CHAPTER 15

The New Realities of Aging in Contemporary China: Coping with the Decline in Family Care

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On December 3, 2006, *China Daily*, the official English newspaper of the state media, carried a rather disturbing news story that raised serious concerns about the plight of poor elderly in China today. On November 9, 2006, a seventy-one-year-old homeless man was detained after he deliberately set a forest fire on a mountainside in south China. Further investigation revealed that this same man was released from prison only a week previously after serving a five-year term in prison on charges of arson. In his self-defense, the old man insisted that he wanted to return to prison to spend his remaining years because it at least provided him with food and shelter (*China Daily* 2006).

On December 8, 2006, another news story concerning the Chinese elderly grabbed the headline, but in a rather different light. In the city of Shanghai, more than 8,000 senior citizens participated in a Web design contest and thirty contestants won various prizes in such categories as creativity and the best fine arts work (Xinhua News Agency 2006b). A seventy-nine-year-old female retiree was awarded an honorary title of "The Most Senior Participant." Upon receiving her award, she said, "Designing Web page enriches my life and makes me feel closer to the young people. This Web contest made me feel 20 years younger." Her words vividly captured a new attitude toward aging and old age among those urban retirees who have both the resources and the active mindset to broaden their horizon and enrich their life in later years.

On June 23, 2006, another mainstream newspaper reported the following story: Ms. Jin, a seventy-four-year-old widow moved into a retirement home against the wishes of her three sons (China News 2006). According to Ms. Jin, "the younger generations all have their own affairs to deal with. It would not be easy to schedule the lifestyles of two different generations under the same roof. Even though we may be next to each other we would have little to say." Now, at the retirement home, Ms. Jin was "quite happy" as she was able to be

with people of her age, playing games or watching television together. However, her story did not end here. Apparently, since the early 2000s, her home city of Nanjing began a new experimental retirement home called "swap home for retirement." Under this plan, the retirees would turn over their apartments for the retirement home to rent out in exchange for care and services at the retirement home. When the retirees die, their apartments would become the retirement home's property. At the time, Ms. Jin's monthly rental income was 1,000 yuan (USD 125), more than enough to pay for the retirement home's monthly fee of 560 yuan. She felt proud that she could meet her retirement home expenses through this "swap home for retirement" plan and did not have to put a financial or caring burden on her children.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, old age in China has taken on new meanings and aging experiences have been greatly diversified and stratified as reform-era China embraces capitalism and focuses on rapid economic development. As the world's most populous country, China is also facing an unprecedented pace of population aging and demographic transition accelerated by both the stringent state population control policy and the rapid modernization and urbanization process that is now engulfing that nation. For example, over the next two decades, China is expected to complete the transition from a relatively young country to a demographically mature society, accomplishing this in less than thirty years, more than twice as fast as the United States (Kinsella this volume).[1] According to the latest data issued by the United Nations Population Division, China now contains more than one-fifth of the world's older population, with an estimated 147.8 million citizens aged sixty or older (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2006). But in the years ahead, China will face an even more daunting reality of population aging, as by the year 2050, the percentage of China's elderly population aged sixty-five years and older is projected to triple from 8 percent in 2006 to 24 percent in 2050 to 322 million people (Kaneda 2006).

Advanced population aging is commonly associated with postindustrialized, highly urbanized countries in the West. Well-developed health care and social security systems have put these countries in a better position to cope with the attendant problems associated with the accelerated aging of their societies. However, China is becoming an aging society while its per capita income is still low, ranking 108 out of a total of 187 countries in the world as of 2004,[2] and over 60 percent of China's 1.3 billion people still live in rural areas. As a developing country with a large rural population, how will China cope with rapid population aging in the new millennium? How do the Chinese elderly fare as China moves from a closely knit rural society to a fast-paced industrial and consumer-oriented urban society, and from a state-planned economy to the capitalist market economy? Will drastic social changes affect their aging experiences and in what ways?

This chapter examines new aging experiences in light of rapid social transformations in contemporary China. More specifically, it focuses on how aging experiences shift and what new coping mechanisms have emerged among the

elderly due to changes in government policies and social and economic contexts. The ethnographic data for this chapter is based on the author's fieldwork in a central Chinese village in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, elder homes in the city of Wuhan in 2001 and public parks in Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai in 2007.

DIFFERENTIAL AGING EXPERIENCES DUE TO THE DEEPENING RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

China has been undergoing rapid social transformation from Mao's socialist revolution (1949–1978) to post-Mao's pro-market reform (1978–present). Social engineering and government policy have played a crucial role in reshaping the well-being of the Chinese elderly. In contemporary China, we can identify at least three emerging salient features concerning the lived experiences of old age that can be directly attributed to the consequences of government social policy and broad societal changes. One is the differential aging experience along the deepening rural-urban divide due to both the state-instituted household registration system and the government's market-reform agenda. The second is the increasing stratification in aging experiences as a result of the widening wealth gap as China repudiates its socialist egalitarian legacy to pursue a capitalist economy. The third feature is the declining family care accompanied by the rise of nonfamily and fee-based eldercare alternatives in post-Mao China.

Shortly after the Communist victory in 1949, the Chinese government began to implement a household registration system (the *hukou* system), which divided China's population into "agricultural" or "nonagricultural residents" according to both place of residence and entitlement to a wide range of state services and welfare benefits (Cheng and Selden 1994). The government provided urban residents and industrial workers with food rations, subsidized housing, free education, medical care and retirement pensions, while rural residents had no such state benefits, but had to depend on their local collectives for limited public services. During the collective economy of the Mao era, the *hukou* system served the purposes of ensuring resource distributions and controlling internal population migration. At that time, even though the *hukou* system accorded more advantages in terms of state welfare benefits to the urban population, and by extension to the urban elderly, it did not necessarily lead to a sharp divide in the general well-being between the urban and rural elderly for at least three reasons (Davis-Friedman 1991; Whyte and Parish 1984). First, because of enforcing socialist egalitarian principles and the practice of limited wages in the urban sector, the standard of living nationwide was generally low and did not differentiate greatly between the rural and the urban.[3] Second, even though rural elderly did not receive state pensions or the same level of health care as did their urban counterparts, they had access to a lower level of subsidized medical care and were guaranteed a basic livelihood by their collectives. Third, the *hukou* system that effectively restricted rural-to-urban migration also

meant that most rural elderly parents had adult children living in the same villages who could provide prompt eldercare when needed.

