Filial Piety

PRACTICE AND DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY EAST ASIA

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CHAPTER 4

"Living Alone" and the Rural Elderly: Strategy and Agency in Post-Mao Rural China

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For centuries, portrayals of both Chinese cultural ideals and everyday practice have focused on multigenerational households in which the older generation occupies a key role. However, it now appears that complex households have begun to "simplify." In Zhongshan, a village in Hubei Province in central China, as recently as two decades ago, for elderly parents with married sons living in the same community to live alone would have been unimaginable. Parents would have been pitied for being deserted by their own sons. Likewise, the sons would have been condemned as unfilial and shameless. Then in 1986, a father of two married sons in Zhongshan moved out of his younger son's house and started living alone. Two months later, his wife joined him. This action marked the first incidence in Zhongshan of elderly parents taking the initiative to live alone and control their own household. By 1993 and 1994, when this study was conducted, at least twenty-nine elderly parents had followed suit. At the national level, both recent ethnographic data and national surveys suggest that more and more Chinese elderly are now living apart from their grown-up children, with a range of 30 to over 50 percent living in a separate household alone or with a spouse (Chen 1998; Goldstein, Ku, and Ikels 1990; Gui 1988; Jia 1988; Shi 1994; Unger 1993). While some see in this phenomenon the collapse of the tradition of filial piety, others view it as a positive change in family relations and a move toward democratization and conjugality (Guo 1997; Xu 1996; Yan 1997). According to some studies, the economic prosperity that has resulted from recent reforms has made separate dwelling for family members more accessible, hence the increase in the number of elderly living apart from their married children (Davis 1993; Ikels 1990). The rapid increase in rural-urban migration since the reforms has also been seen as responsible for more and

more rural elderly parents living alone because their sons have gone to the cities for higher paid jobs (Leung 1997; Wei 1997). Still, there are others who attribute this phenomenon to changes rooted in the political economy of socialism that for decades after the 1949 socialist revolution severely weakened parental authority and greatly enhanced the younger generation's desire for, and ability to attain, financial independence and autonomy (Greenhalgh 1994; Selden 1993).

The increase in the number of elderly parents living alone has presented a number of challenges to traditional family support for the aged in China, especially in the countryside. Unlike urban residents, who can still be economically secure after retirement since they enjoy a public pension plan and medical coverage, the rural elderly have no access to such state welfare services—their old-age support is almost entirely shouldered by the family.[1] Based on fieldwork carried out between 1993 and 1994 in Zhongshan, a rural community in Hubei Province in central China, this chapter attempts to address the following questions: Why are rural elderly increasingly living alone? What are their motivations for doing so? Are they living alone because they choose to do so or are they forced to do so? Are there any benefits to living alone for the rural elderly? How are elderly parents supported economically if they are living alone? What does this shift tell us about changed family dynamics and intergenerational relations? What are rural residents' responses and attitudes toward elderly parents living alone?

Village Setting and Data

Located about 60 kilometers north of the Zhongxiang County seat and 280 kilometers northwest of Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province, Zhongshan Village is mainly a farming community that grows both rice and wheat. In the late 1970s, prior to the rural economic reforms, Zhongshan Village (then known as Zhongshan Brigade) had a relatively strong collective economy. Each of the brigade's six production teams owned tractors, generators, and other farming machines and tools, as well as draft animals such as water buffalo and mules. The brigade itself ran various enterprises, such as a brick kiln, a beancurd shop, and a vegetable oil processor. Income from both grain production and the collective enterprises helped support the brigade's free primary school as well as its low-cost cooperative medical clinics. In 1983, with

the rural reforms in full swing, land was returned to individual families to manage, as was collective property such as farm machines and draft animals. In the first few years of the reforms, Zhongshan's collective enterprises remained intact; in fact, one more—a winery—was added. But by the late 1980s, none of the collective enterprises survived. I never received a full explanation from the village cadres concerning why the collective enterprises collapsed, but the villagers put the blame on the cadres, saying that the enterprises failed because the cadres either put the profits into their own pockets or squandered the money entertaining higher officials in order to establish networks for themselves. Compared to a decade ago, there were some obvious signs of prosperity among the villagers though. There were more brick houses than before, electricity had become available to every household since 1986, and more than 80 percent of the households owned a black-and-white television. The local economy also appeared to be more diversified as some villagers were engaged in such nonfarming activities as fishing, carpentry, masonry, and trading local commodities. Several households also had family-run enterprises such as making liquor and beancurd, and processing oil. However, most of the villagers' economic activities were locally based, and there was not much out-migration of young and middle-aged villagers seeking jobs elsewhere. This population stability can be seen as a potential benefit for support of the elderly as it means that most parents have adult children living in the village all year round.

There is also another important feature in this local area conducive to old-age security. In Zhongshan, as well as in the surrounding area, uxorilocal marriage, in which a man marries into the woman's family, was very common both before and after 1949. Couples who had only daughters and no sons could have one of their daughters married uxorilocally and be supported by their daughter and son-in-law. Childless couples could also adopt a daughter and raise her for uxorilocal marriage. As of 1994, out of 108 elderly parents living in a three-generational household, thirty-three or 31 percent were living with a daughter's uxorilocal family. Without their daughter's uxorilocal marriage, some of these parents would either have to support themselves as long as they could, or they would have to be supported by the "five guarantees" (food, clothing, medical care, housing, and burial expenses), a welfare scheme that has been in existence since the collective period. When I visited the village in 1993–94, no elderly person was eligible. It is possible that the practice of uxorilocal marriage has reduced the number

TABLE 1
Living Arrangements of Zhongshan Elderly Parents, 1993–1994

Family Types and Support Patterns	ELDERLY PARENTS	
	No.	*%*
Stem family	108	60
(Living with a married son)	(75)	(69)
(Living with a married daughter)	(33)	(31)
Two-generation household	23	13
Support by turns	8	4
Living alone or with a spouse	41	23
Total	180	100

of elderly people in Zhongshan who would otherwise have had to depend on public assistance.

