



‘He Is He, and I Am I’: Individual and Collective among China’s Rural Elderly

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Abstract

China’s rural elderly strongly feel the tension between the life patterns they had expected to follow and the risks and possibilities presented by a more dynamic and individualised society. This paper discusses how the elderly react to the rapid changes in intergenerational relations. The focus is on their strategies towards the two most common types of living arrangements during old age: maintaining an independent household, and living with a son’s family. Earlier generations of elderly perceived cohabitation with a son as the only natural arrangement, but interviews indicate that living in an independent household has become an accepted alternative. This illustrates how China’s rural elderly are able to create and accept changes in family relations and new life patterns. Their problems are generated by the lack of social services in rural areas rather than by any culturally determined resistance to change. The last part of the paper discusses recent social engineering projects aimed at reintegrating the elderly into society. By looking at how the elderly adapt to changing family relations and how others imagine their reintegration, the paper highlights the complicated patterns of social change that have emerged in China’s villages in the wake of decollectivisation.

Keywords

old age, rural China, individualization, family, cohabitation

Old women sitting on their small stools along a Chinese village street, keeping an eye on their grandchildren and chatting about the passers-by, may seem almost untouched by the dramatic changes that have swept through China over the last decades. However, China’s rural elderly have been just as strongly affected by recent economic, social and mental transformations as other groups, and they acutely feel the tension that has emerged between the

life patterns they had expected to follow and the new risks and possibilities presented by a more dynamic and individualised society.

This paper will discuss how the elderly react to the rapid transformation of their social environment and particularly to changes in intergenerational relations. We shall focus on their preferences and strategies in regard to the two most common types of living arrangements during old age: maintaining an independent household, and living with a son's family. That every elderly person now can and has to choose between these two options is an example of the 'disintegration of social forms' that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim see as one of the two main aspects of individualisation.¹ Earlier generations of elderly perceived cohabitation with a son as the only natural arrangement, and people who deviated from this norm were looked upon with pity or suspicion by their fellow villagers. Our interviews in two Shandong villages indicate that this is no longer the case. Living alone is sometimes a forced choice, a way of coping with changing family relations, but it has become a generally accepted alternative, and many appreciate the freedom it gives them. This illustrates that China's rural elderly are not just victims of modernisation, or steeped in tradition, but are able to accept changes in family relations and create new life patterns. Their problems are generated by the lack of social services in rural areas rather than by any culturally determined resistance to change on their part.

Like other changes in intergenerational relations, the trend away from cohabitation is, of course, a symptom of larger socio-economic processes such as demographic change and increased social and geographical mobility, and in China the problems faced by the rural elderly have become a symbol of the anxiety and insecurity that these processes generate at a more general level. Not only are the elderly themselves concerned about their future, the aging of the population is also perceived as a serious problem by social scientists and policy-makers.² The last part of the paper will discuss organisations that are intended to represent the collective interests of the rural elderly. Old people's associations initiated by the state and by social reformers are examples of different strategies for re-embedding the elderly in rural society, and the problems that these organisations meet reflect more general issues of social integration and community building in reform-era China.

¹) Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 2.

²) Charlotte Ikels, 'Economic reform and intergenerational relationships in China', *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2006), pp. 387–400.

Old Age in Rural China

Over the last decades, old age care in the rural areas has been identified as a major problem in China's social development. The Chinese population is greying, and this is not least evident in the villages. Thanks to substantial progress in rural health care after 1949, life expectancy has been rapidly rising, and strict birth control policies keep the number of children low. Many young people migrate to the cities, either permanently or in temporary jobs, and are therefore unable to personally care for their parents. The rural elderly of the present generation normally have several children, but it will not be long before one- and two-child parents reach the age when they will need care. In 2006, 149 million Chinese, or 11.3 per cent of the population, were over 60, and a 2007 report from China National Committee on Aging predicted that by 2020 the elderly population will have swelled to 248 million. The problem of who will support them is going to be massive. According to the report, there will be only two working people for every retiree in the years between 2030 and 2050, while the current ratio is 6:1.³

There is little public care for the elderly in rural China, as opposed to the cities, where many people receive pensions and have some sort of health insurance.⁴ Instead, children are legally obliged to take care of their parents. We met a few childless elderly who received support through the 'five guarantees' system, which secures their basic livelihood (food, housing, clothing, health care and burial), but this system is only geared to meet needs at the lowest subsistence level, it only functions in some places, and it is only for those who have no children. By the end of 2003 only 2.5 million people nationwide benefited from the 'five guarantees'.⁵ Less than 5 per cent of the rural elderly received pensions in 2006,⁶ and experiments with introducing old age insurance in rural areas have generally been unsuccessful.⁷ The privatisation of rural health care means that medical expenses for elderly parents are a heavy

³) Wu Jiao, 'Nation faces challenges of graying population', *China Daily*, 18 December 2007.

⁴) For a systematic comparison of rural and urban disparities in support for the elderly, see Xiaohe Xu and Jianjun Ji, 'Supports for the aged in China: a rural-urban comparison', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1999), pp. 257–278.

⁵) Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (2004), *China's Social Security and its Policy*, White Paper; online at http://english.people.com.cn/200409/07/eng20040907_156193.html (accessed 26 February 2007).

⁶) Wu Jiao, *Nation faces challenges*.

⁷) Li Hong and Dan Xueyong, '*Nongcun yanglao baozhang: cong "jiating" dao "shehui"*' (Old

burden on many families, and the hospital bill of a grandmother often has to compete with education fees for a son or daughter when the family plans its budget. Some wealthy villages provide old age support for their inhabitants,⁸ and a rural health insurance system has recently been introduced. However, the insurance only covers around one third of the expenses in case of serious illness, and many peasants cannot afford to buy it. In sum, the task of caring for elderly villagers is left mainly to themselves and their children, and the latter are an unreliable source of support because they are few, may live far from their parents, and often are under great economic pressure.

The main source of income for most rural elderly is the land they received when the collectives were dissolved in the early 1980s, and this land gives them some economic independence. However, the plots are normally very small, often only around one *mu* per person, and many types of farming are not profitable in China today. The land can be rented out, but the rent is low. Normally the land is turned over to a son, who in return promises to support his parents.

The present predicament of the rural elderly can be seen as the result of a double disembedding process from both collective and family that has been progressing since the early 1980s. The dissolution of the rural collectives after 1978 left Chinese villages without a social safety net, and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim correctly mention China as an example of how people also outside the Western industrialised world 'are now expected to take their lives into their own hands and to pay a market price for services they receive'.⁹ However, the social services provided by the rural collectives were limited in scope and, in contrast to the situation in urban state enterprises, never included pensions. For the elderly, the lack of mobility that characterised the Mao era was probably an even more important factor for old age care than collective welfare provisions. The household registration (*hukou*) system meant that while daughters normally married out of the village, sons and daughters-in-law would almost certainly be around when parents grew old and needed care. By nailing peasants to their native village the collective system actually tied the family together and delayed the effects of modernisation on intergenerational

age security in the rural areas: from 'family' to 'society'), *Jingji yu guanli* (Economy and Management), Vol. 18, No. 9 (2004).