But China's post-Mao market reform, the urban-centered developmental strategies China has subsequently pursued, and the legacy of the *hukou* system, have all disproportionately benefited the urban residents and have thus greatly enlarged the gap in the income and the living standards between the rural and the urban populations. In the early 1980s, the urban household income slightly exceeded that of rural households by a factor of 1.5 to 1.8, whereas by 2002 that figure had grown to 3.1 (Cai 2003). The collapse of the collective economy, coupled with urban-centered development strategies, not only caused a stagnation of farm incomes, but also led to a massive exodus of rural able-bodied men and women. As young adults left their aging parents behind in order to seek wage labor in cities, this has generated an especially detrimental impact on the welfare of rural elderly in China today.

In 2002, as a follow-up to earlier fieldwork in a central China village, I found that elderly parents living alone increased from 23 percent in 1994 to 54 percent in 2002. I also learned of three more suicides by the elderly since my last visit in 2000.[4] What is most tragic about these more recent three suicides is that two of the three elderly were a couple who ended their lives not out of the commonly encountered disputes with adult children over parental support,[5] but because they were afraid that caring for each of them would financially bankrupt their adult children.[6] Both in their early eighties, the elderly father was crippled for the previous five years and the elderly mother was his chief care provider, although the couple was living with their youngest daughter whose husband had married uxorilocally, moving in with his wife's natal family.[7] Then the mother's eyesight began to fail and she also developed some chest pains. Tensions flared among the older couple's children as to whom and how much each should pay for medicines needed by their mother. Finally, the mother got some medicine, but her chest pains continued. Feeling that there was no point wasting the money on her, the mother jumped over a bridge and killed herself in 2001. In less than a month, her husband followed suit and killed himself by jumping in the river. When relating this tragic story to me, the villagers claimed that it was the only alternative for a rural family caught in such a situation. They pointed out that the real motive for the elderly couple's suicides was that they did not want to incur too much financial burden, especially for their youngest daughter who had two school-age children. The collapse of the collective economy has not only meant higher medical costs, but also the costs are solely borne by individual families. Paying the medical bills for elderly parents is now often compromised as it is either too costly or competes with money put aside to pay for skyrocketing educational costs occurring since China's pro-market reform.

In his study of Xitucun in rural Hebei province of north China in 2004, Weiguo Zhang also observed a worsened welfare situation of childless elderly men in postreform China (Zhang 2007). Zhang began his observation also with the tragic death of an elderly in his seventies who was partially paralyzed, lived

alone and died in his sleep when his clothes slipped over the coal stove and caused a fire. According to Zhang, despite the fact the village under study experienced overall prosperity in post-Mao reform, the condition of childless elderly actually deteriorated. Unlike in the collectivization period "when the childless elderly actively participated in community life, a time when being poor, childless and elderly was less stigmatized," in the market economy, being childless and elderly meant poverty and isolation from the community (p. 276). In the collective years, childless elderly would be provided with a localized welfare program called "wubao" (the "five-guarantee scheme"—food, clothing, medical care, housing and burial expenses). However, in China's market reform, "the dissolution of collective farming disrupted the financial basis of welfare assistance," and the village cadres in Xitucun claimed that "the village has no money to develop a welfare program" (p. 291). As a result, "the well-being of the childless is deteriorating, even with prosperity surrounding them" (p. 293).[8] That, as shown in the very beginning of this chapter, a homeless rural elder chose prison in order to find shelter and food highlights as well the bleak and precarious life faced by some elderly who lack family and community support.

Elsewhere, I have identified and discussed four unfavorable factors in post-Mao China that have contributed to the worsening eldercare situations in rural China (Zhang 2004). First, is the free-wheeling market economy in reform-era China, which intensifies competition among adult sons for limited family resources in order to maximize the benefits for their conjugal family, often at the expense of taking care of the needs of their aging parents. The second factor is the collapse of the socialist safety net for the rural elderly as a result of decollectivization and the subsequent disappearance of the collective-based, subsidized health care system in post-Mao China. A third problem concerns the limited economic autonomy among the rural elderly as they have no access to pensions or medical coverage available to their urban counterparts. Last, is the absence of effective intervention mechanisms in cases of parental neglect, due both to decollectivization and a weakened parental authority in Chinese family dynamics today.[9]

China's current urban-centered development strategies have further disadvantaged rural families in general, and compromised the well-being of the rural elderly in particular. China's post-Mao development strategies heavily favor urban centers where entire new industries and service sectors have emerged and have triggered an ongoing massive rural-to-urban labor migration. More than 200 million able-bodied rural men and women have left their home villages for urban employment, leaving behind their young children and elderly parents to fend for themselves. Moreover, while the Chinese government has loosened the *hukou* system to allow urban migration of rural men and women, it still denies them urban citizenship and limits their work to only certain industry sectors that are normally avoided by urban residents. These migrants have heavily concentrated in construction jobs, sanitation, service and labor-intensive manufacturing sectors. This work is low paid, onerous and requires

long hours. In other words, urban labor migration can hardly serve as a strategy to enhance a rural family's economic situation since the low wages severely curtail their ability to send remittances home. In the meantime, rural families suffer severe disruptions and endure year-round geographic separations between husband and wife, parents and young children and aging parents and their adult children.