Although the "five-guarantees" scheme provides a form of welfare for the rural elderly, it is aimed only at an extremely small group: the childless elderly. The great majority of rural elderly depend on their families for old-age support. In Zhongshan in the 1990s, family support was becoming even more crucial since the collective economy was almost nonexistent after decollectivization. Furthermore, without the collective enterprises, the village went heavily into debt (I was given the figure of between 14,000 yuan to 30,000 yuan in 1994) in order to fund its primary school, the village clinic, and the village cadres' salaries and other expenses.

Since Zhongshan's elderly parents currently have no source of old-age support other than their own family members, their living arrangements provide a way for us to see how family support is articulated. Zhongshan Village had a population of 1,493 living in 374 households in 1993–94. There were a total of 180 people over 60 years old; their living arrangements are shown in Table 1.[2]

The greatest number of Zhongshan elderly are living in a stem family (60 percent), followed by those "living alone" (23 percent) and those in "two-generation (that is, parents and unmarried children) households" (13 percent). "Support by turns" (*lunyang*) or "meal rotation" is an arrangement in which the parents rotate among their sons for meals and sometimes for housing as well. (See Chapters 2 and 3 for further examples of this type of

arrangement.) In Zhongshan, this form of parental support was not frequently adopted, as seen in Table 1. As for those elderly parents who were living in a "two-generation household," they often still had younger unmarried son(s) or daughter(s) while their older sons were married and had moved out of the common household. However, what is very revealing about the Zhongshan data is that given China's tradition of depending on sons for old-age support, the number of elderly parents being supported by a daughter was very high, making up almost 31 percent of the total number of stem families, and 19 percent among all types of family arrangements. Although most of the Zhongshan parents living with an uxorilocally married daughter did so because they did not have a son, some did have a son or sons, but they could still claim old-age support from a daughter if she was married uxorilocally. In studies of Chinese family types, such terms as "extended family" and "stem family" often assume that parents are living with married sons or a married son. The percentage of parents living with a married daughter has been found to be very low—between 2 to 8 percent in the countryside (Goldstein, Ku, and Ikels 1990; Jia 1988). With as many as 31 percent of elderly parents in stem families living with a married daughter, Zhongshan's data demonstrate that, owing to uxorilocal marriage, a daughter can also play a central role in providing parental support.

If we look merely at living arrangements, the 60 percent coresidence rate is high. If we include elderly parents living with unmarried children, the percentage is even higher—over 73 percent. This suggests that the majority of elderly parents live with their adult children. This should not be surprising, since by the time these rural parents had reached over 60 years of age, they had generally retired from farming, most if not all of their children were married, and the family house and property were divided up among their married sons if they had more than one. As mentioned earlier, there was no pension for the rural elderly, thus they were totally dependent upon their children for support. Thus, the question that the data in Table 1 really raises is why some elderly parents live alone or with a spouse only. It appears that there were two very different situations under which elderly parents in Zhongshan were living separately from their adult children. One was that their child(ren) had moved out of the village, and the elderly parents continued to live in their old residence. In the other situation, some Zhongshan parents were living alone although they had married sons living in the same community (Table 2).

Of the forty-one elderly parents living alone, twelve (29 percent) did so

TABLE 2
Zhongshan Elderly Parents Living Alone and Availability of Children

	ELDERLY PARENTS	
Availability of Children	*No.*	*%*
Children left the village	12	29
Children living in the same village	29	71
Total	41	100

because their children had moved out of the village, while twenty-nine (71 percent) did have at least one married son living in the same village. Further investigation reveals that these twenty-nine elderly parents all had lived in a stem family before they moved out and started living separately. In terms of their economic support while living separately, nine elderly parents (22 percent) reported that they solely support themselves, while the remaining thirty-two (78 percent) said their children provided them with grain (usually 600 to 700 jin of unhusked rice for each parent) and, for some, cooking oil as well, but no cash or pocket money. Most elderly parents living alone could generate some modest cash income through raising chickens and tending vegetable gardens (usually on the land surrounding their dwelling).

Motivations for "Living Alone"

In industrial countries, the decision to live alone is often viewed as "a reflection of an economic demand for privacy or autonomy," and is found to be positively correlated with income level, that is, an increase in income level is followed by an increased propensity to live alone (Becker 1981; Michael, Fuchs, and Scott 1980). Some studies in China also emphasize that more and more elderly people are economically self-sufficient, and thus have the ability to live alone. According to Aimei Jia, for example, the diversification of the rural economy since the economic reforms has allowed some elderly parents to increase their earnings: "Consequently, it is now feasible to live independently" (1988: 143). In a survey of rural Shandong, Xue Xingli, Xin Xiangmu, and Liu Guiyuan (1998) found that more than 30 percent of elderly people over 60 years of age support themselves through their own labor.

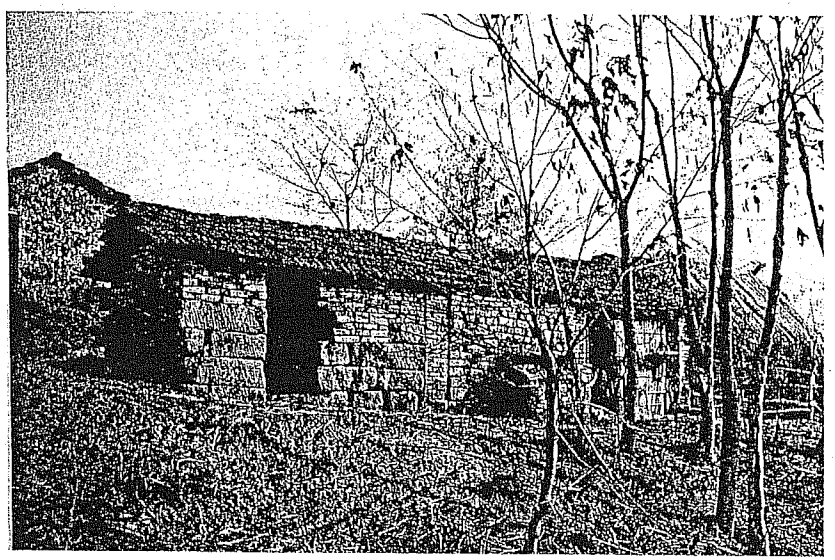

FIGURE 1. Elderly parents living apart from their children occupy the older of the family residences in Zhongshan, Hubei. Photo by Hong Zhang.