⁸ Alun E. Joseph and David R. Phillips, 'Ageing in rural China: impacts of increasing diversity in family and community resources', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1999), pp. 153–168.

⁹ Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, p. 1.

relations. Old villagers today, however, can no longer take it for granted that their sons will remain in the village.

Disembedded fully from the collectives by political decree and partly from the family by market forces, and excluded from the social services of the state, the rural elderly can be said to bear the full brunt of the uncertainties of modern life in post-reform China. How are they tackling this situation, practically and mentally? We shall try to answer this question by focusing on one concrete and fundamental issue faced by the elderly: should they maintain a separate residence or rather live with one of their children? This choice is made within a specific social and cultural framework and has to be considered in the more general context of the tradition for multigenerational co-residence that exists not just in China but in much of Asia.

Co-residence in Asia and in China

One of the main characteristics of the modern family in the industrialised Western countries is that emotional ties inside the nuclear family (husband, wife and their dependent children) have grown stronger, while the bonds between the older generation and their adult children have been weakened. As a consequence, old people in the West now tend to live by themselves rather than with a married son or daughter. The causes of this transformation are changes in fundamental economic and occupational structures: the role of the family as the primary economic group is reduced in modern industrialised societies as most individuals can make their own living without having to depend on the family land or family business, or on skills transmitted inside the family. Increased geographical and social mobility leads to a general decrease in the degree of dependency between generations, and with the declining frequency of *actual* co-residence, according to modernisation theory, comes a gradual transformation of the *norms and preferences* for living arrangements.

In Western Europe and North America most people have apparently adapted their expectations to the new mode of life so that

there seems to be a preference almost everywhere for elders who are losing physical and mental competence to continue to live separately from their offspring, but to have some regular contact with them, perhaps increasing as the parents need help with more aspects of daily life.¹⁰

¹⁰ Stevan Harrell, *Human Families* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), p. 513. See pp. 455–528 for a general discussion of what Harrell calls the ‘M-cluster’ of modern families.

It is important to note that such changes in living arrangements have not destroyed the emotional ties inside the family. The generations continue to provide significant emotional and practical support for each other.¹¹

Intergenerational relations are also changing in Asia, although these societies do not simply follow the Western model. Elisabeth Croll found ample evidence in the literature of ‘an accelerated breakdown of the larger co-residential two- or three-generational joint-family form’ which was attributed to a ‘growing generation gap and an increasing preference of the young to live separately from the older generation’. Across Asia, the older generation feels deprived of authority and respect, while the role of the state in old age support remains minimal. However:

Studies of old-age care across Asia emphasize that the resource flows hitherto associated with co-residence are not constrained by the physical boundaries of separate households and that living near, as opposed to with, children does not necessarily mean that there are fewer resource flows between the generations.

The intergenerational contract, according to Croll, has been ‘renegotiated and reinterpreted to accommodate changes in the distinctive socio-cultural context that is Asia today’, but intergenerational ties remain very strong even after this renegotiation.¹²

If we focus on co-residence, living with an adult child has been a significant and almost emblematic feature of successful family life in East Asia, where ratios of co-residence have remained much higher than in Western countries at corresponding levels of social development. According to the authors of a comparative study, the co-residence ratios in the 1980s were 71 per cent in Taiwan, 74 per cent in the Philippines, 77 per cent in Thailand and 88 per cent in Singapore, and co-residence was not only the most common but also the most commonly preferred living arrangement.¹³ Over the following years there has been some decline in the frequency of co-residence in East Asian countries. In Singapore, for example, the ratio dropped from 88 per cent in

¹¹ Chris Phillipson and Graham Allan, ‘Aging and the life course’, in Jacqueline Scott, Judith Treas and Martin Richards (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 126–141.

¹² Elisabeth J. Croll, ‘The intergenerational contract in the changing Asian family’, *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2006), pp. 473–491.

¹³ Maruja Milagros Asis, Lita Domingo, John E. Knodel and Kalyani Mehta, ‘Living arrangements in four Asian countries: a comparative perspective’, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, Vol. 10, No. 1–2 (1995), pp. 145–162.

the late 1980s to 74 per cent in 2000 and 69 per cent in 2005,¹⁴ although this is still an extraordinarily high figure for a fully urbanised society.

There is, however, evidence of changes with regard to intergenerational relations even among people who grew up in cultures like the Chinese where the notion of filial piety plays a central role. Japan is an obvious example. As an early industrialised country, Japan shows occupational and demographic trends that are very similar to the West, while it shares China's traditional norms for co-residence. As late as in 1980, 69 per cent of all Japanese over the age of 65 were living with their children, and the Japanese family pattern was commonly perceived as an alternative to the European—North American prototype.¹⁵ The ratio of co-residence has slowly dropped since then, however, and in 2005 it was down to 45 per cent.¹⁶ This is still much higher than in Western Europe and North America, but it is interesting to note that the mental transformation seems to proceed more rapidly than the changes in actual living arrangements. A 1983 survey showed that 66 per cent of Japanese over 65 preferred to live with their children, but by 2000 this figure had dropped significantly to 38 per cent.¹⁷ One study of rural Japan actually found that co-residence could be a significant source of stress to the elderly, and it was locally perceived as driving many old people to commit suicide.¹⁸ As for Hong Kong, a recent study found that old people adapted remarkably well to social changes, and that 'living apart from children did not contribute to ... reduced well-being'.¹⁹

If we look at urban China, where public social services are much better than in the villages, co-residence is still quite common but far from being an indispensable norm. A 1993 survey in Tianjin and Shanghai showed that 38

¹⁴ Singapore Department of Statistics, *Key Findings of the General Household Survey 2005. Transport, Overseas Travels, Households and Housing Characteristics* (Singapore: Government of Singapore, 2006), p. 4; online at <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/press/ghs2.pdf> (accessed 2 February 2007).

¹⁵ Harrell, *Human Families*, pp. 522–528.

¹⁶ Ministry of Public Welfare and Labour White Book, Heisei 18 (2006), p. 24; online at <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/wp/hakusyo/kousei/06/dl/1-1a.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2007).

¹⁷ Anemone Platz, 'Ochitsukeru basho: Wohn(ungs)wünschen alter Menschen' (A place to settle down: old people's living preferences), in Roland Domenig, Susanne Formanek and Wolfram Manzenreiter (eds), *Über Japan Denken* (Thoughts on Japan) (Wien: LIT Verlag, 2005), pp. 321–344.

