

Report on Rural Elders' Relationship with Offspring and Living Conditions in a Village in South China

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Elder respect is deeply rooted in Chinese civilization. "If the elder's son has not paid filial piety to his father, then his neighbors, his friends, his relatives, and the local officials will openly condemn and pressure him into action."

But what does filial piety mean in this context? How is it carried out? Is it being challenged in the market-oriented China?

Background

China is aging rapidly. According to official reports from China National Committee on Aging, the population of persons over sixty-five years is growing by 3.02 million each year. By 2020, elders will account for 17.17% of the population. However, social welfare and medical service in China can hardly meet the demands of older persons, especially for farmers who make up more than 75% of China's population.. Older people living in rural areas don't enjoy any reliable pension plan. They have little savings for their old age due to the low income level of farmers.



Traditionally in China, several generations live under the same roof and the elders rely on their children for care. Due to the rapid development of the economy, businesses in coastal areas and cities have needed cheap labor. Because of the huge income gap between cities and rural areas, young and middle aged adults migrate from rural areas to the cities seeking better economic opportunities. As a result, they leave their children behind with their rural families. Hence, the tradition of inter-generational support is being challenged. Chinese say that their villages have become “hollow,” with only elders and children present.



How, one can ask, are these elders living without much support from either the government or their adult children? This survey conducted in Shuidongjiang Village, Shaodong County, Hunan Province, China, aims to explore the living conditions of such rural elders, highlighting their relationship with their adult children.

Hunan is an inland province located on the south bank of the Yangtze River. Hunan has a population of 6.8 hundred million people, accounting for approximately 5.2% of the total population in China. It exports its main labor force to Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces. Hunan’s farmers produce mainly rice. They grow 6% of the rice, 8% of the cotton, and 13% of the oranges of the nation. Hunan is known for its spicy food and “spicy” temper of its people. A

popular Hunan saying was "no government could be formed without the Hunanese, and no army could be rallied without the Hunanese." For example, Chairman Mao Zedong, a Hunan native, led the Autumn Harvest Uprising and established the Hunan Soviet in 1927. Later, he and the Red Army Founder, Zhu De (another Hunanese) developed strategies for guerrilla wars that paved the road for the Long March.



Hunan

Shuidongjiang Village resembles a typical village in southern Hunan, with its agriculture based on rice as its main economic product. From the official report of Shaodong county, the per capita income of the farmer in Shuidongjiang is 4517RMB (the national average farmer's income is 4110 RMB). Most families consist of elders and children only. Men and women from eighteen to forty years old have migrated to the border Provinces Guangdong and Guangxi for jobs in construction sites or factories.

Relationship with Offspring

In the interviews, we find that the elders place great emphasis on filial piety. Many value it as the most important quality to pass on to their children. Filial piety, in their words, includes financial support proportional to their children's income, visits on traditional holidays, financial

and physical support when the elder is sick, and a prosperous family. By prosperous family, they mean a big family with many children and grandchildren.

The elders take great pride in having a large family. “There is an old saying in China,” explained Jiao Yunzhi, one of the villagers being interviewed: “the more sons, the more blessings.” Translated in another way, it also means one’s wealth, social status, and fortune grows with the number of offspring. An interviewee said: “Everyone knows about my filial daughters; they borrow money to cure my illness and take care of me in turns.” Another interviewee said: “The people in the village respect me because my sons own factories in Guilin. My sons ask me to live with them in the big house in the city; I declined, but I am very proud of them.”

A retired village official tells us that the government also values filial piety. “If the elder’s son has not paid filial piety to his father, then his neighbors, his friends, his relatives, and the local officials will openly condemn and pressure him into action”. A village aging organization will also send respected elders to resolve matters if conflicts arise concerning filial piety.