It is under this new, unrelenting mix of market forces and urban-centered development strategies that the aging experience of rural elderly has taken a severe downward turn. Not only do aging parents have to provide their own eldercare in late life, but they are also burdened with the care of grandchildren, and some have to toil in the fields despite being very old. The title of a recent study captures poignantly the plight of rural elderly in contemporary China: "Working Till You Drop: The Elderly of Rural China" (Pang, de Brauw and Rozelle 2004). Based on a survey conducted in 2000 of 1,199 households in sixty-six villages and involving six provinces, their research shows that the majority of rural elderly enjoy no retirement at all and have to continue working in the fields. On a daily basis, they must also perform numerous strenuous tasks such as fetching water, washing clothes, gathering wood for fuel and cooking. Indeed, in China today, rural elderly not only have no retirement to speak of, but large numbers have to struggle just to maintain a subsistence living. In a 2005 survey covering 10,400 peasants over sixty years old in 31 provinces, it finds, "45 percent were not living with their children; 5 percent did not know where their next meal would come [from]; 69 percent had just one set of clothes and 67 percent couldn't afford medicine ... 85 percent of them still toiled in the fields and 97 percent managed household chores" (*China Daily* 2006).

In contrast, their urban counterparts are in a better position to cope with China's market reform and rapid socioeconomic changes. Owing to the legacy of socialist institutions, most urban retirees receive pensions, medical care and subsidized housing. Such state-instituted benefits enable urban elderly to maintain a certain level of economic security in their old age and become less dependent upon their adult children for financial support.[10] Moreover, both the *hukou* system and China's urban-centered development strategies have meant that urban young people are more likely to stay in their hometown for their career, and as a result most urban elderly have adult children living in the same city and providing care when needed. Indeed, Martin Whyte's urban Baoding data reveals a high percentage (about 90 percent) of grown children living in the same city as their parents. Whyte further notes that this allows Baoding parents and their grown children to form "networked families" in which parents live "near several grown children who cooperate in providing support and assistance, but without the need to coreside with any one such child in order to find old-age security" (Whyte 2004:112).[11]

Certainly, China's market reform has also generated uncertainties for urban elderly. Due to health care reform, urban retirees have increasingly found themselves shouldering a larger share of their medical bills. Their limited

pensions often fall behind soaring living costs and inflation in reform-era China. Charlotte Ikels's longitudinal study of urban elderly in Guangzhou shows some paradoxical effects of China's housing reform on the eldercare of urban elderly. While the housing construction boom in recent years has greatly increased living space for urban households, it has also led to "an exodus of married children from parental households" (Ikels 2004b:321). As a consequence, "the proportion of support delivered solely by household members dropped dramatically from 86.5% in 1987 to only 48.1% in 1999." No elders reported lacking support in her 1987 survey data, but by 1998, 7.4 percent of elders were not receiving needed support (pp. 347–349).

THE WIDENING WEALTH GAP AND A STRATIFIED AGING EXPERIENCE

Rising stratification along the socioeconomic scale characterizes another new salient feature of differential aging experiences in contemporary China. Prior to the Communist Revolution in 1949, the tradition of filial piety prescribed the norm of families living in large multigenerational households and the absolute obligation of the young to obey and serve their parents. In reality, however, few families were wealthy enough to reach that cultural ideal, and most families lived in conjugal and extended stem households with about five persons. According to Francis Hsu, "the poverty of the vast majority of the people of China may account for the statistical finding of a small family, for the large family tends to appear when the economic foundations of the family make such an expression practical" (1943:555). A typical scenario describing the livelihood of elderly men in the prerevolutionary era was that while a wealthy man could live in luxury and afford to have multiple wives (concubines) and household servants tending to his various needs, a poor man could only scavenge a living by toiling endlessly as a coolie and would remain a poor childless bachelor the rest of his life.[12]

Stratification in aging experiences was, however, greatly reduced during Mao's collective era from 1949 to the late 1970s. After the Communist victory in 1949, the Chinese government began to institute a socialist economy that eliminated private property and aimed at equity and redistribution of wealth and resources on egalitarian principles. In rural China, joint ownership of land and collective distribution of income and welfare on the basis of need ended the worst poverty and guaranteed a basic livelihood for rural families. In urban China, there essentially were two types of workers: state workers (about 80 percent) who labored in large state-owned enterprises and public institutions, and collective workers (20 percent) who were employed in the commerce and service sector or small neighborhood workshops. State workers received slightly higher wages and better fringe benefits than did collective workers. The National Labor Insurance Regulations implemented in 1951 "provided most urban workers with free medical care, disability pay and pensions" (Davis-Friedmann 1991:24). Although income disparity still existed between

rural and urban populations, and even among urban workers, Maoist socialist economy was successful in ensuring an equitable redistribution of basic necessities and livelihood among all citizens. Consequently, the aging experiences of Chinese elderly under this era were rather homogenous as no new class of concentrated wealth emerged and the worst poverty was eliminated.

However, since launching pro-market reforms in the early 1980s, China has not only experienced the world's fastest economic growth, but also the largest increase in income inequality. The Gini coefficient ratio is often used as a measure of societal income stratification, with ratios in the 20s indicating low levels of inequality and those above 40 marking high levels of inequality. In 1981, China's Gini coefficient was 28.2, but by 2004, it had reached 47.3, ranking as the second highest inequality level in Asia (Yang 1999; Asia Development Bank 2007), and surpassing even the rapidly increasing level of economic difference in the United States.[13] Dramatic increases in inequality since China's market reform also have a direct impact on the changing livelihood of Chinese elderly and have given rise to greater stratification in their aging experiences. I have already mentioned the deepening rural-urban discrepancy in the aging experiences of contemporary Chinese elderly. However, China's market economy has not only increased the wealth gap between rural and urban, but also between regions and within rural and urban populations. In coastal areas of eastern and southern China, rural communities have seen the greatest economic gains through development of village/township enterprises and transfer of land resources for factory sites. Some of these rural communities have become prosperous enough to allocate monthly pensions for the elderly (Guo and Zhou 1997; Joseph and Phillips 1999). In contrast, in less-developed interior provinces, provision of formal support for the elderly is "effectively nonexistent," and "may even be far below that of even the modest provision possible in the collective period" (Joseph and Phillips 1999:165).

