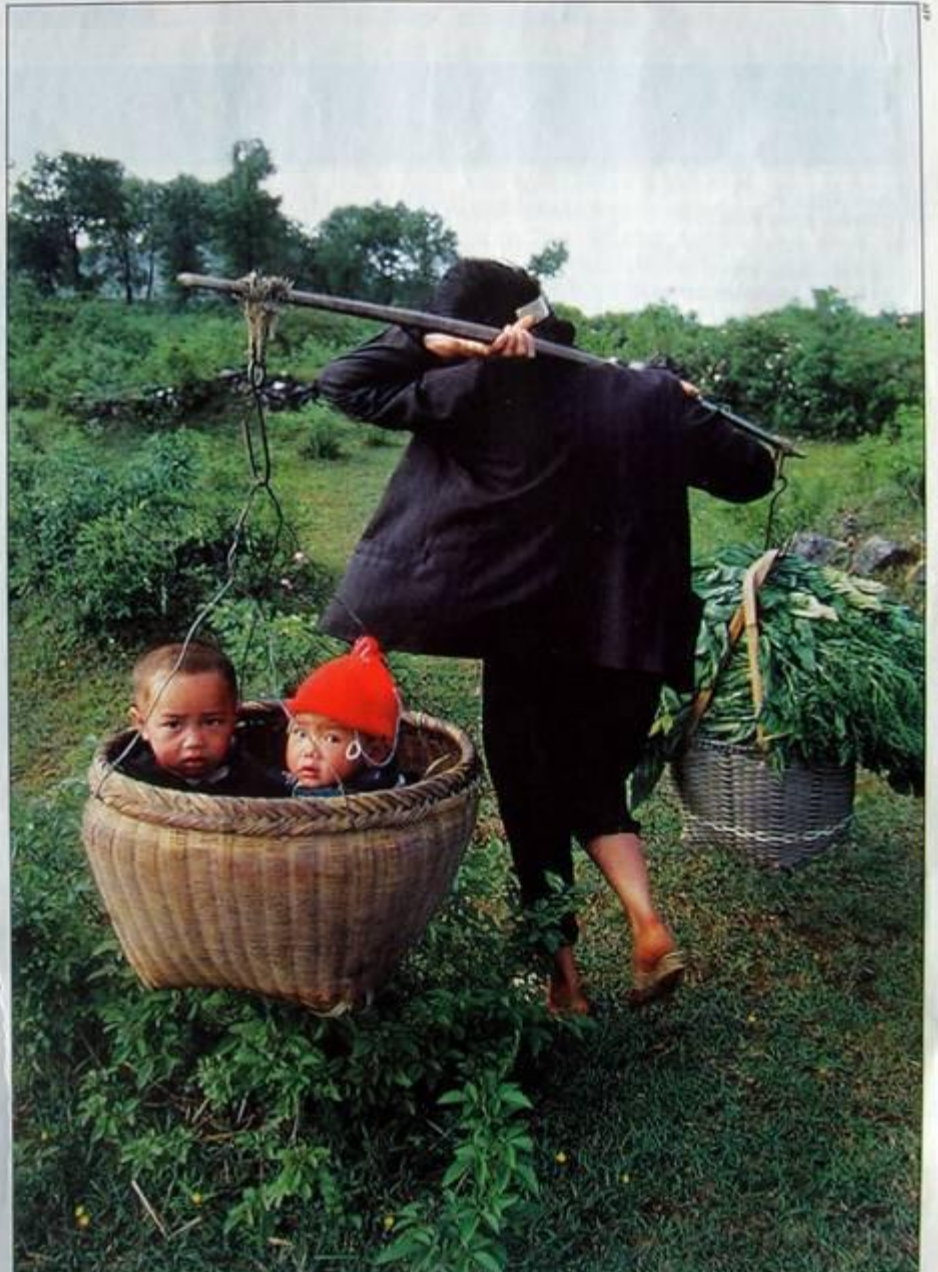
By Lijia MacLeod in Shizhuqiao village,  
Hunan province

Luo Fangrong will never forget the night his wife Xiahua killed herself. "It was about eight o'clock and I was sound asleep," he recalls. "Suddenly, our youngest daughter broke into the room, screaming madly." He followed her into the hall where he found his wife, lying on the ground, white foam around her mouth, writhing with pain. An empty bottle of pesticide lay nearby. She soon lost consciousness, never to awake, leaving behind three daughters, a heartbroken husband and a slightly guilty lover.

Each of the 90 families in Shizhuqiao village in Shaodong county, Hunan province—the Luo family's home—has its own store of dark-brown bottles, their labels yellowing or missing altogether. The potent chemicals they contain have transformed modern agriculture, aiding the Chinese farmer in the age-old battle with nature's pests. But in recent years, the village has suffered a more tragic blight: The pesticides are taking away its wives and daughters as part of a quiet, nationwide epidemic that has made rural China the deadliest place on earth for women.