¹⁸ John W. Traphagati, 'Interpretations of elder suicide, stress, and dependency among rural Japanese', *Ethnology*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2004), pp. 315–329.

¹⁹ Sheung-Tak Cheng and Alfred C.M. Chan, 'Filial piety and psychological well-being in well older Chinese', *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, Vol. 61B, No. 5 (2006), pp. 262–269.

per cent of 60–69-year-olds lived alone or with a spouse, while 19 per cent lived with unmarried adult children and 43 per cent with a married child. For the 70+ age group the corresponding figures were 46 per cent, 9 per cent and 45 per cent, so in both age groups fewer than half of the elderly co-resided with married children. The authors reached the conclusion that co-residence might even decline further if housing conditions and social services were improved.²⁰ John R. Logan and Fuqin Bian summarise previous survey research on attitudes to co-residence in China's urban areas, saying that there seems to be a growing preference for having separate households, and that the "modern" values in favour of separate households for married children have developed in advance of families' ability to follow them'.²¹ Their own survey of actual and preferred living arrangements in nine major cities showed that 'preferences often adjust to circumstance' in the sense that people make practical choices rather than blindly following cultural norms.²² A survey of more than 2,000 elderly in former rural areas that had been turned into urban districts showed that 45 per cent of the 60+ preferred to live with their married children and 49 per cent did so, while 40 per cent preferred to live alone and 36 per cent did so.²³ A 1994 survey of Baoding indicates that co-residence is no longer so important because children will still support their parents even when they live separately. In this way the 'trend toward independent living by the urban elderly need not imply a deterioration of the family support system'.²⁴ As mentioned above, this conclusion is supported by evidence from the West and other countries in Asia. This all appears to support Logan and Bian's conclusion that

²⁰ John R. Logan, Fuqin Bian and Yanjie Bian, 'Tradition and change in the urban Chinese family: the case of living arrangements', *Social Forces*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (1998), pp. 851–882. For a discussion of how urban families in Guangzhou coped with intergenerational relations and co-residence around 1990, see Charlotte Ikels, 'Settling accounts: the intergenerational contract in an age of reform', in Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 307–333.

²¹ John R. Logan and Fuqin Bian, 'Family values and co-residence with married children in urban China', *Social Forces*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (1999), pp. 1253–1282, quotation from p. 1258.

²² Logan and Bian, *Family values and co-residence*, p. 1274.

²³ Shengming Yan and Iris Chi, 'Living arrangements and adult children's support for the elderly in the new urban areas of mainland China', in Iris Chi, Neena L. Chappell and James Lubben (eds), *Elderly Chinese in Pacific Rim Countries* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), pp. 201–219.

²⁴ Shengming Yan, Jieming Chen and Shanhua Yang, 'Living arrangements and old-age support', in Martin King Whyte (ed.), *China's Revolutions and Intergenerational Relations* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), pp. 143–166, quotation from p. 162.

‘there is not a single cultural norm [concerning co-residence] in urban China. Instead there are competing strategies of action, among which parents may select.’²⁵ It seems that while East Asian families are more resistant to change and multigenerational co-residence is a more tenacious phenomenon in Asia than in the West, cultural norms and perceptions in this field *are* undergoing change.

As already mentioned, there are substantial differences between urban and rural areas of China in regard to the material conditions of the elderly, mainly because many people in the cities receive pensions and are better covered by medical insurance. This tends to make rural parents relatively more dependent on their children, and co-residence has traditionally been the norm in the villages. Parish and Whyte found that although the Chinese government attacked particular traditional phenomena like concubines and child brides it did little to change the core structure of the peasant household, to the effect that during the collective period ‘residence remains patrilocal, with virtually all old parents living in the home of a son’.²⁶ This was confirmed by a 1987 national survey, which found that only 10 per cent of the 60+ in rural areas lived alone or only with their spouse, as compared to 26 per cent in cities and 29 per cent in towns.²⁷

China’s rural families, however, are now exposed to many of the changes that triggered the transformation of the family in Western industrialised countries and, to some extent, in the Chinese cities. These changes include lower fertility, longer life expectancy, higher mobility and less dependence on income from agriculture. Ethnographic research shows that there is now also in the villages a growing tendency for the elderly to live independently.²⁸ Hong Zhang, who did fieldwork in a village in Hubei province in 1993–1994, discovered that it had ‘not only become more acceptable, but also more and more commonplace’ for elderly parents to live alone.²⁹ Those informants who lived independently told her that they had much more freedom in this way and, particularly important

²⁵ Logan and Bian, *Family values and co-residence*, p. 1278.

²⁶ William L. Parish and Martin King Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 137.

²⁷ Wu Cangping and Du Peng (eds), *Renkou laolinghua guochengzhong de Zhongguo laonianren* (Elderly Chinese during the Process of Population Aging) (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 1996), p. 109.

²⁸ The definition of living independently/separately (*danguo*) varies in different studies of rural China, but having a separate dwelling, cooking one’s own meals and eating at one’s own table is a practical and operational definition which appeared to follow local perceptions.

²⁹ Hong Zhang, “Living alone” and the rural elderly: strategy and agency in post-Mao

to them, had regained control over their own budget. She also found, however, that the majority of the villagers still felt that living with a child was the ideal arrangement, while living alone was generally considered disgraceful for the parents and interpreted as a sign of the children's unfilial attitude. More than 80 per cent of those living alone had moved out after 'fierce and constant quarrels with their adult children', which indicates that the individualised lifestyle was often a forced rather than a preferred solution.³⁰

Eric Miller, who did fieldwork in Zouping, Shandong, likewise observed that many elderly 'preferred the independence and freedom of eating apart from children or in some cases even living apart in separate housing'.³¹ However, he interpreted this trend as an indicator of old people's lack of power in family relations: without power and resources they had to minimise their demands and be grateful for the little support they got. The ethnographic research of Zhang and Miller indicates that the intergenerational contract is being renegotiated also in rural China. The question is how the revisions should be interpreted.

Images of China's Rural Elderly

The Chinese public discourse is dominated by two partly overlapping images of the rural elderly as a *burden* to society and as the *victims* of modernisation.³² They are a burden because the Chinese population, in a much favoured phrase, has become old before it became rich. According to this argument, only more developed countries can actually afford to have a life expectancy rate as high as the one we now see in China, which is said to lack the economic basis for providing public old age care. The elderly are also seen as victims, however, because problematic demographic and economic trends are said to be matched by a moral crisis among the younger generation, who no longer live up the traditional values of filial piety. When old people live independently it is often seen as a sign of their position as victims, as when *Beijing Weekly* in a report

rural China', in Charlotte Ikels (ed.), *Filial Piety. Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 63–87, quotation from pp. 85–86.