Even though urban elderly, in general, fare much better than rural counterparts in terms of financial security and economic independence, they are by no means a homogeneous group, and their standard of living and access to pensions and medical care has become increasingly differentiated. One major source of inequality in urban China lies in the rising differential of income distribution in different occupations and industries, and this income inequality has also directly stratified the life situations of Chinese urban elderly. In a recent survey on urban elderly in Guangzhou, Li found a sharp discrepancy in monthly pensions among urban retirees on the basis of their former occupations and social status. While "high-ranking cadres" (government officials) and "professionals" could receive an average of 1,929 yuan (USD 253) and 1,250 yuan (USD 164), respectively, retired blue-collar workers and staff workers in the commerce and service sectors received only 602 yuan (USD 79.2) and 656 yuan (USD 86.3).[14] Moreover, retired high-ranking cadres and professionals were further privileged with much better medical care and housing benefits. Here as the wealth gap widened in reform-era China, low-income urban retirees found themselves unable to maintain a basic livelihood, while

more-privileged elderly were provided with substantial incomes and other generous fringe benefits (Li 2002). The increasing stratification in aging experiences among Chinese elderly can clearly be seen in the stark contrast between this chapter's first vignette where the poor homeless elderly person preferred prison for food and shelter and the second vignette where educated Shanghai elderly elites had the luxury of participating in the Web page design contest and acquiring modern technology skills to enrich their lives.

FAMILY CARE: A MYTH OR REALITY? ENGAGING THE LIMITATIONS OF FILIAL PIETY

It is generally assumed that in China and other East Asian countries as well, the cultural tradition of filial piety continues to exert a controlling influence on the eldercare patterns and old-age support despite rapid social and economic changes. Studies have shown that a high level of intergenerational coresidence and cooperation has persisted, and that family support and intergenerational reciprocity still play a major role in shaping the aging experiences for the elderly in these countries (Maeda and Ishikawa 2000; Whyte 2003, 2004; Ikels 2004; Takagi and Silverstein 2006; Jenike and Traphagan this volume). For example, Takagi and Silverstein note, "In 2002, about 30 percent of those 65 years and older in Japan lived with their married children, whereas equivalent figures in the United States and Germany were less than 5 percent" (p. 474). Based on his 1994 data in Baoding, a medium-size city in north China, Whyte noted that the coresidence rate was 64 percent and all the other measurements on filial attitudes and behaviors seem to "yield a picture that familial and filial obligations are robustly intact" (Whyte 2003:89).

However, despite the persistence of the cultural expectation for filial obligation, there are signs that new attitudes and practices have emerged regarding eldercare in contemporary China. According to the most recent report on the Chinese elderly population, the percentage of Chinese elderly living in "empty-nest" households increased from 42 percent in 2000 to 49.7 percent in 2006 for urban China, while it increased slightly from 37.9 percent to 38.3 percent in rural China (China National Committee on Aging 2007). In his study of Xiajia Village in northeastern China, Yunxiang Yan finds that for younger villagers, "unconditional filial piety which was based on the sacredness of parenthood no longer exists," and in its place is "a new logic of intergenerational exchange" in which "if the parents do not treat their children well or are otherwise not good parents, then the children have reason to reduce the scope and amount of generosity to their parents (Yan 2003:177–178). In my 2001 study of the elderly parent's motivation to live in elder homes, some told me frankly that residential care gave them more reliable eldercare than would their children (Zhang 2006). In several cases, rather than living with their children, parents either sold or rented their apartment to move into a residential home and saved the property proceeds or the rental fees for future residential care expenses. When I asked these parents why they felt they could not count on their children for eldercare, some said that their children had their own families and careers to worry about in China's new competitive economy, while others simply lamented that their children were unwilling to care for them.

Even by the early 1990s, a national survey on eldercare patterns showed that contrary to the general belief that adult children assume eldercare for aging parents, most elderly parents provided their own care or were cared for by their spouse: 77 percent among the urban elderly and 63 percent among rural elderly (Wang and Xia 2001:49–68). My 2001 study of elder homes in Wuhan showed that although an overwhelming 95.7 percent of the elderly in these homes had children, 58.8 percent of the parents cited "family care unavailable" and another 19.6 percent cited "strained relationship with children" as reasons for seeking residential care. Similarly, the study by Zhan, Liu and Bai of elder homes in Tianjin city also shows that despite the fact that more than 70.9 percent of the parents had more than two children (and of these more than half had more than three), 55.8 percent of the parents listed "having no children nearby or children being too busy" as the most common reason for moving into an institution (2005:179). Both this study and my elder home study in Wuhan revealed that loss of spouse very frequently preceded becoming an elder home resident (87.3 percent in Wuhan and 77 percent in Tianjin). My interviews with elder parents in these homes found that prior to moving to these institutional settings, many lived alone or with their spouse and provided eldercare for themselves or for their spouse. But once their spouse died, they decided to move into an elder home as many found it difficult to live alone and manage their daily routine by themselves.[15] Even though moving to live with their adult children was an option, some chose not to as they "claimed that they did not want to become a burden to their children while others simply stated that they did not get along with their children" (Zhang 2006:61–63).[16]

It appears that a new lifestyle that emphasizes autonomy and intergenerational independence has taken hold among both the rural and urban Chinese elderly. My village studies in the mid-1990s and early 2000s showed that despite physical difficulties in tending the vegetable gardens, gathering firewood for fuel and fetching water from the lake or river, rural elderly parents actively sought to live separately from their children because they now perceived separate living as giving them more "convenience," "freedom," and "better control of their lives" (Zhang 2004:63–87; Zhang 2005).[17] In a 2004 survey that involved 833 elderly who lived alone in Nanjing, a city with more than 6 million urban residents, it was found that while almost two-thirds had adult children in the city, only 14 percent claimed to be "willing" or "somewhat willing" to reside with these children (Zhang et al. 2006:218). When asked to list the reasons for "not willing to live with their adult children," the majority (63.2 percent) said that they chose separate living because it gave them "more freedom," and about one-third said that they did not want to "burden their children." Only 13.1 percent indicated that they lived alone because their adult children were unwilling to coreside with them.

