

Esther Xiang
Freeport High School
Freeport, IL
China, Factor 11: Malnutrition

Malnutrition in China

China is the world's most populous country housing over 1.3 billion people. From this, a third of the population live in cities while the rest reside in the country. Despite its expansive size where one-fifth of the world population lies, China had not taken charge as a critical leader in the world economy until the late 20th century. On average, its GDP has consistently reached over 10% each year, becoming the fastest growing economy in history (World Bank). Moving away from the Socialist People's Republic of China's policies in 1949 of placing a heavy emphasis on the development of heavy industry, the economy was strictly regulated by the government. As a result of the numerous problems involved with the policy, including imbalanced labor forces and a low living standard for people living in both rural and urban areas, China adopted reform and shifted to a more market-oriented country in order to stimulate economic growth, taking on a leading role on the world stage beginning in the late 1970s. This has ultimately led to China's GDP increasing over tenfold since 1978 after the shift from a focus of heavy industries to high-technology (CIA). Additionally, there became more room to enhance the productivity of the country as the development of private enterprise arose from a reduction in economic interventions by the government.

Despite these many advancements in China's economy, China has nonetheless continued to face numerous issues. These issues include the malnutrition of children in rural areas in China where millions continue to live below the poverty level. In 1980, China had the record highest number of undernourished people in the world. This was also the time when China's economy began increasing and consequently, the number of people undernourished began to decrease slowly. According to the World Bank since 1990 over 1.1 billion people have been able to escape the poverty trap. This was primarily due to China's economic growth allowing 730 million people out of extreme poverty. Despite this, recent data shows that in 2015, 55 million people in China were still living in poverty (World Bank). It is clear that to eradicate the systemic issue of poverty once and for all, China must continue to take significant measures as much of its actions impact not only their country but also the world. Ultimately, it will take deliberate policy action and innovative methods of thinking to be able to break this systemic cycle that millions are still trapped in.

As stated previously China has the world's largest population and the third largest country regarding the land area. Until 2012, most of that population lived in remote rural areas. Many of these remote areas have a mountainous terrain and infertile land which leads to many living a problematic life stuck in poverty. Compared to the people living in urban areas, there are still millions in these impoverished regions that are suffering. With China's relatively recent rise to economic power, rural Chinese have begun to make the move to cities in an astonishingly high rate. The growth of urbanization has been increasing at such a high rate due to a larger number of high-paying jobs near these urban settings. Despite this, the search for these jobs is not an easy task especially since a majority of those coming into these urban centers are uneducated with many taking underpaying jobs and increasing their cost of living

by a substantial number as a result of the higher living expenses.

After the implementation of the One Child Policy in the late 1970s, the whole situation in regards to one's family was made worse. The policy had been put into place to restrict the number of children parents to have, ultimately limiting that number to one. As a result, this new traditional structure of the family was created where one child as being brought up and supported by two parents and four grandparents leading to an enormous amount of stress for that one child to succeed and do well. Despite the repeal of this policy, nationally, the average household size is three people per household. This number was calculated by dividing the household population by total households (Ceicdata). A typical Chinese household houses three generations (grandparent, parents, children) of the family lived under the same roof.

Poverty and hunger continue to exist around the world although the causes of it in each country continue to vary, the effects are nonetheless very similar. China possesses a number of unique circumstances regarding the problem of poverty. Despite new programs being implemented into the country in order to address the issue first hand, most of the hundreds of millions living in this trap reside in rural areas where even the best plans for progress fail to produce the desired result.