³⁰ Zhang, 'Living alone' and the rural elderly, pp. 72 and 75.

³¹ Eric Miller, 'Filial daughters, filial sons: comparisons from rural north China', in Ikels, *Filial Piety*, quotation from p. 40.

³² For an interesting discussion of the public debate on old age, see Anna Boermel, "No wasting" and "empty nesters": "old age" in Beijing', *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2006), pp. 401–418.

on recent survey results wrote that ‘45 per cent of the old lived separately from their children, 93 per cent did not get a new item of clothing every year, 67 per cent could not afford to buy medicine, and 85 per cent supported themselves by agricultural labour’.³³ It is obvious that living alone is here listed as one of several problems haunting the elderly.

Influential anthropological research tends to confirm the idea that the rural elderly are victims of the forces unleashed by the post-1978 economic reforms and particularly of recent changes in intergenerational relations. Yunxiang Yan describes the transformation of the emotional relationship between the generations as the ‘demystification of parenthood’, and argues that ‘without the backdrop of a traditional kinship system and religious beliefs and rituals ... the basis for intergenerational relations became more rational and self-interested’.³⁴ Guo Yuhua makes a similar argument when she says that the ‘logic of justice’ for intergenerational exchange has changed. In traditional China there existed a social contract between parents and their offspring, which obliged children (and particularly sons) to be eternally and unconditionally grateful to their parents who had borne and raised them. At present, however, the young generation sees the relationship more as a contract between individuals with equal rights. They are willing to provide financial support even if their parents behave unreasonably, but they will not allow the old generation to become a nuisance to the life of the young family, so if co-residence leads to domestic trouble the aged parents will have to live by themselves.³⁵ Guo’s analysis of the emergence of a new logic of justice is very similar to Goode’s description of the way ‘the terms of the role-bargaining between the generations’ were altered by industrialisation in the West.³⁶

Both Yan and Guo see the problematic transformation of rural intergenerational relations not just as a general effect of modernisation but as a specific consequence of China’s post-1949 history. After the revolution the state

³³ Feng Jianhua, ‘*Shei lai shanyang tamen? Nongcunren de yanglao zhi you*’ (Who will support them? Rural people’s worries about old age support), *Beijing Zhoukan* (Beijing Weekly), No. 2, 2007.

³⁴ Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 188.

³⁵ Guo Yuhua, ‘*Daiji guanxizhong de gongping luoji jiqi bianqian. Dui Hebei nongcun yanglao shijian de fenxi*’ (The logic of justice in intergenerational relations and its changes. An analysis of cases of old age support in rural Hebei), *Zhongguo xuekan* (Chinese Scholarship), No. 4 (2000), pp. 221–254.

³⁶ William J. Goode, *The Family* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 109.

smashed the existing social structures, primarily the lineage and the patriarchal ideology that underpinned the family system. The rural collectives were to some extent able to take over the care-giving functions performed by the lineage system because they made it possible to allocate the work of caring for the elderly to work team members, particularly daughters-in-law, but after decollectivisation the villages were left without any care-giving social institutions, and even without moral standards. As expressed by one of Guo's informants, the present generation of elderly is the most unfortunate. When they were young they had to obey the older generation and put up with their tyrannical behaviour. Now they must obey their own children and live at their mercy. According to Yunxiang Yan: 'The most significant change with regard to elderly support, in my opinion, is the disintegration and ultimate collapse of the notion of filial piety, the backbone of old-age security in Chinese culture.'³⁷ To Yan, the collapse of old age support is a prime example of the *negative* aspect of individualism, the rise of what he terms 'the uncivil individual'.

Precisely because of the state's intrusive influence in everyday life during the collective period, its retreat in the postcollective era has produced an equally strong yet perhaps more negative impact on the private lives of individual villagers—that is, the development of ultra-utilitarian individualism in a unique context where the survival of traditional culture, the legacy of radical socialism, and global capitalism are competing with each other.³⁸

While Yan generally portrays the increased autonomy of the individual in rural China as a positive development, he is thus much more sceptical towards its effects on the older generation. In the following we shall try to modify this rather pessimistic picture of how the rural elderly have reacted to recent changes. While we fully agree that they constitute a highly vulnerable group and that many elderly lead miserable lives, we shall argue that a significant proportion of the elderly are actually adapting quickly to more individualised lifestyles and no longer see co-residence with a married son as the ideal manifestation of filial piety. Autonomy and individual space have also become crucial to many elderly in China's villages, and living independently is becoming a socially fully accepted option for them.

³⁷⁾ Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, p. 189.

³⁸⁾ Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, p. 233.

Old Age and Autonomy in Rural Shandong

The interview data used in the following discussion are part of a larger research project on old age in rural Shandong.³⁹ In August 2001 we did eight exploratory interviews with people aged 50 to 82 in Zhaibian, a village in Boxing county with just over 3,000 inhabitants. In economic terms this used to be a medium-level agricultural village, but its inhabitants have recently become wealthier as they have found employment in enterprises and construction teams in Boxing town and further away. This means that the elderly are exposed to some of the effects of an open and more industrialised economy. Each interview lasted half a day or more. Besides learning about the informant's own situation we also asked their opinion about the general conditions for the elderly in their village. In addition we conducted interviews with people in other age groups, particularly local leaders such as the village Communist Party secretary. One of the things that struck us during the interviews was the flexible and pragmatic attitude of the elderly towards co-residence with married children.

Based on these findings, Ni Anru and graduate students from the sociology department of Shandong University conducted 53 semi-structured interviews in June 2004, May 2005 and May 2006 in Changyu village in Licheng district. Changyu is a mountain village with 960 inhabitants, quite far from the nearest town and with an average yearly per capita income of a modest 3,500 yuan. The informants were selected to represent different life situations in terms of gender, age, income, family relations and degree of dependency. We did not consider random sampling to be a useful way of selecting informants because we wanted as wide a range of experiences as possible rather than statistical representation. The interviewers asked general questions about the living conditions of the elderly, but particularly in 2006 the focus was on their perception of individuality and family bonds.

We were particularly interested in whether elderly villagers who could still take care of themselves preferred to live alone with their spouse or together with a married son. In contrast to those who are already dependent on the help of others, the healthy old actually have a choice when it comes to living arrangements, and if this group prefers to live alone we believe it can be seen as a sign of their wish for more personal autonomy. In this context we also wanted to learn more about their perceptions of old age and filial piety, which contribute significantly to attitudes towards generational cohabitation.

³⁹⁾ The project includes the collection of quantitative data which we are not able to discuss here because of limits of space.

Perceptions of Old Age and Filial Piety

Our informants offered several different definitions of what it means to be old, which may be summarised in two broad categories reflecting important aspects of old age for Shandong villagers.