We can identify several socioeconomic factors that may have contributed to this general trend of weakening family care for the elderly. One has to do with the pension system instituted in urban China since the 1950s. The 2006 national survey data shows that 78 percent of urban elderly received pensions (China National Committee on Aging 2007). With their pensions, urban elderly have not only become much less economically dependent upon their adult children, but they also tend to adopt a conscious choice of "not to burden" their adult children with eldercare tasks. As early as the mid-1980s, survey data found that parents with state pensions were four times more likely to live apart from their children than parents without pensions (Unger 1993). A 1997–1998 study in two Chinese cities by Zhan and Montgomery found that family caregivers "were much less likely to assist the elder if he or she has a pension" (Zhan and Montgomery 2003:222). In my recent interviews with the elderly parents on their motivations for seeking residential care, I was repeatedly told by some parents that since pensions were available that could help pay for their eldercare, they did not want to become a burden to their adult children financially or physically (Zhang 2006:66–69).

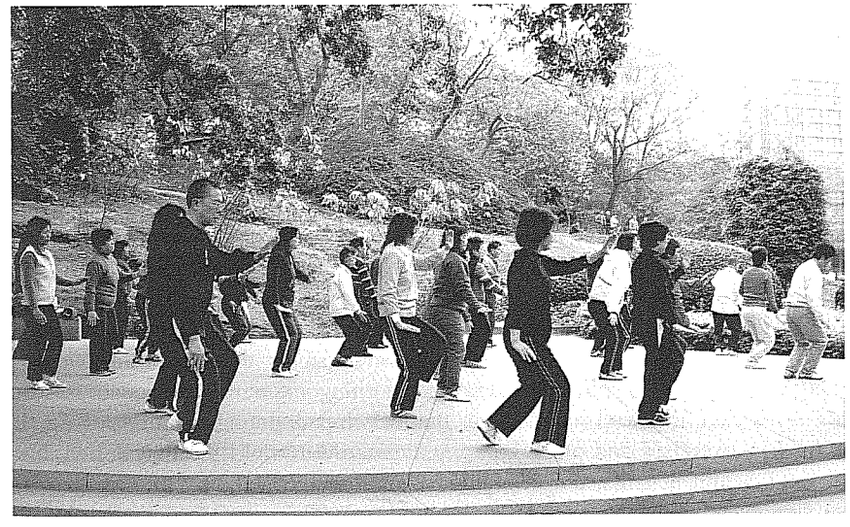
Another factor is the link between declining multigenerational coresidence and increased living space due to the housing construction boom since the mid-1980s. In her study of changing eldercare patterns in Guangzhou from 1987 to 1998, Charlotte Ikels noted that the proportion of support delivered by family members dropped dramatically from 86.5 percent in 1987 to only 48.1 percent in 1998. Over that same decade, the proportion of older people receiving paid care rose from a mere 3.8 percent 1987 to one-quarter of her sample in 1998. Ikels attributed such changes in the eldercare patterns to the city's recent housing boom: "first by making it less likely that family members are sharing the same household, and second, by freeing up space vacated by former household members that could now be utilized by a live-in domestic helper (Ikels 2004b:348).

Additionally, the decline in family care for the elderly has to do with the rapid expansion and increase in China's consumer culture and service sector since the mid-1980s. In Chinese cities, the household service sector has become a new industry, offering a wide range of fee-based services including providing care for the elderly. If their children or other family members are not available, elderly parents can purchase eldercare through hiring a helper who either lives in or gets paid by the hour. Fee-based residential care facilities, which did not exist in Mao's era, have mushroomed in many Chinese cities since the 1990s, offering another alternative for eldercare. With their pensions and savings, and housing property, more and more urban elderly are now turning to nonfamily-based alternatives to secure eldercare. As revealed in the third vignette opening this chapter, Ms. Jin's decision to move into a retirement home against the wishes of her three sons clearly demonstrates both the availability of this nontraditional eldercare form and the new autonomy among Chinese elderly. This is creating new conceptions of how to best meet one's needs in late life.

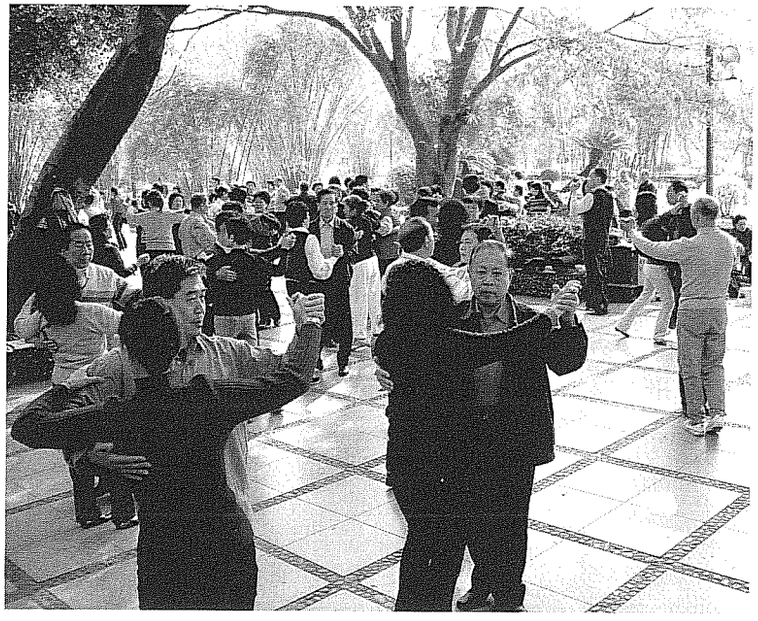
NEW CULTURAL SCRIPTS FOR OLD-AGE PROBLEMS: ACTIVE AGING AND PEER SOCIALIZING

On a January morning in 2007, I went to Xiaogang Park in Guangzhou, a city of 10 million people in southern China, and was immediately struck by the lively scenes there: on my left under a big tree, a group of thirty or so middle-aged and elderly men and women moved in unison practicing *Taichi*, following the music and instructions coming out of a portable tape-recorder, and toward my right, on the other side of the park, another group of fifty or so men and women danced in pairs and waltzed in circles; further along, a group of elderly women were moving to disco music, while another group (mostly middle-aged women) were dancing with red cloths in their hands.

