

Picking Up Suicide Victims in a Shanghai River

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I watched a chilling story on CNN yesterday about a man who has started a business driving his small motorboat up and down a river outside of Shanghai, finding and picking up suicide victims.

He fishes the bodies out of the water (in various states of decomposition) and then calls the families and tries to negotiate the highest prices possible for the return of the bodies. Most of the suicides are people who jumped off bridges all around Shanghai.

Business is very good for this man. Based on the news story, he is fast becoming wealthy. The faster Shanghai grows, the more suicides there are, and the more money the man earns.

What I found interesting about this story was not that so many suicides were occurring. Instead, the interesting fact was that almost all the suicides were by people who had moved from small farming villages from all over China to Shanghai.

Uneducated, without social connections, and with few skills, not everyone ends up fitting in and making it in the big city.

Many of the people from farming villages cannot read and have never been to school. They do not “fit in” with the social norms of a sophisticated city like Shanghai. Social niceties and similar behavior that might be taken for granted elsewhere are not known to them.

Rather than returning to their former lives in their villages, the men end their lives believing death is better than the alternative.

The move from agricultural areas to cities has been occurring in cultures all over the world for hundreds of years. There is nothing remarkable about that. What is remarkable, though, is the fact that people who move from villages believe that city life is so much better and important than their own.

I do not know how many movies and television shows I have seen that explore the differences in social conventions between people from cities and the country. Shows like *Wife Swap* and *The Simple Life* explore this. These shows are always good for a few laughs when social conventions are so closely compared—almost always at the expense of the person from the country.

Agricultural workers who move to Shanghai may face draconian working conditions. They may work in a factory eighteen hours a day for very little pay. Many workers will just take what they can get. Many may not [find jobs](#) at all. Nevertheless, back in the village they came from, the workers may not have enough to eat and face extreme poverty. At least in a menial factory job, this is not a threat.

On a social level, cities around the world always seem more glamorous than agricultural areas. In the United States, people from agricultural areas are called “hicks” and are often looked down upon by people from cities. There are even hierarchies of a sort among cities. People from New York City almost universally think they are more sophisticated than people from Chicago and Houston, and so forth.

As economies (like China's) start to grow, there is a mass migration to cities. Some are able to make it in the cities, and others are not.

A job with a corporation in a city will often result in a suppression of individualism.

- You may be expected to wear a suit and tie or a uniform.
- You are told when to work and when to quit.
- You are told what you are going to be paid.
- You are expected to fit in.

Your success will come to a large extent based on your ability to conform and be part of the group in whatever company or organization you are part of. Your success will come from connections you make--who you know.

American Indians in the United States are a perfect example. Their culture for hundreds of years involved living off the land. As a group of people, their transition to cities and modern living has been difficult for them. Many remain on reservations and do not leave. Understanding the society around them and integrating has been a challenge for those who chose to attempt it. It has, for many, been an issue of fitting in with the dominant society that rapidly grew up around them.

A few years ago, I was in Fiji and noticed that most of the people working in the businesses and hotels were all Indian (from India). “Why no Fijians?” I asked several people.

The explanation I received was quite interesting. Apparently when the English and others first came to Fiji, they could not get the Fijians to work. For as long as the Fijians had been there, they had been able to live by picking up a coconut, catching a fish, and living simply.

The Fijian culture never learned to appreciate work and did not see the point of working eight-plus hours a day when they already had everything they needed. Fijians, like American Indians to some extent, could not be commoditized or forced to conform (i.e., made like everyone else). They kept their individuality. Indians were brought in from cities around India and they set out working right away.

I think that, to some extent, the reason for the suicides and so forth in Shanghai is related to the fact that many of the people moving from the villages are simply unable to fit in with the different expectations of the city. They remain individuals who cannot conform to a different understanding of work and behavior in cities.

One of the largest messages of self-help gurus--and even the American consciousness—is the idea that we can do anything alone. In fact, the idea of individualism is something that has been part of the American credo for some time now. James

Dean made this idea famous in *Rebel Without a Cause* in the 1950s when he showed a shocking level of individualism for what was largely a conformist society at that time.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of American individualism came out even more. Drug use and sexual promiscuity increased. Pop icons were respected and gained fame and power for stepping outside of the normal rules of society. Corporations became held in suspicion for suppressing creativity, enforcing social norms, and so forth.

By the 1990s, workplaces started adopting “casual Fridays.” Then, many employers dropped dress codes altogether. Silicon Valley inserted itself into the dominant culture and people became revered for being creative and individualistic. The lone entrepreneur became celebrated. Even today we see people like Elon Musk and others who are portrayed as working alone and fighting the status quo (e.g., developing electric cars, launching rockets to compete with NASA).

Most people do not succeed alone, though. People succeed by being parts of groups and being supported by groups. The better the group you are in and the more support you have, the better off you will be. Many people who achieve great success often believe this is simply due to their ability; however, in most cases this is not true. Success comes in most cases from our relationships with others.

In our personal lives, we are defined by the success of our primary relationships with others:

- A successful relationship benefits us in numerous ways: we are happy, we identify ourselves by the relationship, and it helps us become positive and creative.
- A poor relationship works in a similar but negative way: we feel angry, limited, suspicious, and afraid.

Think about the successful close relationships you have had and how the success of this relationship defined much of what went on with your life. Your fate and life will be affected in subtle ways by the dynamics and quality of your relationships with other people.

Do you know people whose friends, lovers, and others seem to always be worse off due to their relationship with them? Do you know people whose friends, lovers, and others always seem to be better off due to their relationship with them? I do. I think our lives are completely defined by the quality of our social connections.

Having quality links and social connections with others is crucial for your happiness and success. People who do not have such links are often not happy.

The reason that so many people are plunging into the river in Shanghai—I think—is due to the quality of the social connections the people have when they move to the cities from villages. Where they once had lots of connections, they now have few to none. They have no social support. They are not appreciated for their accomplishments and what they have done. They are not respected members of the society in the city—whereas they might have been supported when they lived in the country.

The people who do not end up floating dead in rivers, and who succeed in their careers and lives, have a secret: they make the most of networks, and they have large networks of people who support them, give them information, and help them.

One of the most typical stories I hear is about stars having psychological issues, problems with drugs, and so forth. In almost all cases the reason for this is that the person feels isolated and alone. I saw a story recently about Tatum O’Neil, who spent a long time in the hospital after a traffic accident and only had three visitors the whole time (her parents each visited just once). She soon descended into a world of drugs and other problems with her personal life and a suicide attempt.

You need to work with people with whom you have an affinity and can create connections. You need to work in an industry where you can create connections. Your career and success will be determined, in large part, by your ability to create connections with the people around you.

THE LESSON

Your success depends on the connections you make, and your ability to conform to the groups of which you are a part. People succeed based on the support they receive from the groups of which they are members. Develop quality links and social connections with others, and work with people for whom you have an affinity and with whom you can grow.