In the past, the lack of reliable and comprehensive statistics kept China's rural suicide problem in the shadows of its vast hinterland. Even now, it's difficult to draw definitive conclusions about what lies behind the phenomenon. But one thing is clear: Women are dying in the countryside in alarmingly high numbers, and the pressure of China's fast-paced economic development is a major culprit.

The World Burden of Disease, a study conducted by the World Bank, World Health Organization and Harvard University, credits China with 56.6% of all female suicides worldwide, an astonishing figure considering only 21% of the world's female population lives there. The study also found that the rate of suicide among Chinese women is nearly five



A woman's burdens: China's poorest are not the only ones hit by the suicide epidemic.

## **The Dying Fields: economic pressures are driving rural women to commit suicide at alarming rate**

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"Why are they doing this?" asks an officer at a foreign aid organization in Beijing who specializes in poverty alleviation among rural women. "It's these women who do over 70% of work in the fields nowadays, while their men go off to earn money in the cities. Many simply find it hard to cope with lives that are overburdened, poor and lonely, with little support. Worse still, they are not treated with equal respect."

Significantly, China's poorest are not necessarily the worst hit by the suicide epidemic. Instead, better educated women from more affluent rural areas are often the most vulnerable. "If they were willing to live like their parents, there would be no problem," says Xie Lihua, the editor of self-help magazine Rural Women Knowing All. "But the education they have had, and access to the outside world, make them realize the gap between what life could be and what they could do. That increases their despair."

The tragedy of Luo Xiahua -- one of the estimated 350,000 people who commit suicide in China a year -- is sadly typical and illustrates many of the factors at work when a rural woman kills herself. When her husband left to work in the southern boomtown of Guangzhou, Xiahua stayed at home. She looked after their daughters, aged between seven and 18, and worked the fields.

Enter the second Luo, a bachelor who ran a mine in the nearby hills. Fairly well-off, he had a colour television. And like many of her neighbours, Xiahua often went to his house at night to watch it. Luo took a fancy to her, and a fatal affair began.

When husband Fangrong returned home a few months later, he heard the gossip and whispered warnings not to wear the "green hat" of a cuckold. At first, he ignored the talk, even taking a job at Luo's mine. But Fangrong became increasingly suspicious when the boss arranged for him to work the night shift whenever possible. One night, he pretended to leave for work, only to return and catch the lovers in bed.

The next day, everyone in the village knew about Xiahua's infidelity. Before, she had been known for being capable, hard-working and honest. Now she was disgraced and publicly humiliated. People pointed at her, saying in a voice loud enough for her to hear, "Look! That's the woman who steals men!"

Two days after the discovery, Xiahua decided she could endure no more -- the only way out was to die. "She always cared about face a lot," her husband sighs.

Rapid economic growth has also exacerbated the age-old clash between new ideas and old traditions, bearing down especially hard on young, rural women and their marriages. Take the case of Luo Xiaoping, for example. When her mother died, she was brought up in the same township as Luo Xiahua by her father and a brother 10 years her senior. Poor and short, the brother was still single when he reached his mid-20s. A matchmaker found another family with an unmarried brother and sister from a neighbouring village for a "swap marriage," with the girls moving to live with their respective in-laws.

But Xiaoping returned to her father's house after two months. She refused to go back to her in-laws, who then raided Xiaoping's house and dragged her off. Her caring but helpless father followed behind to check on her; by the time he arrived, she was dead. Pesticide was again the culprit. Xiaoping never expressed her despair to anyone nor left a suicide note; no one was sure exactly why she killed herself. It may have been because of a bossy mother-in-law or an unremarkable husband. Friends believe she saw no other way out of a loveless marriage.

In other cases, China's strict family-planning policies are the trigger. About four years ago, a mother of two baby girls from Shaodong county escaped to Changsha, Hunan's provincial capital, after becoming pregnant again: Her mother-in-law's pressure for a grandson was too intense. When she returned, already distraught over having a third daughter, she found their house had been demolished -- her punishment for violating family-planning rules. She drowned herself in a river. The rule that required her house to be torn down has since been rescinded.

The World Bank-spearheaded study isn't the only research under way on this sensitive subject. Other work includes that of charity group Befrienders International, China's own Ministry of Public Health and Canadian psychiatrist Michael Phillips, who has worked in China for more than 12 years. He believes the World Bank figures may be inflated, yet agrees that "wherever the data comes from, they show the same pattern: Most of the suicides happen in the countryside. The rate of rural suicide is threefold the urban rate, and many more women commit suicide than men. In fact, China is the only country in the world where more females commit suicide than men."

The issue is finally gaining some attention in China, with more reports in the media, and counties taking measures to control pesticides. But Phillips' optimism is tempered. He points out that while the media are beginning to cover the topic, the articles seldom address the particularly dire situation in the countryside. Likewise, various hotlines and counselling services are available, but only in the cities. "There is no social support at all in China's countryside and medical facilities are appalling," he observes.

"When we go down to the countryside to do interviews," says editor Xie, "we often hear of one family's daughter committing suicide and then another family's daughter-in-law, too, like commonplace events. The bottom line is to teach women in their minds how to cherish their lives."