As I walked further into the park, I saw more elderly people doing various exercises either individually or in small groups, playing chess or other board games, reading newspapers, or chatting with friends. By the time I reached the middle of the park, it was almost 10:30 A.M. and some groups began to disperse and wrap up their morning exercises. Then I came across a group of at least sixty men and women singing loudly to the music played by a band of elderly people. An even larger crowd gathered on a nearby sloping hill and sang vigorously as if they were in competition with the other singing group. Among the second singing group was an eighty-nine-year-old man who played "peng ling" (colliding bells) for the group. This man later told me that he came to the park every day and that he enjoyed doing so because playing music for the group



Doing group *Taichi* in Xiaogang Park, Guangzhou, 2007. Photo by Hong Zhang.



Practicing the waltz in Xiaogang Park, Guangzhou, 2007. Photo by Hong Zhang.

not only made him stay healthy and energetic, but also feel useful. He added, "I would probably be dead by now had I not been with the singing group."

Similar scenes of elderly and middle-aged men and women dancing, singing, exercising, playing chess or other board games (including mahjong), practicing calligraphy, chatting with friends and tending to grandchildren were repeated when in the summer of 2007 I visited four more parks, two in Beijing and two in Shanghai. In my interviews with some of these elderly, I learned that typically they are in the parks between two to three hours in the morning and then return for another period of time in late afternoon or after dinner. They all come in groups. Some are neighbors or former colleagues, while others are new acquaintances they have made in the parks. Almost all are urban retirees who have pensions and are thus economically independent. From my casual interviews, I also found that these urban retirees come from all walks of life, ranging from retired government officials, factory cadres and managers, school teachers and other professionals, to ordinary factory workers or service sector workers.

However, what I found even more important about these men and women who congregate daily in the parks for morning exercises and other leisure activities were the deep social bonds that developed among them through their collective exercises and other group activities. Many told me that besides the obvious health benefits, they were also drawn to the parks by the opportunity to chat with old pals, exchange tips and remedies about aging and health issues, seek advice on family/personal problems, share the recollections of their

past, or simply gossip and have conversations on what is going on at their home, neighborhood, or former work unit. An eighty-two-year-old Beijing woman told me that she spent an average of four hours a day in the parks with friends, two-and-a-half hours in the morning and one-and-a-half hours in the late afternoon. She told me, "The parks are just like our home and my exercise pals are like my extended family of sisters. We exercise and chat together and give each other advice if we have any problems. You don't feel old or lonely this way." One of her exercise pals, a seventy-nine-year-old retired woman, added, "We always keep in contact. If one does not feel well and cannot come to the park, we will visit her and make sure she is okay." As they were speaking, many others in the group who gathered around us nodded in agreement.

Admittedly, the elderly people in the parks may comprise only a small fraction of China's elderly population who are not only healthy and mobile enough to go to the parks, but who are retired with state-assisted pensions and are thus free from the burden of eking out an income for daily subsistence. However, this new phenomenon is still worth further investigation and can shed some insight on new trends of aging among urban retirees in contemporary China. From my observation and interviews in the parks, I can identify four new trends of coping with aging in urban China.

First of all, contrary to conventional Chinese images linking old age to being dependent on family and home-bound,[18] these urban retirees are full of life and vitality as they actively seek outdoor activities to keep their bodies and minds healthy and young. Whether practicing *Taichi* or learning to dance the waltz or joining the chorus, these urban elderly take active aging to a new level. Although what we witness in China's parks may point to a new trend in aging among China's urban retirees, we also need to put this new fascination with active fitness exercises in the context of China's market reform and rapid social transformation. As far as urban workers and retirees are concerned, China's market reforms in the past two decades have also brought about a diminishment of social welfare benefits and an increased burden on families and individuals to shoulder soaring health care costs. In other words, knowing that they can no longer count on the state or their former work units during times of need, many urban retirees turn to self-reliance and physical exercise to keep themselves healthy so they can avoid or reduce hefty medical bills to themselves or their children.

Secondly, the middle-aged and elderly women are the most common, active participants in these group exercises and other activities in the parks. In fact, among the five parks I visited in 2007, women far outnumbered men. In Xiaogang Park, for example, among ten or so groups that had more than thirty people exercising or dancing together, four had both men and women, but the other six groups were almost exclusively female participants. In the Chinese tradition, leisure time and activities used to belong to elderly men almost exclusively; as they retired from work, elderly men would visit tea houses, playing chess, socializing with friends and colleagues or taking their birds out for a walk—still a popular hobby among elderly men in Beijing.

For middle-aged and elderly women, however, social mores confined them to the home and familial duties preoccupied them with time-consuming household chores such as cooking, cleaning and providing care for grandchildren or elderly parents-in-law. Several factors may be at play to account for this ubiquitous new trend of middle-aged and elderly women both finding leisure time and feeling it important to do morning exercises and other group activities in parks and other public places. First of all, reform-era China has brought great material progress to urban residents. In less than two decades, wide availability of modern household appliances such as washing machines, gas stoves, microwaves and refrigerators has greatly reduced the time and labor dedicated to household chores.[19]

Secondly, the almost universal enforcement of a one-child policy among urban families in the past thirty years means less child-care time for urban mothers and grandmothers. Finally, China's market reform has had a gendered impact on middle-aged women as they were disproportionately made "redundant" in the economic restructuring and many were forced to retire "early." In urban China, the legal retirement age is fifty for women workers and fifty-five for women cadres and professionals, and sixty for men. However, beginning in the mid-1990s, when state enterprises began massive lay-offs and mandatory retirement in the name of efficiency and competitiveness as China prepared to enter the World Trade Organization, women in their mid or late forties would even be let go or pressured into "accepting" early retirement (Wang 2000; Liu 2007). While "early" retirement may allow middle-aged women to have more free time, it also means a shorter working life, smaller pensions and reduced medical coverage. This is perhaps why we see middle-aged women far outnumbering middle-aged men doing group exercises in the parks. Sidelined by the market economy, they have to resort to such proactive measures as physical exercise to protect themselves against illness and disease.