Based on survey data from Wuhan in the mid-1980s, Jonathan Unger (1993) found that parents with state pensions were four times more likely to live apart from all their children than were the elderly without pensions. But if we look at the Zhongshan data, self-sufficiency was not necessarily the determining factor in elderly parents living alone, as the majority of them continued to receive their main food supply from their married sons. Thus, in Zhongshan, "living separately" does not mean "living self-sufficiently," nor does it suggest an absence of economic support from children.

Related to the issue of "self-sufficiency" is the level of prosperity or wealth. Familial interdependence and extended family living arrangements have generally been thought of as features of a subsistence, nonindustrial economy. A more developed and modern economy with goods and services readily available to anyone with cash is one in which individualism and privacy are emphasized (Becker 1981; Caldwell 1981). "Families with sufficiently high income are able to purchase the desired independence in living arrangement. Thus, economic growth in a society should reduce the need as well as the incentive for living in extended households" (Chattopadhyay and Marsh 1999: 527). Studies comparing rural and urban China on the correlation between

income and living arrangements seem to support this view. Based on 1990 census data from Sichuan, Zhang Junliang found that on average the annual income of the urban elderly was almost four times higher than that of their rural counterparts—2,764 yuan for the urban elderly as opposed to only 785 yuan for the rural elderly (Zhang 1995). Higher income enjoyed by the city elderly is correlated with the high percentage of them living alone. A 1987 national survey showed that urban elderly are almost three times more likely to live alone or with a spouse than their rural counterparts (Lin 1995). An ethnographic study by Melvyn Goldstein, Yachun Ku, and Charlotte Ikels (1990) in rural Zhejiang is also a case in point. This study demonstrates that in the relatively prosperous village of Pingyuan, 50 percent of the elderly were living alone or with a spouse whereas in the poorer village of Shancun, only 26 percent did so. According to the authors, it was the greater prosperity of Pingyuan that enabled their elders to live alone. More new houses have been built in Pingyuan, and "because their sons are generally doing well economically, the elderly in Pingyuan were able to obtain financial assistance from married/separated sons in the form of regular cash payments. The elderly themselves are also doing better economically than their counterparts in Shancun in the sense of having higher income from their agricultural endeavors" (Goldstein, Ku, and Ikels 1990: 128). But if we look at the Zhongshan data, there is no clear economic pattern that determines whose parents are more likely to live alone. Some families were struggling economically according to the village's standards, and yet their parents were living alone. Likewise, some families were relatively well off, and their parents were nonetheless living in a stem-family structure.

Studies have found that in urban China age and health can be factors determining whether elders will live alone or with their married children. Based on a 1986 survey on Shanghai elderly, Unger (1993), for example, found that "as the elderly increasingly aged, they were more likely to enter the family of a married child." This survey shows that of the 835 truly aged Shanghai residents studied—those over 80 years of age—fully 80 percent "lived with married children, far greater than the 52–53 percent of Shanghai elderly sixty years old and over who were living with married children" (Unger 1993: 45). Deborah Davis's study of the elderly in urban Shanghai also leads her to comment that although "the ideal housing arrangement was an independent household for each nuclear family," the need to provide care for aged and frail parents repeatedly "overrode the desire to establish nuclear households, and the norm was multigenerational homes and persistent complexity" (Davis 1993: 56–57). Given the lack of independent resources such as pensions and savings that many urban elderly enjoy, it is almost imperative that truly aged rural parents live with and be supported by their married children. However, evidence from Zhongshan shows that old age does not necessarily guarantee a multigenerational living arrangement, as almost half of the parents living alone were over 70 years of age, and many of them had some health problems. Two were actually bedridden and were taken care of solely by their respective spouses.

Why do parents move out of the stem family to live separately? What has motivated them to do so? When asked these questions, the most frequent answer I received was *ziyou* (freedom). According to these Zhongshan parents, life is too stressful living in a three-generation household. They have to constantly help with household chores, from taking care of grandchildren, to feeding the farm animals, to tending the vegetable plots. Differences in food preferences are also frequently mentioned as a reason for separate living. Older people generally prefer to eat softer foods; and thus living together often means the elderly cannot eat what they like. Older villagers also point out that young people are not as respectful of older people as in the past; close contact on a daily basis often leads to more disputes and strained family relations, which in turns adds stress to their lives. By living separately, these parents argued, they could enjoy freedom in all aspects. They could cook and eat whatever they liked, and whenever they wanted. They could also control their own time and could take a nap or chat with old friends without being constantly worried about doing household chores in their son's family. When comparing his single-generation household life now with his three-generation household life before, one father commented:

> I now have much more freedom (*ziyou duole*) and some cash too. I have some indulgences; I like to smoke and have two drinks every day. But when I was living with my son's family, they were very reluctant to spend money on me. We would quarrel over these matters endlessly, and I often ended up not getting my cigarettes and drinks. Now living separately from them, I can get some cash from the chickens I raise, and now I can smoke and drink whenever I want.

Disguised under the desire for more "freedom" and "convenience" are often the realities of strained intergenerational relationships. More than 80 per-

cent of the elderly parents living alone had fierce and constant quarrels with their adult children before they moved out to live separately. The fate of a 78-year-old widow provides a telling example. This woman had a married son living in the village. By all standards she should have been living with her son's family, as she was of advanced age, had bound feet, and had only one son.[3] However, there were daily arguments in the household such that living separately became the only tolerable alternative for her. She did not set up a separate dwelling but continued to live in the original family house, though she added a small kitchen space for herself. Hers is a type of living arrangement known locally as *danguo* (going it alone) or *ling kaihuo* (having a separate stove). She did not eat with her son's family and was responsible for her own daily needs including fetching drinking water, washing her own clothes, and tending to her vegetable plot.[4] However, her son was supposed to provide most of her food and cooking oil. She had lived alone for two years when I first visited her in 1993. She told me that her son had not given her any grain in the past two months, and she had to support herself by gleaning grain from the harvested fields. In tears, she said that she wished she did not have a son so that she could qualify for the "five guarantees." When I interviewed her son, one of the reasons he gave for their separation was that his mother "talked too much" and did not help him in the busy farm season as "she was busy gathering leftovers from the harvest for herself."