The first category concerns the degree of dependency on others and is closely connected to physical health. Yuebin Xu divides the process of increasing dependency into three stages which correspond well to what our interviewees expressed: during the first stage the elderly have their own household and grow their own land, but they need cash from their children for extra expenses; during the second stage they turn their plot over to their son(s) but maintain their separate household and cook their own meals; during the third stage they become dependent on their children for personal care and are forced to move to their children's families.⁴⁰ It is particularly the third stage that is problematic, and many elderly were terrified by the idea of being confined to bed. When asked about what they would do if this situation should occur, most respondents said that they never considered this question because it made them too depressed. Worrying about the future would not change anything, so they might as well wait and see what destiny would bring them.

There was a second category of definitions, however, which looked at old age rather as a time of leisure and retirement after a long working life. As one informant said: 'If your children are rich you get old when you are in your forties. If you are poor you can live to eighty without getting old.'⁴¹ In other words, if you have nobody to support you, you have to go to the fields no matter how old and weak you are, and you will have no chance of enjoying life in the way an old person should. Richer families, however, can let their parents retire from agricultural labour and enjoy 'old age' while they are still quite young. A 60-year-old woman said that you are old when you have 'completed your tasks' (*wanchengle renwu*) by arranging your children's marriages. Then you can relax and know that you have done what is expected of you. You will not have to work so much and can expect your sons to take care of you when you need it.⁴² While the first concept of old age is primarily negative and related to physical ailments and dependency, the latter is thus more positive and refers to the gratification you deserve after a long life.

⁴⁰ Yuebin Xu, 'Family support for old people in rural China', *Social Policy and Administration*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2001), pp. 307–320.

⁴¹ Interview no. 1, 2001.

⁴² Interview no. 2, 2001.

Both these perceptions of old age leave room for ideas of autonomy and individual agency. In the perspective of dependency, living in the household of one's son may certainly become necessary at some stage in the absence of other care providers, but it is not an ideal to be strived for. On the contrary, living alone may be seen as a sign of good health. If, on the other hand, old age equals retirement, your children should, of course, take good care of you, but economic, practical and emotional care may also be provided to parents who prefer to remain in their own homes. Thus none of these perceptions of old age necessarily entails co-residence.

The traditional term 'filial piety' (*xiao* or *xiaoshun*) was generally used to describe the desired attitude of children towards their parents, and the most frequently used definition of what it meant to be filial was that you should 'not upset the old' (*bu rang laode shengqi*):

The most important aspect of being filial is not to upset the old. If [your children] just give you money and things to eat and drink but still make you angry, how can that count as being filial?⁴³

Not to upset the old can mean many different things. Some examples given in the interviews were tokens of love and care such as bringing one's parents small gifts, inviting them over for meals, and covering their medical expenses. But informants also emphasised that old people have their own ideas and habits and prefer other activities and other types of food than the younger generation. Not to upset one's parents also meant that the young should accept and respect such particularities and individual whims. They should not interfere in the old people's lives but let them keep their autonomy.

The right to be left alone and not be bullied may be seen as a sad watering down of the traditional privileges of the elderly, but we may also think of this reinterpretation of *xiao* as a sign of their demand for a more independent life. This would explain what seems to be a contradiction in the literature on rural filial piety. On the one hand many observers, like Yan and Guo cited above, find very little *xiao* in China's villages. To the Zouping informants of Eric Miller, for example, 'the filiality of sons is simply to provide basic support and to not create conflicts'.⁴⁴ On the other hand, a 1995 survey in Shandong showed that 83 per cent of the rural elderly felt that their children and grandchildren were 'very filial' (38 per cent) or 'rather filial' (45 per cent),

⁴³ Interview no. 10, 2006.

⁴⁴ Miller, *Filial daughters, filial sons*, p. 38.

and in our interviews practically everyone said that unfilial sons were the exception.⁴⁵ However, their attitude was somewhat contradictory, indicating that the nature of filiality had changed. The contradiction was most explicitly expressed by an 82-year-old peasant who practically changed his view in the middle of a sentence:

In the past, a filial son would never make the elders angry, but society has changed now, there is no such thing as a filial son. Well, there are filial sons in the village, they are actually a majority, most people are good, there are not many bad ones. As for those who are not filial, you can't just blame the young, the old are also responsible.⁴⁶

One interpretation of this ambiguity is, of course, that the old have simply lowered their expectations, but it is also possible that many accept a new inter-generational equilibrium and actually prefer less narrow bonds inside the family. In this way *xiao*—which fundamentally just means making one's parents happy—may have achieved an element of accepting a more autonomous position for the elderly. This interpretation becomes more likely when we look at elderly people's responses to questions about living arrangements.

Attitudes to Living Independently

There were four main types of living arrangements among the elderly we interviewed: (1) living in a separate household with or without a spouse; (2) living permanently with a son's family; (3) rotating between the families of sons (*lunyang*); and (4) living in an old people's home (*yanglaoyuan*).

Rotational living meant that those sons who were still in the village took turns in providing their parents with board and lodging. Such arrangements were quite common in both Zhaibian and Changyu and were seen as a practical way of sharing the burden of support and care. The length of each stay became shorter as the burden increased. One old couple, both in very good health, had arranged to live three years with each of their sons. Those who demanded more care would have to move every year, and in one case an old woman who was confined to her bed was moved from house to house every ten days. We were told that in the final stage of an old person's life he or she may be allowed

⁴⁵ Cheng Xuechao and Guo Peifang, 'Shandong nongcun laonianren shehui xinli zhuangkuang de zai diaocha' (A re-investigation of the socio-psychological condition of the elderly in rural Shandong), *Shandong shida xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (Journal of Shandong Teachers' University (Social Sciences)), No. 1 (1995), pp. 66–70.

⁴⁶ Interview no. 10, 2006.

to stay in one room, and the children would take turns in attending to her needs, sometimes down to 24-hour shifts. Rotational living arrangements are only used in some parts of China, while others regard them as degrading to the old person.⁴⁷

Old people's homes are reserved for people with no children, and they are still rare in rural areas. In Zhaibian, a former school served as an old people's home. Two sonless couples lived there under the five guarantees system, but their living conditions were evidently very poor. In Changyu only one old divorced man had moved to an old people's home in the town, and his fellow villagers felt sorry for him.

With a few exceptions, rotational living and old people's homes were thus only relevant for the weakest elderly. The large majority of relatively healthy old people were living either in a one-generation family or with a married son. Living in a separate household meant cooking one's own meals and maybe also having a separate courtyard. Those elderly who lived in a son's household would normally leave their land to that son in return, but other sons and daughters were still expected to contribute to their care and support.

In the two villages where we did interviews, most informants expressed a wish to live independently as long as possible. A 71-year-old farmer repeatedly stated that he would only live with his children if he became absolutely unable to take care of himself, and he summed up the prevailing attitude in an almost programmatic way:

Q: Why [do you not want to move to your son's house]?