Thirdly, in China's urban parks today there is a strong collective spirit of camaraderie among the middle-aged and elderly men and women who exercise together or participate in other group activities. As I discussed previously, many come to the parks not only for exercise to keep themselves physically healthy, but also for friendship and mutual help and to avoid feeling lonely and isolated at home. What seems to be emerging among urban Chinese retirees is the embracing of a new cultural construction of retirement and old age. It is manifested in a focus on age-peer sociability rather than dependence on their adult children and on active outdoor activities rather than confinement to the home. In my study on urban elderly parents spending their later years in elder homes, similar narratives such as "not wanting to burden the children," "seeking companionship with people of our own age," and "seeking independent living" (i.e., avoiding multigenerational living) were frequently mentioned by my elderly interviewees as the reasons why they chose to live in elder homes (Zhang 2006). While not necessarily abandoning the family centered support system of Chinese tradition, this new desire and practice of sharing the aging experience with peers and maintaining autonomy, among urban Chinese elderly, does indicate a new way of coping with aging that goes beyond the family domain. It prioritizes commonalities in shared work histories, life-cycle period and age-cohort experiences.

Finally, this new trend of active aging through outdoor fitness exercises and group socializing and friendship has been perceived as beneficial to society, family and the elderly themselves, because it is low cost, effective and socially contagious. The Chinese government has encouraged this new perception of aging. In 1995, the government issued "Outline of Nationwide Physical Fitness Program" and launched a public campaign calling for a nationwide movement toward self-health maintenance through physical fitness activities (State Council 1995). To facilitate this fitness program, the government has "stipulated that 60 percent of the proceeds from the sports lottery" will go to fund "the Nationwide Physical Fitness Program," and outdoor fitness centers "have been installed in urban communities, public parks, squares, roadside and other convenient locations, equipped with fitness equipment and facilities in various forms."[20] Indeed, by the year 2007, any cursory look would find fitness equipment that suit the exercise needs of the elderly conspicuously dotting residential areas, public parks and other open public spaces in Chinese cities. Here we find an interesting contrast between the U.S. parks, which are predominantly utilized by children and young adults, and similar areas in urban China, which mostly cater to elderly people.[21]

Moreover, since 2004, to further facilitate more elderly using public parks for physical exercises and other leisure activities, most Chinese cities have

Elders doing fitness exercises in Tiantan Park, Beijing, 2007. Photo by Hong Zhang.

either made their public parks free to the public, or instituted a reduced fare for retirees, or only charged fees at later hours after the elderly finish their morning exercises or activities in the parks. Clearly the Chinese government has a strong vested interest in facilitating this new trend of active aging among the elderly. China's market reform in the health sector has not only led to soaring medical costs, but also shifted the health care burden increasingly from the state to individuals and families. By encouraging and helping facilitate the elderly to engage in fitness activities, group exercises and other recreational activities, the government can reposition itself as working in the interest of the elderly people. A physically active and healthy retirement population will not only translate into fewer health costs for both the state and the retirees themselves and their families, but a more stable social order.

In 2001, the Chinese government also launched a "Starlight Project," which aimed at building more community-based recreational and service centers for elderly Chinese. Between 2001 and 2004, 13.5 billion yuan (USD 1.63 billion) from the welfare lottery proceeds were used to create "32,490 service stations, where elderly people can read books, play cards, do painting, practice calligraphy, have exercises and attend lessons specifically for aged people" (Xinhua News Agency 2005).[22] These community-based service centers not only provide another socializing venue for the elderly, but also "offer cleaning, laundry and medical care services" (Xinhua News Agency 2006a; Wu et al. 2005; Zhang 2007). Clearly, such newly emerging community service centers are increasingly fulfilling the role of caregiving that was traditionally provided at home and by family members. Here, again, as most of these newly emerging community-based service centers are being built in Chinese cities, we can only imagine that the rural/urban eldercare gap will only further widen as government resources continue to flow predominantly to cities.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary China, life situations and the standard of living for the elderly have become greatly differentiated along both the rural-urban divide and the widening wealth gap. While stratification in aging experiences existed in China before, its sharp rise in contemporary China is a more recent phenomenon and represents a reversal of the relatively homogenous aging experiences due to the government's prior commitment to a socialist egalitarian society during the Mao era. The three media vignettes, at the beginning of this chapter, attest to the increasingly diverse and stratified aging experiences of the elderly in China today. For most urban elderly who have access to state pensions and medical care, they are able to purchase eldercare services or pursue a more active late life through fitness, peer socializing and other recreational activities. For them, old-age support has increasingly extended beyond the family context and shifted more toward self-maintenance, peer socializing and paid care.

However, for the vast majority of rural elderly, life has become much more precarious, and for some, even destitute. According to the latest statistical data

released by the China National Committee on Aging, at the end of 2006, China had 149 million people over age 60, of whom 38.6 million (or 26.3 percent) were urban elderly and 108.01 million (73.7 percent) were rural elderly (China National Committee on Aging 2007). However, despite their large numbers, rural elderly have been so marginalized by the consequences of China's market reform and socioeconomic changes that their dire situation has no end in sight. Despite China's impressive double-digit GDP growth in the past two decades, older people in rural China have been largely excluded from sharing the benefit of China's new-found prosperity. The government has yet to come up with a comprehensive national plan to protect millions of rural elderly against the vicissitudes of aging exacerbated by a competitive market economy, as well as a much weakened, if not disappearing, family support system.

NOTES

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1. This "speed of aging" variable is usually measured as the time it takes a population to go from 7 percent of its population to 14 percent, sixty-five years or older.

2. According to the World Bank data, China's per capita income was USD 1,740 in 2004, ranking 108 out of a total of 187 countries in the world (World Bank 2006).

3. Although in general the standard of living was higher in urban areas than in rural areas during the Mao years, the rural elderly as a group were not singled out as being disadvantaged.