One of the many causes of poverty stems from the Hukou, which is a governmental registration system established in the 1950s which severely limits where one is allowed to live. This registration system determines one's eligibility for a number of welfare benefits that include health care, housing, employment, and education. In the present day, even the act of trying to move from a rural to an urban environment can pose some restraints because of this system. The Hukou is now not only a huge barrier for people to get out of the poverty trap, but it is in place to also prevent people from receiving services such as healthcare and access to education. With the administration of this system comes strict housing and high-income requirements in order to move from one place of settlement to another, creating this continued circle of poverty where the attempt of escaping is near impossible. These requirements lead to an estimated 23 million children less than 14 years old who are left behind, living without parents, but with relatives outside of the cities (Guo). Those children who are taken care of by non-parents end up facing many nutritional problems including poor physical development and low intake of specific nutrients. Additionally, it has been reported that those in kinship care are more likely to feel unsocial and develop psychological problems and learning disabilities, including a higher chance of committing crimes and smoking and drinking excessively, which would lead to more health problems later on down the road (Luo). There have been consistent studies that have shown that despite the positive effects of moving to urban cities to have an increased income, those who are left behind end up suffering because of it. The importance of improving the conditions of daily food and drink intake cannot be stressed enough especially in regards to the left-behind children. The level of nutritional intake of these children has consistently been low, and as a result, their nutrition health is not optimistic. Adequate and effective measures must be taken to improve the quality of life of these children and others living in these rural areas.

Additionally, the Hukou system exacerbates urban-rural disparities in health outcomes related to nutrition. A solution to the Hukou would be to eliminate its discriminatory restrictions and to place supportive efforts of assisting migrants as they want to make the move to urban areas. This can also include engaging in international dialogue regarding the issue at hand in order to make others more aware of the problems

that millions in China are facing. One cannot stress the importance of providing a way for these migrant workers to have a voice.

Another issue revolving around malnutrition and undernutrition is the extreme prevalence of stunting or linear growth retardation. According to the United Nations, proper nutrition in the first 1,000 days of one's life is critical to one's development leading to the prevention of stunting which is ultimately irreversible (World Health Organization). As a result of poor nutrition during this very critical and sensitive time, children can experience severe damages to their brains and bodies. The effect of this is known as stunting which demonstrates a failure of a child to thrive in its environment. Many of the time, the mother herself is malnourished and consequently cannot provide adequate access to healthy, nutritious food for her child who ends up in the same position as her, affecting the child's growth and development severely. Consistently, girls who are born malnourished will often grow up to become undernourished mothers who give birth to malnourished children, and as a result, this cycle is created and repeated. The main issue of stunting is that it is entirely preventable; however, so many families do not have the means to be able to provide for these newborn babies, and as a result, stunting occurs. In regards to national prevention of stunting in China, progress has been made in children younger than 5 years of age, from 17.2% in 2002 to 8.1% in 2013, regardless of urban or rural residence. This decrease in stunting was especially prominent in rural areas where stunting decreased from 13.6% in comparison to urban areas where stunting only declined 3.6% (Yu). However, one cannot merely rest on their laurels as there is still much to be done since there is a nine-fold higher risk of stunting occurring in rural areas in comparison to larger cities.

Recently, there has been a higher emphasis on evaluating stunting as an indicator of overall child health since the effects of stunting last a lifetime. Intervention must take place in order to immediately address the needs of these children and to minimize the health disparities between those from rural and urban areas. This can be done through the initiation of improved maternal nutrition and early breastfeeding for the first six months of life and even the addition of Ying Yang Bao (YYB). Ying Yang Bao is a soybean complementary food supplement that contains various minerals and vitamins. It was initially promoted by the National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC) in 2012 with the launch of its Nutrition Improvement for Children in Poverty Areas Programme, and since then it is commonly used as a product in complementary feeding and has been shown to improve the nutritional status of people all around China. YYB has been evidenced to improve anemia and stunting in children under 5 years of age. This product has helped so much that by 2014 the Chinese government invested over 400 million RMB into the purchase and distribution of YYB to families in 300 counties where over 12 million infants had been covered. The China Center for Disease Control monitored and collected data in 1,800 infants and their guardians to see the effect of YYB. On average, the anemia rate significantly decreased from 32.9% to 26% while the stunting rate dropped from 14.2% to 9.4% (Wang). From these statistics, the importance of YYB cannot be denied, and it is clear that the government should continue to invest more money into the distribution of YYB around the more rural and more deprived areas of China to benefit millions of infants around the country. The solution can begin by implementing complementary food supplements along with dietary counseling to improve feeding practices and reduce stunting in children. Though more studies should be completed to analyze the actual impacts of stunting. Though more supplementation programs must be implemented to minimize these nutrition deficiencies, localized approaches must be taken regarding putting these programs together to ensure their sustainability.