For some other elderly parents, one of the benefits of living separately was that it ensured their sons would contribute equally to their support. The story told by a father of two sons was a case in point. From 1983 to 1985, this man and his wife were living with their younger son's family because their older son had already set up a separate household shortly after his marriage in 1978. At that time the older son did not contribute to supporting the parents, the agreement being that since the parents were still healthy enough to bring in some extra income for the younger son's family, the latter would provide for their support. But in 1985, the father had a stroke and was partially paralyzed. For months his younger son spent both time and money to take him to different places for treatment while his elder son refused to lend a hand. When he started recovering, the father decided to leave his younger son's family to live separately. His argument was that if he and his wife started living separately from their younger son's family, both his sons would contribute equally to his old age support instead of the burden being solely on his younger son. By the time of my fieldwork in 1993–94, the father and

his wife had lived by themselves for more than eight years. His two sons each were taking turns providing support, which was mainly in the form of rice, meat, and cooking oil. In return, the father and his wife also helped out their sons during busy seasons. In early 1994, his wife died, but he continued to live alone. He was satisfied with this arrangement, emphasizing that it was fair and avoided conflicts between his sons with regard to providing support. Thus, for this aging father, living alone actually became the best way of guaranteeing support from both his sons in his old age.

However, what I also found revealing from my interviews with these elderly parents was that some of them claimed that "living alone" actually made their sons more "filial," and that their relationship with their sons also started improving once they lived on their own. One couple told me that when they lived with their younger son's family, part of the agreement between their two sons was that the elder son would provide 700 jin of unhusked rice each year. However, the elder son often failed to do so on the grounds that his parents were helping with household chores in his brother's family but not his. The father had argued with his elder son many times, demanding that he fulfill his agreement, but always in vain. As a result, their relationship was severely strained. Moreover, the father also felt that his life at his younger son's household was very difficult. He was doing hard manual labor in the fields despite his age, but the younger son still complained that his father had too many "costly" indulgences and he would often deny his father's requests for drinks and cigarettes, which in turn led to fierce disputes.[5] According to the father, moving out of his younger son's family was a last resort: he had no other way to protest his sons' "unfilial" behavior. Through the mediation of the village cadres, his two sons agreed to provide their parents with 700 jin each of unhusked rice a year. The parents reciprocated by agreeing to herd their shared water buffalo, take care of the grandchildren, and cook during the busy season. When I visited the elderly couple in 1994, they had been living separately for more than two years. The father told me that in those two years, he had a better relationship with his two sons than he ever had before, and that both his sons now behaved more filially and respectfully. Here we can see how "filial piety" is redefined or compromised in contemporary rural China. Although the very act of letting one's elderly parents live alone and not providing daily care for them already violates the most basic premises of "filial piety," to this Zhongshan father his sons can still be considered filial even though they do no more than just meet their parents' basic food needs.

However, a major reason why many Zhongshan elderly consider living alone is to regain their financial autonomy and control over their own budget. For the majority of China's rural elderly, living in three-generation households means they no longer assume the role of family head and do not control the family budget. Data from Zhongshan indicate that only three older fathers out of a total of eighty-one in stem families were in charge of the common household budget. Furthermore, most elderly parents have no separate savings of their own. Many find their lives very constrained by their lack of economic power within the household. No matter whether they need some money to see relatives, to visit a village clinic, or for leisure activities, they have to ask their sons or daughters-in-law. Disputes often arise when parents' requests for pocket money are ignored or denied. By living alone, parents can manage their own budget and gain better control of their own lives. This factor becomes particularly relevant for those elderly parents who are still physically capable of light manual labor and can earn a cash income. In one case, an elderly father told me that he and his wife started living separately from their only son in order to avoid an increasingly impoverished life. According to the father, when he himself was the family head before his son was married, his household's annual income was above the average in the village. But since his son got married and started controlling the family budget in the late 1980s, his family was going downhill and had become one of the poorest in the village. Apparently, his son failed in several "business" attempts and had to borrow money to pay the land tax and fees (the father also suspected that his son had lost money gambling). Although the father might have been more capable at managing the family finances, he had little say in his son's family. He and his wife felt they had to move out in order to protect themselves against the increasing uncertainty facing their son's family. Similarly, after comparing the net income and family support in rural Zhejiang between elderly parents who lived in the "ideal" extended family and those who lived alone, Goldstein and Ku conclude that "the elderly who were living with married sons in the 'ideal' family situation had limited or no access to their household's cash income and thus generally were worse off with respect to economic independence and access to non-subsistence goods than elderly living alone or with spouses" (1993: 219).

As for their comments on their present living arrangements, Zhongshan's elderly parents all claimed that their mental state, health, and life in general had improved greatly since they started living separately. When asked if they ever planned to move back into their sons' housholds, the answer was negative. These Zhongshan parents said that since they fared better now than in a three-generation household, there was no point in moving back. They cherished their newly gained freedom and were afraid that once they moved back, they would lose it all and the same pattern of disputes and household chores would reemerge. While most of them said they would live separately as long as they could and then see what happened, some did mention that when their death was imminent, they would move back so as to avoid becoming wandering ghosts. Apparently, the villagers in this Hubei community share a Chinese belief that to die at home with family members at one's deathbed not only marks the completion of a person's life cycle but also is a protective measure for later generations. It is believed that if one dies outside the home, one will become a wandering ghost, which could come back to haunt and bring ill fortune to the offspring. So it is in the interest of both the person who dies and his or her offspring that death take place at home and that burial be with appropriate ritual.[6] Having said this, one elderly Zhongshan couple told me that they had lost all hope with regard to their two sons and would never move back. They claimed that they did not care if they became wandering ghosts since they were now no better than homeless, hungry ghosts anyway; if refusing to go home to die would bring ill fortune to their sons' families, their sons deserved it.[7]