4. This is on top of nine elderly suicide cases that I documented in this village between 1991 and 2000 (Zhang 2004).

5. Studies have indicated that approximately 18 to 29 percent of parental suicides were caused by family conflict (He and Lester 2001). Lee and Kleinman note that suicide data collected from thirty-nine countries in the mid-1990s found that China had "the third highest suicide rate amongst the elderly (after Hungary and Sri Lanka)" (Lee and Kleinman 2000:224). As for the reasons leading to the elderly suicide, Lee and Kleinman cited "the decline of family solidarity, filial values and status of aging people" (p. 232).

6. The couple had two daughters and two sons, but their elder daughter moved out of the village through marriage and their elder son also transferred to work in the county seat. Only one son and a daughter still lived in the village at the time of their parents' death.

7. In a uxorilocal marriage, a daughter stayed in her natal home and her husband married in and joined her family. A uxorilocally married daughter would provide old-age support for her parents. Although considered less than ideal and practiced only under special circumstances, uxorilocal marriage has been common in this locality, side by side with the more culturally dominant patrilocal marriages (Zhang 1998).

8. Although the number of childless elder men was small at this time, Zhang's study of the marginalization of childless bachelors and their lack of access to welfare services from the state or the village in reform-era China raises a serious issue concerning the likely future facing millions of men who may not be able to find a wife and set up a family due to a severely skewed sex ratio as an unintended consequence of China's stringent birth control policy. The sex ratio in China has risen to 119:100 in 2005 (Reynolds 2007; Xinhua News Agency 2007). As Zhang points out, "the state cannot entirely dismiss the predicted 30 million unmarried men, a group created by the official population policy and society norms of son preference, and who, within the foreseeable future, will become elderly" (p. 293).

9. Yunxiang Yan has also provided an excellent analysis on various socioeconomic factors and changing intergenerational family dynamics behind the "crisis" in the old-age support for the elderly in rural China today (Yan 2003).

10. In fact, in his comparative study on the old-age support systems between urban China and Taiwan in the early 1990s, Martin Whyte found that even though Taiwan had a much higher level of economic development, urban elderly in Taiwan had "much more need to rely on their grown children or other family sources for old-age financial support than do their Baoding (a city in mainland China) counterparts" (Whyte 2004:118). Whyte's study shows that while only 27 percent of urban retirees receive pensions in Taiwan, in urban China the rate was 77 percent (p. 117).

11. Jonathan Unger made the same observation based on survey data on five Chinese cities in mid-1980s. See Unger 1993.

12. Looking at the demographic data from the 1640s to the 1940s, James Lee and Wang Feng note that "the shortage of women, exacerbated by the practice of polygyny and the discouragement of female remarriage, prevented a significant proportion of Chinese males in the past and some even today from ever marrying." According to Lee and Wang, "from the seventeenth through the late nineteenth centuries 10–20 percent of all men were unmarried" (Lee and Wang 2001:64–71). Lee and Wang further point out that "[a]ccess to marriage was determined by access to resources which were distributed unequally both by household positions and occupation" (p. 69, p. 80).

13. The United States' Gini coefficient was 46.9 in 2005. The speed at which China reached such a higher level of inequality is also astonishing, as its Gini coefficient rose from 28.6 in 1981 to 47.4 in 2004. In comparison, the Gini coefficient for the United States was 40.3 in 1980 and reached 46.9 in 2005 (from Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gini_coefficient).

14. As China does not have a uniform social security system, the pensions received by urban retirees thus vary greatly, based on one's association with a particular work unit. In general, government officials, professionals from big public institutions and workers in large, state-run enterprises receive much higher pensions and better fringe benefits than workers and staff members in smaller or collective-run enterprises. "High-ranking cadres" (*lixiu gangbu*), referring specifically to those officials who joined and worked for the Chinese Communist Party prior to 1949, stand out as a special category of retirees who receive far better retirement packages. As pointed out by Raymo and Xie, the huge preferential benefits for high-ranking elderly cadres could be seen as "an inducement to retirement for a highly privileged, yet redundant, group of cadres who were reluctant to retire. This 'buy-out' policy has resulted in a sizable number of urban elderly receiving huge returns to their political capital" (Raymo and Xie 2000:5–6).

15. Through my interviews, I can detect a gender difference among widowers and widows when they told me why they chose an elder home for residential care. Widowers were much more likely to mention that they moved to an elder home because their spouse had died and they could not deal with daily life and manage their elder care alone. Although widows outnumber widowers in elder homes, they cited other reasons for going to elder homes such as advanced age, strained relationships, or avoiding boredom or loneliness, rather than their inability to manage self-care due to the loss of spouse.

16. Zhan et al.'s Tianjin data (2005) also shows that prior to institutional placement, "more than half (50.6 percent) of the elderly reported living alone or with a spouse" and presumably managed their own care (p. 179).

17. See also Yan 1997; Miller 2007.

18. The ideal old-age life encapsulated in Chinese sayings is "to live a happy family life surrounded by sons and grandsons" (*tianlun zhile, ersun raoqi*).

19. According to one study on the refrigerator market in China, in 1985, there were only 6.58 refrigerators per 100 urban households, but by 2001, the number increased to 82.3 refrigerators per 100 urban households (*Xiandai Jiadian* 2002).

20. This information is obtained from "China in Brief 2006" in the Chinese government's official sports site: http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/Brief/193374.htm.

21. Western-style theme parks and amusement parks have sprung up in reform-era urban China. But these parks are often very expensive (100 yuan to 150 yuan or more per person) and are very commercially oriented as they are owned and operated by private or joint ventures. These amusement parks are also a new phenomenon spurred by both the rising consumerism in China's market reform and the child-centered family trend as a result of China's one-child policy. Urban parents with newly found disposable income often compete to spend big money to indulge and pamper their only child through visiting such parks or eating at Western fast food restaurants.

22. It seems to have been a common practice for the state to raise money from the public through issuing lotteries nationwide for specific public causes such as a welfare lottery, a sports lottery and so on. A certain percentage from the proceeds raised through such lotteries funds the public programs set up by the state.

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To my beloved grandchildren Josephine, Alex, Natalie and Zemanel, who have made my life more complete by enrolling in "Grandpa Jay's Summer Playschool" for the past twelve summers. They are my enduring legacy.