A: I wouldn't feel at ease (*zizai*).

Q: Wouldn't you feel at ease in the house of your own son?

A: Well, you know, he is he and I am I ... (*ta shi ta, wo shi wo*).⁴⁸

This attitude was not only found among the 'younger old'. An 81-year-old man with three sons said:

Nowadays each person looks after himself, many [from the young generation] leave the village to make money and do not return all year, but we old people don't mind ... It is better to live by yourself, there is more freedom, you can take your meals whenever you want.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For a discussion of why rotation arrangements are widespread and accepted in some villages but not in others, see Jun Jing, 'Meal rotation and filial piety', in Charlotte Ikels (ed.), *Filial Piety*, pp. 53–62.

⁴⁸ Interview no. 12, 2006.

⁴⁹ Interview no. 5, 2006.

Different eating habits were often seen as a potential conflict area if the generations stayed together, but the grandchildren's upbringing was also mentioned several times. A 67-year-old retired school teacher and his wife lived close to their son and grandson, but they preferred not to share a courtyard with the young family, because this would involve them too much in the grandson's education:

It is a social trend [to live separately]. It is a problem these days that the kids are all spoiled. If we tried to give him [i.e. their grandson] good manners, would he listen? ... He makes a lot of trouble ... If it gets really bad the state must take care of him, dial 110 and they will come and arrest him, what can old people do about that?⁵⁰

One old woman just wanted to have her freedom to sit and gossip with her mates in the square without having to think about returning for meals. An old man talked about how he got together with friends to discuss calligraphy and traditional literature, and felt that he had an independent life with pleasures and values that had nothing to do with his children. A middle-aged man put it this way:

I have five children and they are all doing fine. My three girls often invite me to go and stay at their place, but I don't want to go. If I cannot refuse I may go, but only for a few days. It is great to live by myself here on the hill, it wouldn't be convenient to live with them, it would feel awkward. I don't want to live at my son's place either, but if he is going out I can watch his house for him.⁵¹

Some informants said that they preferred to live alone because they did not want to be a burden to their children, but there were also many like this man, who apparently chose to be on his own because of the freedom and leisure it gave him. This indicates that the new 'logic of justice' is not always working in favour of the younger generation. It is tempting to believe that the new trends are received more easily by the young, and that they will be the ones to welcome a more contractual relationship disembedded from the traditional family institutions. However, older people with sufficient economic, mental and physical resources also welcomed the loosening of tight family bonds.

Middle-aged informants made plans that would enable them to maintain their autonomy in old age. A 49-year-old farmer said that his age group had learned their lesson well. Members of the old generation had sometimes been

⁵⁰) Interview no. 8, 2006.

⁵¹) Interview no. 7, 2004.

thrown out of their own house after they had divided the family property (*fenjia*) with their sons, and had been left ‘without even a place to hide’. To avoid this he had designed a new home for himself and his wife where they could move when his son took over their present house. ‘It is better to live separately, it is more convenient for everyone,’ he said.⁵² A 59-year-old retired school teacher had also *fenjia* a few months after his son had married. In this way ‘they have their freedom, and we have our freedom, we can all do what we want’.⁵³ A 51-year-old woman said that she and her husband had tried to persuade their son to *fenjia* but he was unwilling to do so. This annoyed them, partly because they preferred to live independently and partly because a separation would reduce their expenses for gift-giving, as part of such family obligations would pass on to their son after *fenjia*.⁵⁴ That the younger old expect less from their children than the older cohort is not surprising. Hong Zhang likewise reports that young parents in the Hubei village where she did her fieldwork found it ‘out-dated and out of sync with the changing times’ to depend on their own children for old age support.⁵⁵

Our informants’ wish for autonomy was apparently not triggered by current family conflicts, but living independently was thought of as a preventive measure to maintain intergenerational harmony by reducing the children’s burdens to a minimum. The ideal was to be able to divide the property without breaking up the emotional relationship (*fenjia bu fenxin*). A 75-year-old farmer said that he and his wife were still in good health and perfectly able to take care of themselves: ‘You can’t just make your children look after you too early. If they have to take care of you for a long time there will be disagreements. That has happened to a lot of people in the village.’⁵⁶ He obviously felt that the revised intergenerational contract obliged the elderly to take care of themselves as long as possible, no matter how old they were. Like the young people interviewed by Hansen and Pang (in this issue), the elderly were coping with changes in family relations while maintaining the family as their principal frame of reference.

Not all informants were equally positive about living alone. Some clearly expressed a wish for co-residence and referred to this as the most ‘natural’

⁵²) Interview no. 7, 2004.

⁵³) Interview no. 1, 2006.

⁵⁴) Interview no. 4, 2006.

⁵⁵) Hong Zhang, ‘From resisting to “embracing?” the one-child rule: understanding new fertility trends in a central China village’, *China Quarterly*, No. 192 (2007), pp. 855–875, quotation from p. 866.

⁵⁶) Interview no. 6, 2006.

arrangement. As can be expected, people who had lost their spouse or who were ill often held this view, but it was not the dominant trend.

Could it be that those informants who spoke favourably about living independently would have preferred co-residence but found it embarrassing that their children were not willing to take care of them? The idea that parents bear a substantial part of the blame for their children's unfilial behaviour certainly exists, and few old people talked negatively about their own offspring, while they were more willing to criticise unfilial behaviour in other families. It speaks against this interpretation, however, that new ideas about individual space were most common among high-status groups such as former cadres, teachers, migrant workers and others who had been employed outside agriculture. These people had relatively many resources (savings, pensions, etc.), which it would have been attractive to their children to share, so if they had really wanted to live in their sons' households they could probably have done so. However, they were among the most vocal in their praise of independence.

In conclusion, we found that ideas of autonomy and individual space were widespread among our informants. Old people wanted to be close to their sons and daughters, physically as well as emotionally, and they wanted their grandchildren to come over after school, but much like the younger generation they simultaneously felt a need for an independent social life without the restrictions entailed by generational co-residence. In practical terms, around one third of the families in Changyu had solved the problem through dividing the courtyard with a wall and opening an extra door to the street for the old couple. This solution meant more privacy for both generations and lived up to the ideal of 'dividing without leaving' (*fen er bu li*). While Parish and Whyte found that co-residence was the norm in the collective period, Hong Zhang discovered in the early 1990s that many old people enjoyed the freedom of living independently, but that such living arrangements were still not fully accepted by village society.⁵⁷ What we saw in Shandong more than a decade later was that living in a separate household was no longer associated with disgrace or failure.⁵⁸ Living independently as long as possible had become a socially fully acceptable choice. Harmonious intergenerational relations were still very important to the elderly and to their reputation in the village, but

⁵⁷ Parish and Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*; Zhang, 'Living alone' and the rural elderly.

⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that Zhang in a footnote mentions that when she came back in 2002, 54 per cent of the 60+ were living separately, compared to 23 per cent during her original fieldwork in 1994. Zhang, 'Living alone' and the rural elderly, p. 255.

co-residence was no longer a precondition for being regarded as an ideal family. The elderly we met were not simply the victims of the atomising trends in a society torn apart by modernisation. Many of them had changed their perception of the ideal balance between family and individual, and the idea of autonomy was crucial for the way they now thought about their own lives.

Such mental transformations cannot change the fact that many elderly are extremely vulnerable, and that practically all of them will still have to rely on their family if they become too weak to take care of themselves. However, this dependency on the family is a problem inherent in China's socio-economic structure; it is not caused by the elderly's lack of mental flexibility. The collectives are gone and the traditional family is under strong pressure, but many rural elderly are prepared to change established cultural patterns and organise their lives in new ways. In order to reintegrate the rural elderly in society it will be necessary to develop institutions that can cater to their needs and defend their rights. In the following section we shall first look at those organisations—or rather, traces of organisations—for the elderly, which we came across in the two Shandong villages, and then turn to examples of collective organisations for the rural elderly in other localities.

Real and Imagined Communities for the Rural Elderly

While urban pensioners actively defend their rights and often organise social protests,⁵⁹ the rural elderly are more vulnerable because they are scattered, have few resources and rarely think of themselves collectively as an interest group. In Zhaibian we interviewed a 79-year-old man who was entitled to a monthly pension of 100 yuan because he had been a middle-level manager in a township enterprise. He had not received his pension for the last year, however. The township government claimed that the obligation had been transferred to a private contractor, who had taken over the enterprise, but this person simply refused to pay pensions and the old man had no idea how he could collect his money.⁶⁰ Old people whose families refused to take care of them had similar problems claiming their rights. In theory they could take legal action against unfilial children, but no old person in the two villages had ever done that. Most of them just silently put up with insults and neglect, or they only grumbled

⁵⁹ William Hurst and Kevin O'Brien, 'China's contentious pensioners', *China Quarterly*, No. 170 (2002), pp. 345–360.

⁶⁰ Interview no. 1, 2001.

to their confidants.⁶¹ As is the case for the young people discussed by Hansen and Pang in this issue, state institutions did not have much to offer them, and the family was the only collective unit of direct importance to them.

In principle, the interests of the 60+ should be taken care of by an old people's association (OPA, *laonianren xiehui*). Such an organisation existed briefly in Zhaibian in 1991–1992. It organised activities for the elderly, such as calligraphy competitions, and was also supposed to mediate in conflicts between the generations. The collective economy of the village withered away, however, and when the two old men who had taken the initiative to establish the OPA died all activities stopped. Changyu never had an OPA. Old people in both villages were very sceptical about their own ability to cooperate across families and they also feared running into conflicts with the established power structure. Nobody would take the lead in setting up an organisation unless the village government encouraged it. One mentioned that village leaders might look at an independent OPA as an attempt at establishing an alternative centre of power. Even attempts in Zhaibian to establish a funeral association and an opera troupe had proved futile because of internal disagreements and lack of initiative.

Also, the younger elderly found it difficult to imagine that old people should relate to each other as members of an interest group. A 58-year-old farmer prided himself on having maintained his full physical and mental capacity, but his reaction to the idea that he should take the lead in establishing an activity centre for old people was completely negative: 'I won't do that, I haven't got the ability. It is fine if we [i.e. he and his wife] can just make our own lives better, we can't manage more than that.'⁶²

Although the OPA had not been successful in the villages we visited, it plays an important role in other parts of China. We shall here look at two ways of imagining the social function of the OPA, which represents two different visions of how rural China may be socially reconstructed and how groups that have been marginalised by recent social developments can be reintegrated into village society.

The first model has a strong corporatist flavour and sees the OPA primarily as an instrument that can be used by the state in a top-down political process. Mette Halskov Hansen has shown how OPAs are 'obliged to use the traditional authority of older people to promote and support specific policies of the government', and how the traditional prestige and political experience of the

⁶¹) Interview no. 3, 2004.

⁶²) Interview no. 7, 2006.

old men who head the organisations make them perfect partners for younger officials suffering from a general lack of public respect and confidence.⁶³ This way of utilising the OPA appears to be particularly efficient in places like Jiangsu and Zhejiang, where lineages have traditionally been strong,⁶⁴ but the party-state's cannibalisation of the OPA is a common phenomenon. A Chinese report found that only 37 per cent of village OPAs elected their chairman, while 63 per cent of them automatically appointed either the Party secretary or the village head as chairman. The report complained that the OPAs in many places were turned into administrative organs under the local government, and that members' enthusiasm dropped when they realised that the OPA was not a genuine popular organisation.⁶⁵

It is not surprising that the party-state regards the OPA as the old people's equivalent to the Women's Federation, the Youth League or other 'mass organisations' that are primarily instruments of Party control. However, there exists a competing vision of how old people should be organised, which deserves attention as an alternative to the top-down approach. This vision is rooted in the idea of rural reconstruction, which was very popular in the 1920s and 1930s and has recently had a remarkable revival.⁶⁶ He Xuefeng is prominent among the scholar-reformers who imagine the way collective organisations may be established by and for old people in rural China. His diagnosis of the present problem is pessimistic and resembles the views of Yunxiang Yan and Guo Yuhua: confronted with a rapidly changing world many old villagers despair and some even commit suicide. The people's communes have collapsed, the market econ-

⁶³ Mette Halskov Hansen, 'Organising the old: senior authority and the political significance of a rural Chinese "non-governmental organisation"', *Modern Asian Studies*, forthcoming.

⁶⁴ Tan Tongxue, 'Laonianren xiehui, cunzhuang shenghuo yu minzu jingshen' (Old people's associations, village life and the national spirit), *Huazhong keji daxue xuebao, shehui kexue ban* (Journal of Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Social Sciences), No. 2 (2006), pp. 7–10.

⁶⁵ Huang Qian and Yuan Xin, 'Goujian hexie shehui guochengzhong de jiceng laonian qunzhong zuzhi zuoyong yanjiu—yi laonianren xiehui wei li' (Research on the use of basic mass organisations for the old in the construction of a harmonious society—old people's associations as an example), *Renkou xuekan* (Population Studies), No. 2 (2006), pp. 24–28.