However, elderly parents' living alone is not without controversy in Zhongshan. The majority of the villagers still agree that the ideal living arrangement for elderly parents is to live with and be taken care of by their adult children. Elderly parents' living alone carries negative connotations for both parents and their adult children. It is disgraceful for the parents, as they would seem to be "unwanted" and abandoned by their own sons. Sons who allow their parents to live alone would be condemned as "unfilial" for "deserting their own parents." These negative views are reinforced by the fact that most of the parents moved out of their son's family as a result of irreconcilable disputes. Once the elderly decided to live alone, however, they generally won more sympathy from their fellow villagers, and it was their sons who felt the heat of blame as "unfilial." Public sanctions against obviously "unfilial" behavior still remain strong in the community. This might explain why some parents found their sons starting to behave more respectfully and filially after they moved out and lived alone. These sons needed to compensate for the consequences of their "unfilial" behavior that led to their

parents living alone in the first place. In this regard, "living alone" or "living separately" has the potential to become a form of bargaining power for parents who still live in a stem family. Since "living alone" can create a public embarrassment for sons who get the reputation of being unfilial, elderly parents living in a three-generation household can force their sons to meet some of their requirements by threatening to move out and "live alone." Indeed, I know of several cases in which elderly parents had successfully used such "threats" to force their sons to perform their filial obligations. Thus, "living alone" can also become a strategy elderly parents use to renegotiate and maintain support in their old age.

Coresidence and Vulnerability of the Elderly

International discourse on the demographic transition and care for the elderly identifies what is called the "Asian care model," which is defined as family support with a high level of intergenerational coresidence. This model has often been invoked as an alternative to the government- and institution-based support found in industrial countries (Hashimoto, Kendig, and Coppard 1992; Hermalin 1997; Knodel and Debavalya 1992; Morgan and Hirosima 1983; Ogawa 1990). When examining living arrangements in six developing Asian countries between 1984 and 1991, for example, John Knodel and Nibhon Debavalya (1992) found that 66 percent to 84 percent of the elderly aged 60 and older coresided with their children, and thus they concluded that "a pervasive family system of support and care has persisted despite major social and economic change." According to Akiko Hashimoto, Hal Kendig, and Larry Coppard (1992), the relatively high incidence of extended families in such developed countries and regions as Japan and Taiwan demonstrates the strength of the cultural basis of family responsibility for the care and support of the elderly in Asian societies. Naohiro Ogawa (1990) reports that in Japan and other Asian countries, the majority of the bedridden elderly live in extended family settings and are looked after by middle-aged women who are not part of the labor force. He regards this elderly care as the standard and warns that the well-being of the elderly sick might seriously deteriorate if alternative care has to be developed as a result of more middle-aged women participating in the labor force. In some Asian countries, government policies and programs have been developed to further encourage

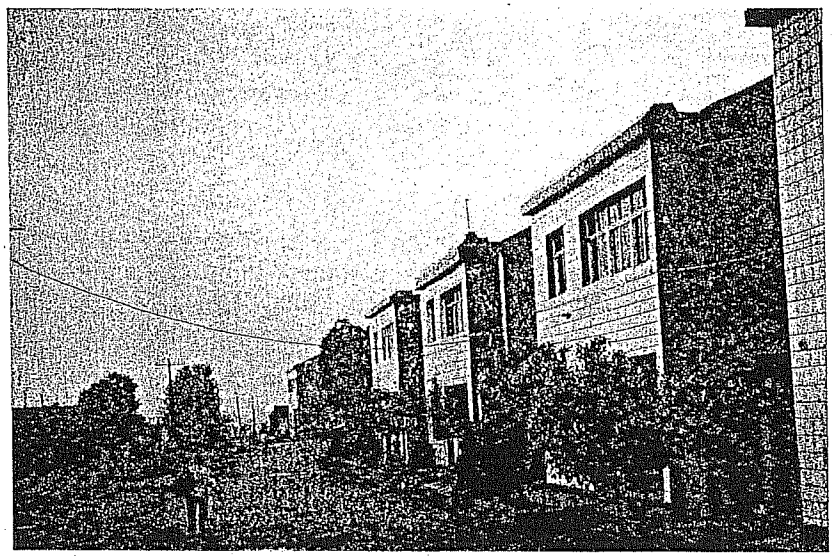

FIGURE 2. Newer housing in Zhongshan is usually occupied by conjugal family units consisting of young or middle-aged couples and their children. Photo by Hong Zhang.

coresidence across generations and family-based support for the elderly. In Singapore, for example, the government provides the younger generation with numerous incentives, such as tax deductions or priority housing, if they care for or live with an elderly parent (Chan 1997).

However, some other observers claim that Asian family structures are rapidly changing, and that the role of the family in the support of the elderly is in decline due to such social changes as migration, urbanization, and increased female labor force participation (Hu 1995; Martin 1988, 1990; Mason 1992). Yow-Hwey Hu goes so far as to challenge the Asian care model as the best for the elderly in a rapidly changing social and economic environment, stating "Asian elderly are currently very vulnerable in their socially constructed total dependence on children" (Hu 1995: 199). Using the suicide rate as an indicator of the well-being of the elderly, Hu's data show that suicide among the elderly in East Asian countries is twice as high as that of their counterparts in Western countries. When comparing the suicide rates of different age groups, Hu also finds that the elderly in East Asian countries are five times more likely to kill themselves than members of the younger generations of their own societies while in Western countries, suicide rates

remain more similar across all age groups. Since the elderly are more likely to live with their families in the East Asian countries, the high rate of suicide among them indicates that they do not "enjoy greater life satisfaction or a better quality of life than their western counterparts among whom independent living is preferred and direct state finance for social security and medical care are their main concern" (1995: 201). Hu argues that in rapidly industrializing and urbanizing Taiwan, the elderly living in extended families have suffered positional decline within the family and a discontinuity in social life and physical environment, making them "far more vulnerable," and putting them at high risk of suicide.