However, due to the migration of the young and middle aged adults, filial piety is being undermined. Young adults these days are not interested in getting married early or having big families. Therefore, elders work hard to create conditions for a more prosperous family. In order to ensure a stable and early marriage, they introduce local girls or boys to their children or grandchildren because they distrust the friends they may make in the city factories. In addition, many ignore the two child policy for rural families and encourage their children to have more offspring: “They won’t understand the importance of children until it is too late. We have to force them sometimes; it is for their own good.”

Elders have also enthusiastically taken up the role of providing care for their grandchildren. Many couples leave their children to the elders due to the high expenses in the city. Despite much heavier housework, many elders take great pride in helping raising the children. “It is a joy to see my grandson everyday,” says Shen Qunying: “I pity my neighbor; she doesn’t have grandchildren to take care of.”

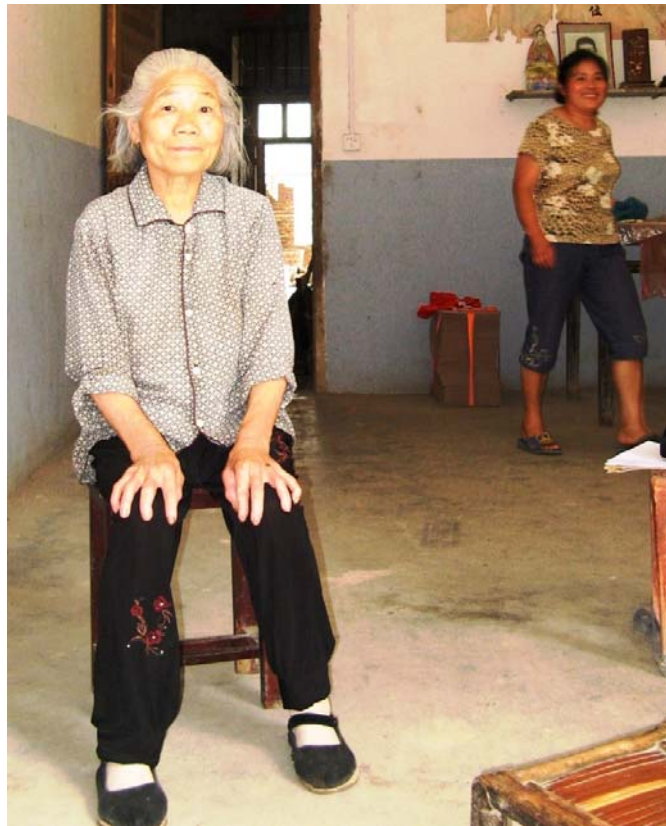
The elders put huge emphasis on their grandchildren’s education. More than one couple has moved to a new house (the property of their children) for the convenience of their offspring’s education. The elders complain that they are not used to the new neighborhood. However, they think it as a worthy sacrifice if their children can get into a good high school. The elders compare their grandchildren’s grades with each other, or even pay a little bribe to the teachers if they can afford it. One elder explains why he values education: “The ones who study get their reward as high officials or successful businessmen. The ones who don’t study get stuck with little money and hard work.”

It is interesting to observe that the elders have continued to place great emphasis on having a big family. However, the gender preferences in the relationship between elders and children are diminishing. Elder grandparents take care of the grandchildren from both their daughters and sons. For their part, the daughters and sons provide financial help to their parents to the best of their ability. Although elders place great emphasis on education, they see education as only one of the possible ways to advance towards the goal of social advancement.

Living Conditions for the Elders

This section explores the living conditions of older persons, including their housework, income, expenses, health, entertainment, and the psychological well-being of the elders.

Older people do most of the work in and around the home, such as feeding the chickens, cleaning the house, taking care of the grandchildren, and cooking. The elders continue to cook their own meals even if they are living with their children because they developed a rather different taste and schedule. “I like eating softer and less salty food; I want to eat on my time.” The elders and the children even use separate kitchens: elders continue to burn wood and coal, while their adult children have switched to gas.



For households where the adult children have migrated, elders receive money in proportion to their children's income. The elders receive more money if they also take care of grandchildren. For co-residents, in one household, the only son who has retired as a middle school teacher receives a very small pension; his mother does not get any money from him. In another case, the son owns a factory so he has hired a cook for his mother and pays her at a higher than usual salary.