Although the number of children underweight and stunted has continued to decrease, this does not mean that malnutrition is eliminated. Many children in rural areas continue to suffer from nutritional deficiencies. In the past, children would live at home with their parents and consequently eat their meals at home. Because of this, the primary target to solve malnutrition was getting families to improve the nutritional status of their children. Today, this is not the case. In fact, many children in these poor rural areas eat their meals at school. This is the result of the 2000s efforts of China's Ministry of Education (MOE) which implemented the Merger Program. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, enrollment in these rural schools has decreased dramatically in recent years. After the implementation of the Merger Program, smaller schools began to shut down to merge them with larger schools. This plan was created in order to reduce the number of schools in the area to concentrate their efforts in one place rather than in many. With the Merger Program, more students are living and studying at the school itself rather than at home. This information is imperative to know and pass onto policymakers. Targeting these boarding schools where malnutrition still runs high is an excellent start to reducing malnutrition among children.

Looking at another side of the cause of the issue, many people are uneducated about how to eat properly. Malnutrition does not only affect the poor, but is something that has a significant impact on people of all different backgrounds, cultures, and ages. It affects people from around the world, regardless of socioeconomic background. Some hunger in certain areas of the country is a result of poor feeding knowledge and behaviors rather than by poverty. One solution to combat this would be to continue to promote education in these areas by teaching people what and how to eat properly, including increasing one's uptake of vitamins and minerals.

Another huge problem in China is pollution. Because of China's rush to industrialize its country to keep up with the West, they weren't able to do so in a way that was protective of their environment. Not only is pollution leading to intensified health risks, but it also tied back to the issue of poverty regardless of where one lives. Air pollution, inadequate water supply, and sanitation and hygiene can all cause devastating illnesses and destroy environments. In fact, air pollution has a tremendous impact on the country's agriculture as it can damage the crops grown, leading to a lower quality of goods distributed to the people. Though solving the problem of pollution will not solve hunger, it will assist in the process to lead to more people in China who are not going to bed on an empty stomach. By placing more emphasis on pollution cleanup and pollution prevention, China would bring home a higher quality of crops which would benefit farmers who in turn would be able to give back to their families a healthy and nutritious food source. The need to address pollution is absolutely necessary since this issue not only has terrible economic consequences on China from decreasing the country's annual GDP, but it also has a toll on the health of its people. The next step would be to start reducing emissions of certain air pollutants, including fine particulate matter. This can be done by prohibiting coal-fired power plants and replacing the coal with natural gas. Another step to take could even be by restricting the number of cars on the road. These small steps are necessary in order to address the other problem of hunger and poverty. Other than malnutrition, China still faces a number of different challenges, including a rapidly aging population, gender imbalance, income inequality, and environmental degradation. In fact, helping to address some of these other needs, will also be necessary to ending hunger. With the 13th Five-Year Plan, China plans to tackle the problem by eliminating extreme poverty. To achieve this lofty goal, much work

has to be done. By providing people with universal healthcare, creating early childhood development and nutrition programs, and cash transfers to low-income families, the road ahead looks bright. There are still many challenges with this plan primarily because of the hukou system; however, this can be solved by improving access to better jobs for those in rural areas and explicitly targeting poverty programs to areas of the population that may be difficult to reach including ethnic minorities. All in all, if China works together with other nations and its people, the goal of eliminating poverty in the country, won't seem so impossible after all.

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