Based on her cross-cultural study of the factors affecting the well-being of older people, Jennie Keith finds that in Hong Kong, coresidence between the elderly and their adult children may not necessarily indicate a voluntary and congenial family unit, as it "may be forced by lack of economic resources and may be correlated with lower levels of well-being for the elderly people." When imposed by limited resources and a shortage of housing, coresidence may become "a setting for friction between generations estranged from each other by extreme change in both values and technology" (Keith 1992: 26; Keith, Fry, and Ikels 1990).

Most studies of the elderly in contemporary China tend to emphasize the positive aspects of coresidence: it is described as having "mutual benefits for both generations," fulfilling the "intergenerational contract, intergenerational entitlement," providing "the best and most natural care and emotional support for the elderly," and demonstrating the "long cultural tradition of caring for and respecting the aged" (Davis 1993; Davis-Friedmann 1991; Ikels 1993; Kwong and Cai 1992; Sher 1984). Given China's relative poverty, the government's lack of funds, and the huge number of rural elderly who are not supported by any state pension plan, the care of the rural elderly in the home and by family members is also the only alternative available today. Thus, the state has a strong vested interest in promoting and even regulating family support by law. The right to old-age support from one's children is stipulated in various Chinese laws such as China's constitution, the Marriage Law, and criminal law. In 1996, a new law intended solely to protect the interests and rights of the elderly was passed.[8] The second chapter of this new law is devoted to the issue of family support and care. Article 10 reads "Elderly support is mainly dependent upon family members who should show concern for and take care of their elders."

Recent increases in legal cases involving parents suing their children for failing to provide old-age support, as well as media reports of increased incidences of parental abuse and abandonment, have led to a growing public concern over whether the family is still capable or willing to take care of their elderly (Hai 1998; Xu 1996; Yao 1999). Nonetheless, there are very few studies exploring the potential negative aspects of coresidence for the elderly in today's changing Chinese society. But a family tragedy reported by Yan Yunxiang (1997) in his study of a Heilongjiang village is revealing. On a chilly winter night, a 64-year-old man ended his life by drinking a bottle of pesticide. In studying the reactions of the older villagers to this incident, to his surprise Yan found that many said that this old man's death could have been prevented if he had chosen to live alone. In other words, in many of the older villagers' minds, coresidence possibly triggered this old man's death since it had led to intensification of family conflict.

In my interviews with older villagers who live in stem families in Zhongshan, I also found a strong sense of ambiguity with regard to their living arrangements and life situation. On the one hand, they recognized that to spend their later years with their children's families was a normative way of life. On the other hand, many of them also confessed that their current living arrangements were the only ones open to them and that as a result their lives were severely constrained. Their complaints ranged from constant pressure to do too many household chores despite their frail health and old age, to distress from frequent daily disputes with their married son or daughter-in-law, inconvenience due to different lifestyles,[9] and lack of economic independence and power within the household. It seems that coresidence in the social and economic realities of the post-Mao reform era may actually make the elderly more, rather than less, vulnerable. Below I identify four new situations in the post-Mao reform period that seem to have particularly negative effects on the well-being of the rural elderly living in coresidential settings.

First, while the new reform policy, which returned land to farm families and emphasized productivity and profits, seemed to strengthen the conjugal unit, on the other hand it increased the competition among brothers to the detriment of their elderly parents. In the new freewheeling economy, brothers are now more interested in conserving and investing for the best possible return for their individual conjugal family rather than spending money and time taking care of their elderly parents. Thus brothers may find various excuses to evade their filial duty, or pass it on to others. This is especially true

if their elderly parents are in bad health. According to Zhongshan villagers, agreement on old-age support was particularly hard to reach among brothers who have parents with some kind of chronic illness. If parents are in reasonably good health and can perform manual work, coresiding with their son's family often means they have to do various household chores for this son's family. It almost seems that the parents have to pay for living with their son's family. Within the household, family dynamics have also witnessed dramatic changes in recent decades. In the first three decades of Mao's socialist rule, collectivization and the state's attack on ancestor worship and parental arrangements of marriage had already weakened the traditional father-son relationship that emphasized filial piety and the absolute authority of seniority. Accompanying the decline of the father-son relationship was the rise of the conjugal-based husband-and-wife relationship. Since the post-Mao reforms, new economic opportunities seem to have reinforced the younger generation's conjugal ties and their demand for conjugal independence.[10] In stem families, this newly configured relationship often means that in family conflicts involving daughters-in-law, parents find that their son sides with his wife instead of them (Yan 1997). Many elderly parents cannot adjust to these new dynamics, and my informal interviews with older villagers reveal that they were very pessimistic about life in their son's family. In a stem family where there is close contact between the generations on a daily basis, frequent quarrels are almost unavoidable; the result can sometimes become fatal for the elderly parents. The old man's suicide in Yan's village cited above is a good example. In Zhongshan, at least nine elderly parents committed suicide between 1991 to 2000.[11] In one case, a widow with two sons lived in a household consisting of herself, her elder son and his family, and her unmarried younger son. But this widow never got along well with her elder son's wife, and relations were always tense. Thus the widow was counting on getting her younger son married and living with his family. In 1983, her younger son indeed married, and the two brothers set up separate households immediately. She moved in with her younger son's family. It turned out that as time went by, she had an even more difficult time getting along with her younger son's wife, who was notoriously sharp tongued. To make matters worse, her younger son was very quiet and had a reputation of being henpecked. In 1991, the widow got sick, and knowing that she was not going to get any treatment without causing more disputes, she took her life by hanging herself.