Inside the house



Older persons who receive 200 to 400 RMB from their children spend every cent on food. Meat costs 14 RMB per pound and vegetables are 1 RMB per pound. Most elders grow vegetables and keep chickens in the backyard to save money. However, they do not eat meat often due to price inflation during 2007-08. Elders who receive over 400 RMB from their children will have money to spare for cigarettes or pocket money to contribute at a funeral or weddings, or to use gambling.

Older persons in rural areas face challenges to their health. Major health conditions include heart disease, rheumatic arthritis, deafness, Alzheimer's disease, skin problems, and persistent coughs. All of their adult children provide them with special financial and physical support in times of sickness. Either the daughter or son will leave work for weeks in order to care for the older parents. However, the cost for full treatment from a hospital often exceeds the household's ability to pay, even though the two elders have received reimbursement from the rural health reform plan. Many older persons feel that aging has caused their illness and therefore remains incurable. They don't want to be a financial burden to the family.



Older people in the rural areas enjoy simple social activities: chatting with their fellow villagers, watching TV, going to the flea markets, playing poke cards for a few hours. The villagers are usually very friendly because they either come from the same family or share the same surname. They keep each other company. Even though the elders miss their adult children, they are reluctant to visit them. "There is no fun in the city; I could not find anybody to play poke card with me. And I may get into quarrels with my in-laws."

The researcher made four major findings from the study described above. First, whether older persons do housework largely depends on their health conditions, not whether or not they lived with offspring. Secondly, the elder's income depends on their children's income; however, the financial transfer often takes place in the form of service exchange, such as working or taking

care of the grandchildren. Third, the government's rural health reform plan does not seem to be helpful to the elders. Fourth, the general health condition of the village is very good compared to elders in the cities. (The average age of the elders being interviewed was 74 years old; only half of them have had a major illness.)

Government Measures

The local government has adopted some important measures to promote the well-being of the elders. The most pertinent include establishing an old age home and adopting a new rural reform health plan.

Disabled or childless elders are eligible for the old age home. The Aging Home provides housing, food, and pocket money. The elder receives 230 RMB from the government; 220 RMB is spent on electricity, meal plans, health insurance, plus wages for the manager and the cooks. Some 10 RMB is left for pocket money such as snacks or cigarettes. The government also pays out 20 to 50 RMB to the old persons at the four traditional holidays. The old age home also provides free furniture, clothes, and an activity room with books and television. The elders grow some rice and vegetables and take care of some fish and pigs. The older persons living here seemed very satisfied and happy about their living conditions. They expressed their gratitude to the government.

The New Rural Reform Health Plan which costs 10 RMB per year for the older persons have an upper limit of 30,000 RMB and a minimum of 100 RMB to 600 RMB, depending on the type of hospital. The reimbursement rate varies from 40% to 60% depending upon the type of hospital. The older persons told us they participate in the New Rural Reform Plan either because the local officials have urged them to do so or they think it may be useful in the near future.

In conclusion, both the rural reform health plan and the old age home provide help to a very limited group. The home serves childless and disabled elders; the rural health reform, from the interviews with the elders, is insufficient for those elders who need its assistance.

Further Thoughts

Based on the survey, the researcher finds that elders continue to rely largely on their children for financial and physical support. Despite the migration of the children to the city labor force, the elders' lives have not changed in any essential way. They continue to do most of the work on their own and receive financial help from their children. Yet the elders become very vulnerable once they become unhealthy. However, due to the progressively changing attitudes of the younger generations and the pressure of the two child policy, the relationship between the children and the older persons is bound to change in the future. Sadly, the government has only adopted important measures to help a limited group of elders in the village. Therefore, a more comprehensive and generous reform must be put into place.

It would be interesting to explore in depth about the elder's psychological well being under the impact of the children's migration. However, this is beyond the scope of this report.



Menghan Shen and two older men from Hunan