⁶⁶ The social reformers in the rural reconstruction movement of the early twentieth century represented many different schools of thought: see Charles W. Hayford, *To the People. James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). He Xuefeng appears to be inspired mainly by Liang Shuming, a cultural conservative who believed that genuine Chinese culture survived only in the rural areas, and that the revival of rural communities was therefore also the key to national resurrection.

omy has undermined social norms and moral standards, and old people do not know how to operate in an increasingly but still incompletely law- and contract-based society. Once the middle-aged realise that their own children are not likely to care for them in the future, they separate economically from their offspring and try to secure their future by making their own money and saving up. This is one way of solving the problem of how to provide for old people in the villages, but this solution does not satisfy He Xuefeng because it will turn farmers into ‘atomised individuals’ (*yuanzihua geren*) and destroy the family, which has been the foundation of China’s social structure for thousands of years. He sees an alternative to individualisation, however: the reconstruction of rural society with economic support from the state, and the establishment of OPAs that will enable old people to defend their own rights and interests.⁶⁷

In addition to their theoretical analysis, He Xuefeng and others have also conducted real-life OPA experiments. Inspired by clan-based and economically very successful OPAs in the Wenzhou area, researchers from Central China Normal University in Wuhan, where He worked at the time, stood behind the establishment in 2003 of an OPA in a fishing village in Hubei province. Its 20 board members were democratically elected by all villagers above 60 years of age, and the board elected a former Party secretary as chairman. The OPA first established an activity centre offering the elderly a meeting place with occasional cultural events. This was a big success, according to He, because the old villagers who used to live in isolation now had a chance to meet. Soon the OPA started expanding its range of activities. It helped old people with unfilial children, mediated in domestic conflicts, visited the elderly when they were ill, and appointed 10 model ‘respect-the-old families’ (*jinglaobu*). In the following years the experiment was extended to three more villages, apparently also with great success.⁶⁸

In the tradition of the rural reconstruction movement He Xuefeng emphasises the cultural revival generated by the OPA, the re-emergence of unity, harmony, rich folklore and venerable cultural norms, and the bottom-up nature of the organisation’s operations. Shen Duanfeng, however, draws attention to the

⁶⁷ He Xuefeng, ‘*Nongcun laonianren de chujing*’ (The situation of old people in the countryside), in He Xuefeng, *Xiangcun de qiantu. Xin nongcun jianshe yu Zhongguo daolu* (The Future of the Rural Areas. The Construction of a New Countryside and the Chinese Way) (Jinan: Shandong Renmin Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 213–215.

⁶⁸ He Xuefeng, ‘*Laonianren xiehui jianshe jishi*’ (A chronicle of the formation of old people’s associations), written 27 October 2005; online at <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-4471/page-1.html> (accessed 26 February 2007).

fact that while the OPA established by He certainly managed to organise the old and raised their status in the village, this did not mean that a ‘civil society’ (*gongmin shehui*) had emerged, or that the old started to think of themselves as ‘citizens’:

To the contrary, the old people repeatedly expressed their gratitude to the Party and saw the establishment of the OPA as an expression of the higher level Party and government organs’ concern for them. When they were up against the official organs of power at the village level they always relied on the support of the higher level Party organization, and they never proceeded from considerations of citizens’ rights in an individualistic sense.⁶⁹

Shen concludes that ‘the development of a Chinese “society” must depend on external factors, particularly the support of the government, and cannot possibly become a “civil society” in the Western sense’. The difficulties facing organisations for the rural elderly thus clearly reflect the general problems involved in establishing genuine non-state social organisations in China.

Conclusion

The elderly in China’s rural areas are exposed to many of the vicissitudes of the reform period. The established patterns that determined their living arrangements have been seriously challenged by socio-economic change. The solid cultural norms that used to guide the relationship between aging parents and their offspring are being replaced by a much broader variety of standards, some of a legal-contractual nature, others influenced by the multitude of ‘modern’ family patterns reflected in the media and directly experienced by an increasingly mobile rural population. The village, in its capacities both as organ of state power and as community, is an unreliable source of care and support. To describe these new conditions as a happy world of opportunities would be grossly misleading, and we heard enough stories of loneliness, poverty and fear about the future to exclude such an interpretation.

However, in this paper we have downplayed the problems of old age in order to highlight the fact that the rural old are not just an undifferentiated

⁶⁹ Shen Duanfeng, ‘*Lun nongcun NGO de fayu he chengzhang. Yi Hongyuchang laonianren xiehui wei li*’ (On the growth and development of rural NGOs. An example from the Old People’s Association of Hongyuchang), *Shandong keji daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (Journal of Shandong University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences)), Vol. 6, No. 1 (2004), pp. 28–31, 42.

‘weak group’ (*ruoshi qunti*) victimised by aggressive modernity. Their response to recent changes depends on their individual physical, social and economic resources as well as on their mental outlook. A substantial proportion of the healthy old have adjusted their expectations to old age, and not just in the sense that they have lowered their standards for filial behaviour. Their new vision of an ideal life is to stay independent as long as possible, economically as well as with regard to living arrangements, but to maintain close emotional contacts with their children. In this way they gain two things: their own life becomes more pleasant and the period of time when they are a burden to their children is shortened. Miller found that an ideal parent–daughter relationship in Zouping was very similar to the behavioural ideal of parent–child relationships in America,⁷⁰ and although expectations of sons are still higher, at least with regard to the question of residence, our informants’ ideal visions of family life would also be immediately recognisable to old people in the West. The idea that elderly Chinese villagers are trapped in a narrow cage of traditional norms and values does not correspond to what we saw.

It should be kept in mind that the basic problems of old age have not been solved simply through this mental transformation among the elderly. At some stage they will no longer be able to live an independent life. They may become ill and end up immobilised in bed, maybe for several years. It is no coincidence that this last phase of life was surrounded by so much anxiety that it was practically impossible to make people talk about it. At this stage there would be no more individual choice: they would be left to the mercy of their children and could only hope that they had fulfilled their part of the renegotiated contract between the generations so well that they would get the necessary help.

Reintegrating the elderly into rural society presents the Chinese state with massive difficulties which are typical of one of its classical dilemmas: should it monopolise political power and the right to social organisation, or should it allow more grassroots activity? The old people’s associations tend to suffer from the general shortcomings of top-down ‘mass’ organisations and become tools of governance rather than organs of group-based self-help and interest articulation. Are there any alternatives? Judging from our interviews it is difficult to imagine that the rural elderly will organise themselves at grassroots level across family lines, and even if they should try, it is doubtful whether the existing village power structure would accept it. Lineage and religious organisations, although they were not active in the villages where we did our interviews,

⁷⁰ Miller, *Filial daughters, filial sons*, p. 52.

undoubtedly play an important role for the elderly in some localities and the state may accept that they come to play a larger role in the future. Experiments such as the one carried out by He Xuefeng show that alternative visions of rural organisations are certainly alive among Chinese social reformers and activists. Whether they will succeed in overcoming the challenges of social atomisation is still an open question.

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