The second unfavorable condition for the rural elderly to be discussed here is the disintegration of the collective economy since the reforms. To some extent, the previous collective system provided a "socialist safety net" for security in old age (Lin 1995). The collective distribution system was conducive to reinforcing the senior male's role as family head, as he could still represent his household in receiving grain and cash income based on the total number of workpoints earned by family members and in that way control the family budget despite his old age (Cohen 1998; Davis-Friedmann 1991; Parish and Whyte 1978). Depending on the ratio of consumers to producers in the household, and the output of the collective economy, family income might fluctuate from year to year. Consequently, the standard of living of the elderly might rise and fall with the rest of the family members, but they were not uniquely or especially vulnerable. The collective system also guaranteed a basic livelihood for all the villagers, including even the destitute elderly who were too old or sick to work and yet who had no family to support them. The heavily subsidized medical system in the collective years also provided low-cost health service to the elderly and their family members. With the dismantling of the collective economy since the early 1980s, many of the welfare services previously provided by the collective system are no longer available. The reemergence of the family as the unit of production and management seems to give the younger generation an incentive to demand financial autonomy and conjugal independence. Their priority is their own individual conjugal unit rather than the well-being of their elderly parents. The collapse of the collective economy also means that the burden of old-age support is entirely shouldered by family members, leaving both the elderly parents and their adult children with no other alternatives. Privatization of the rural health-care system in many areas means that rural patients pay for their medical needs completely out of their own pocket. According to Gu Xinghua and his coauthors (1993), in the mid- and late 1970s, 90 percent of China's villages were covered by cooperative medical schemes that provided low-cost health services. But decollectivization has led to the collapse of many cooperative medical care schemes. "By the late 1980s, only five percent of rural residents were covered" (Gu et al., 1993: 386). Paying out of pocket has now become the main or only way for rural residents to get medical care. In Zhongshan, the village clinic, even after the reform, is still operated on a cooperative basis in the sense that the village doctors do not provide their medical service for profit but are paid a fixed salary by the village. But the cost of visiting the

village clinics has gone up, as instead of paying a low flat fee as in the collective years, villagers now have to pay according to the medical service they need. Moreover, the health services available in the village exclude surgery and are restricted to treating common ailments. For more complicated medical conditions and chronic illnesses, villagers have to go to the township or county hospitals, all of which are fee-based and nonsubsidized. Taking care of elderly parents can thus become potentially costly and burdensome for rural families. I was repeatedly told that because of their lack of access both to cash and to the household budget, many elderly parents in stem families often did not get medical help when needed. In fact, many of them did not even seek medical help either because they did not want to burden their son with additional expenses or because they were afraid their son might refuse to pay. Ironically, it is those elderly who were living alone who would and did visit the village clinic as they saw fit, since they ran their own budget and controlled whatever cash income they could generate.

Third, a combination of demographic forces and changed social and economic factors also threatens the security of China's rural elderly today. As a group, the rural elderly over 60 years of age have experienced extreme vicissitudes in their lives. Most of them spent their formative years in the prerevolutionary era, their prime years in Mao's collective system, and began to enter old age just as the Mao era ended and Deng Xiaoping's reforms started. While improved health conditions and life expectancy after 1949 have enabled them to live a much longer life than most of their parents, they do not necessarily enjoy a happy and satisfactory life in their later years. They have generally been unable to take full advantage of the economic opportunities provided by the reforms, since they had already retired or were about to retire when the reforms started. On average, elderly parents in the 1990s have raised more sons than both their parents' generation and their sons' generation, the fertility of the former being curtailed by poverty and wars in the prerevolutionary period, and of the latter by the strict family-planning polices enforced since the late 1970s. However, to the dismay of many parents, having more grown-up sons in the 1990s does not necessarily guarantee them security in their old age (Yang and Chandler 1992). As their grown-up sons reached marriageable age in the late 1970s and the 1980s, these parents immediately faced the reality that more sons meant greater economic burdens and a greater drain on their limited savings, this because of the skyrocketing increase in the cost of weddings since the reforms. In

Zhongshan, the cost of a wedding during the collective years averaged around 100 to 200 yuan. But in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the average cost ran from at least 2,000 to 4,000 yuan. The end result is that if they still had a younger son or sons waiting to get married in the late 1980s and early 1990s, elderly parents had to work hard in the fields despite their failing physical strength. Once their last son is married, parents often find themselves with no cash savings and totally dependent on their sons.

Recent comparative studies have shown that the urban elderly are generally more satisfied with their lives and enjoy a better intergenerational relationship than their rural counterparts (Zhang 1995). What is different for the urban elderly is that they have access to state pensions and medical coverage after retirement, which their rural counterparts do not. Their pensions plus savings make the urban elderly more self-sufficient and less dependent economically on their families. If they are coresiding with their adult children, urban parents still have their own salary or pensions at their disposal and can set up separate living arrangements should conflicts arise. However, their rural counterparts do not have such leverage. It might well be that because of their lack of economic independence the rural elderly have to coreside with and be supported by their family members. However, as we have seen, coresidence does not necessarily guarantee that they get the care and support they need. According to one study, the rural elderly were more worried about their "lack of social support from their relatives and friends" (Liu, Liang, and Gu 1995: 1182).

The last grave problem facing the rural elderly in coresidential settings in the reform era is the lack of an effective intervention mechanism in cases of parental neglect. Although the ideology of "filial piety" played an important role in the traditional system that supported old-age security in China, it never existed in a vacuum. Before 1949, parental control of family land and property, parental authority and power within the household, and the social norms dictating behavior for the children sanctioned by the strong lineage-based local community could all serve to insure the care of aging parents. During the collective years, although the balance of power was starting to shift within the household, old-age support was not seriously undermined due to a number of reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, the collective distribution system reinforced the senior male's role as family head, which allowed him to control the family budget in his old age. Second, the collective system gave village cadres greater power in intervening in cases of parental abuse and

neglect since they were in charge of distributing the grain and income for every family in the village, and could influence villagers' behavior through administrative means. With the collapse of the collective economy, however, each individual family became responsible for its own production and distribution. Consequently, cadres' ability to intervene in cases of parental abuse has been greatly reduced. Moreover, my observations in Zhongshan show that most of the current cadres were in their late 30s and 40s, and thus were themselves facing the same issue of how to balance their conjugal interest and their filial duty to support aging parents. Data from Zhongshan show that between 1993 and 1994 there were at least three cases involving village cadres' parents moving out of the stem family and starting to live alone as a result of disputes over old-age support.

