HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION OF THE ELDERLY IN TWO RURAL VILLAGES IN THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

ABSTRACT. This paper reports on the household composition of a sample of elderly residing in two villages in Zhejiang Province, China, one that is prospering under the post-1978 economic reforms and another that is not. It reveals that while a large proportion of the elderly in both the study villages are part of single generation households, the two villages differ with respect to the composition of the single generation household category. In the prosperous village, 50% of the elderly are living alone or with a spouse and 6% are living “by turns” (rotating between son’s residences). In the less prosperous village, 26% are living alone or with a spouse while 22% participate in “by turns” arrangements. The paper suggests that a failure to separate analytically the “by turns” arrangements obscures the extent to which China’s rural elderly now live in economic units separate from their offspring and masks important aspects of the differential impact of the new economic reforms on the household situation of the elderly in different villages.

Key Words: household composition, rural elderly, single generation households, China

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on household composition of the elderly in two villages in rural China demonstrating the importance of analytically distinguishing a type of traditional living arrangement known as “by turns” in Chinese. In this living arrangement, the elderly rotate eating (and sometimes sleeping) between their sons’ residences. The paper suggests that failure to recognize this type of living arrangement may be producing misleading under-enumeration of the elderly living in single generation households.

The implementation of China’s decision to restrict population growth through the “one child family” program has varied in strictness since its inception in 1978 but has clearly reduced fertility dramatically with the result that China is well along the way to an “aged” population structure (Greenhalgh, 1986; Banister, 1987; Sankar, 1989; Wei, 1987; Wu and Xu 1987). Although much is being written about the implications of this, for the current elderly age 60+ the one child family planning program is actually not an important determinant of their current household status since the families of these elderly were completed before it was implemented.

Far more relevant is the new economic policy that the Chinese government launched in 1978. This policy emphasized productivity, profit, and market (supply and demand) competition. In rural China, the agrarian communes were ended and their agricultural lands redistributed among the members. The household again became the basic unit of production and consumption. Rural households were free to organize their time and resources as they saw fit and
were encouraged to "get rich" if they could. The consequences of these changes for the family, and particularly the more vulnerable segments of society such as the elderly, have been of interest to officials and scholars both in China and abroad, although research on such issues is just beginning and the literature consists more of speculations than empirical findings.

Although we will not examine this literature in detail, some observers suggest that these new economic reforms should reinforce Chinese values on filial piety and the traditional extended family (several generations under the same roof). Yuan (1987:38) explains, "after the implementation of the new responsibility system, the family had returned as the key unit of production and a joint family has the advantage of bringing the potential of the aged into full play and thereby increasing income." Sankar (1989), in a cogent review article on aging in China, similarly reasons that it is plausible that decollectivization and the new economic system have increased the potential economic contribution of the elderly. There is some evidence for the new reforms supporting the traditional extended family in the literature. For example, one study conducted in a rural area near Tianjin city reported that 86% of the elderly are living in 2, 3 or 4 generation households (Wuqing County Committee on Aging Problems 1986: 85–86).

Other observers, however, have hypothesized that the reforms may be detrimental to the elderly. Welfare services previously provided by the brigade are no longer available, and the pressure on children to support parents who can no longer make an economic contribution has been weakened (Davis 1986, cited in Sankar 1989). Similarly, the younger generation's increased opportunities for outmigration and wage employment, and the growth of materialism and consumerism, could lead to generational conflict over spending household resources on unproductive elderly. Moreover, it has been suggested that the elderly have lost their patriarchal authority in the household and that intergenerational relations are becoming more egalitarian (Yuan 1987:38).

A number of surveys conducted by Chinese researchers offer some indirect support for this. They report data that show a change in family structure in the direction of reduced family size ("nucleation") and a concomitant increasing proportion of the elderly living alone or only with their spouses, i.e., in single generation households (Yuan 1987; Wu and Xu 1987). Yuan (ibid.: 37–8) cites findings from a survey comparing village areas in Heilongjiang and Sichuan Provinces which found that while 40% of the people surveyed regarded the joint family with several generations to be their ideal, only 27.9% of the families actually fell into this category. The composition of the remaining 72.1% was not stated. Another survey of the elderly conducted in villages in the suburbs of Shanghai reported that only 41% of the study elderly were living with a married child, i.e. in the ideal 2–3 generational household; 54% of the elderly were living either alone or only with a spouse (Gui 1988: 159). Similarly, two surveys, one conducted in a rural village in Hunan Province and another in Zhejiang, report respectively that a somewhat lower, but still substantial, 33% and 34% of the elderly were residing separate from children (Jia 1988: 142; Yang 1989).