Studies dealing with aging problems in developing countries, especially countries where the family plays a central role in providing old-age support, tend to emphasize that as a group the elderly are marginalized in the modernization process (Cowgill 1974; Goode 1963; Martin 1988; Mason 1992; Thornton and Fricke 1987). Industrialization and urbanization, these studies argue, erode family care, since the elderly are more likely to be separated from their family members because of the younger generation's greater participation in wage labor and rural-urban migration. The elderly are more likely to be trapped in traditional and less rewarding jobs and, lacking modern education, are also less capable of adapting to rapid socioeconomic and lifestyle changes. But recent trends in China seem to indicate that older people are by no means passive when facing a changing social landscape. In her study of elderly support in a Hunan village in 1987, Jia Aimei (1988) found that the modal preference of the elderly was "to live independently." Of the elderly she interviewed, 53 percent said they preferred to live by themselves, while only 35 percent said they would prefer to live with a son. Data from Susan Greenhalgh's three Shaanxi villages suggest that "parents were beginning to entertain doubts about the reliability of filial support. . . . Of those cared for by their sons, only two-fifths believed that such an arrangement was ideal" (Greenhalgh 1994: 54). Goldstein, Ku, and Ikels's study of two Zhejiang villages also reveals that rural elderly nowadays do not think the traditional arrangement of coresiding with at least one married son and his family is a "realistic aspiration." Changes in their sons' and daughters-in-laws' attitudes tending toward less filial piety and greater conjugal independence have made the elderly feel it is now more difficult than in the past to live an extended-

family life. As a result, they generally "prefer the greater freedom and lesser conflict/stress of living alone (or with a spouse)" (1990: 127–28). Wang Yilong's survey in another Zhejiang village in the late 1990s shows that most rural elderly think that young people nowadays are more "selfish" and "less respectful of old people" than young people in the past, and that some even prefer institutions over families to take care of their old age. Wang interviewed 15 elderly parents and asked them if they would be willing to spend their later years at the old people's home (Jing lao yuan). They all replied "very willing" (Wang 1999). Based on the national census data from several large cities, Unger (1993) found a dramatic change in parents' preference for living arrangements from 1977 to 1985. Between 1977 and 1982, about 69 percent of parents thought it best that a married child live with them. But by 1984–85, the trend reversed its course to a range of 48 to 68 percent of parents who did not want to live with any of their married children.

My interview data from Zhongshan on this issue are also revealing: most young and middle-aged villagers (in their 30s and 40s) told me that they actually preferred to have their parents live with them. The reasons given include: parents could help with childcare, do some household chores, or simply watch the house during the busy farm season. They argued that it was the old people themselves who wanted to live alone for more "freedom" and "convenience." In a way, the younger cohorts of Zhongshan villagers almost seem to put the blame on their elderly parents for choosing to live alone for the sake of their own "convenience" and "freedom." Older villagers, on the other hand, were seriously doubtful that their old-age needs were better taken care of when they were living with their children. They indeed seemed to see living alone as an opportunity to gain better control of their own lives. It is almost as if they embraced "living alone" as a way of maintaining autonomy in the face of their diminishing authority and a shift of power to the younger generation within the household. If given the opportunity, most of my older Zhongshan villagers said they would prefer to live separately from their adult children.

Conclusion

Although Zhongshan villagers may still have reservations about elderly parents living alone, doing so has not only become more acceptable, but also

more and more commonplace.[12] Although in general elderly Zhongshan parents who lived alone told me that since they started living separately they were happier and healthier, they still faced real difficulties by choosing to live alone. They had to take care of their own daily needs, such as cooking, washing clothes, tending the vegetable garden, gathering wood for fuel, and fetching water in the nearby river, lake, or well. Although they might bring in some cash income for themselves by living separately from their adult children, what they could earn was very limited. Many of them told me that if they had just some minor sickness, they might visit a village clinic, but if they became very ill, they would not seek any medical help, and would just wait to die.

Moreover, even though living alone does have the advantage of allowing the elderly to control their own lives, it is not an option for many. Judging from the situation in Zhongshan, most parents over 65 years of age live with their youngest married son in a stem family arrangement. Although the Confucian ideal is to live with an elder son, many elderly parents now end up living with their youngest son because of a new form of family division that Myron Cohen refers to as "serial division" (Cohen 1992, 1998). In this form of family division, the first married son sets up a separate household soon after his marriage, leaving his parents and unmarried younger brother(s) living in the old household. This same process repeats itself when the second son marries, until the last son, who often stays with his parents in the old residence. The trend for this form of family division apparently began in the late 1960s (Cohen 1992; Parish and Whyte 1978), and it has been reported in many parts of China (Harrell 1993; Huang 1992; Selden 1993; Yan 1997). For many Zhongshan parents, to live alone thus means to build a new, separate dwelling. Not many elderly parents have the resources this requires. There is also the issue of how long they can live alone and who will look after them once they become too old to take care of themselves. Perhaps the real significance of the recent development of elderly parents living alone is that it makes the generation currently in their 40s realize that they may not be able to count on old-age support from their own children. This in turn makes them see the importance of starting to save for their later years now, while they are still in their prime of life. Indeed, Greenhalgh finds that doubt about filial support was "stronger among younger informants, who had not yet had to face the question of how they would make it through old age"; only one third of the 131 younger household heads in her survey said they considered "children the optimal means of support" (1994: 54). Since the late 1980s, the

state has begun to encourage local governments to experiment with social insurance schemes for old-age security in some economically more advanced rural regions. Such schemes, however, are mostly geared toward the middle-aged, who are required to put a certain amount of monthly (or yearly) premiums aside now, and ten or twenty or thirty years later can access the money to support themselves in their old age (Cai and Zhang 2000). It is still not clear whether such social security schemes can be successfully carried out. As for those who have already entered old age, there is very little relief coming their way. For the most part, they are left to fend for themselves. One 72-year-old father of two married sons confided to me that he had accumulated almost an entire bottle of sleeping pills. When he got too sick or his relations with his sons and daughters-in-law ran too sour, he said, this bottle of sleeping pills would end it all.