

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

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

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

### INTRODUCTION

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

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

Far more relevant is the new economic policy that the Chinese government launched in 1978. This policy emphasized productivity, profit, and market (supply and demand) competition. In rural China, the agrarian communes were ended and their agricultural lands redistributed among the members. The household again became the basic unit of production and consumption. Rural households were free to organize their time and resources as they saw fit and

were encouraged to "get rich" if they could. The consequences of these changes for the family, and particularly the more vulnerable segments of society such as the elderly, have been of interest to officials and scholars both in China and abroad, although research on such issues is just beginning and the literature consists more of speculations than empirical findings.

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

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

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

Thus, despite the suggestion that China's new rural economic reforms should favor the perpetuation of extended families and the security of the elderly, a number of recent studies have reported that 1/3-1/2 of rural elderly are actually living alone, although the proportions varied considerably from study to study. This paper presents new data on household composition relevant to this question that were collected in two villages located in the Yuyao administrative unit (*shi*) in Zhejiang Province in eastern China (roughly 350 miles south of Shanghai).

#### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The data derive from an in-depth anthropological study of the elderly conducted during 1987-88. The study utilized a natural experimental study design comparing Pingyuan and Shancun,<sup>1</sup> two rural villages (*cun*) in the same general administrative unit (*shi*) that differ in the degree to which they have prospered under the new economic system. These sites were identified using local (*xiang*) statistics on annual per capita income for each village under the *xiang*. The range of per capita income for the entire rural Yuyao area in 1986 was roughly 210 to 700 yuan<sup>2</sup> and the per capita income for Yuyao city was 789 yuan.

Pingyuan is a middle income village with a per capita annual income in 1986 of about 450 yuan. It is on the plains 12 miles from a rail line and from Yuyao city, a district seat promoted to city status in 1985. Pingyuan has a number of small scale industries and has prospered. In 1985 it consisted of 755 persons and 252 households, 31% of which contained an elderly person 60 years or older.

The other study village, Shancun, is located just 40 miles from Pingyuan but is in a mountain region with poorer transportation links to urban markets. It has not prospered as much and ranks toward the bottom of the economic scale in this area with a per capita annual income in 1987 of about 215 yuan. In 1985, Shancun contained 901 persons and 241 households, 29% containing elderly persons.

The study focused on a randomly selected sample of 50 elderly 60 years of age or older in each village. This sample is 52% of the elderly in Pingyuan and 60% of the elderly in Shancun. It accounts for 63% of the households with elderly persons (age 60+) in Pingyuan and 71% in Shancun.

Data on household composition were obtained by intensive participant observation as well as questionnaire and abbreviated life history interviews conducted by Yachun Ku, a citizen of the People's Republic of China who is an anthropology doctoral student specializing in cross-cultural aging at Case Western Reserve University. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in each of the villages for ten months, and monthly data on expenditures, income, activities and health were collected from the sample households once a month for 12 months.

Males comprise 54% of the Pingyuan sample and 48% of the Shancun sample. The mean age of the sample in both Pingyuan and Shancun is 69 years. The proportion of the Pingyuan sample who are 60-69 years of age is 66%, the

proportion who are 70–79 years of age is 24% and 10% are 80–89. In the Shancun sample, 60% are between the ages 60–69, 26% are 70–79 and 14% are 80–89 years of age.

With regard to marital status, 80% of the males in Shancun are married and 20% are widowers. In Pingyuan, 70% are married, 22% are widowers and the rest are divorced and never-married. In Shancun, 23% of the females are married and 77% are widows. In Pingyuan, 43% are married and 52% are widows.

#### TRADITIONAL CHINESE HOUSEHOLD/FAMILY STRUCTURE

The basic social unit in Chinese villages is called the *jia*. This term is usually translated as “family,” and is really a family corporation. Fei (1983: 24) says:

The members of this group possess a common property, keep a common budget and cooperate together to pursue a common living through division of labor.

Thus, while the *jia* is comprised of individuals related by common descent (or adoption), and/or marriage, its defining criteria are economic – the presence of common property, joint finances and shared management. When a distinction is made between family and household in the literature on China, the household is treated as a territorial group – a residential/commensal unit which contains individuals who live and eat together but may not be coparceners and do not have joint finances. For example, a worker or distant relative may live together with members of a *jia* but not be part of it. However, because Chinese peasants normally live and eat only with the other members of their *jia*, for all practical purposes it is generally identical with the “household.” Consequently, although some studies of rural China talk only of households and others only of families, both normally mean *jia*. We shall use household to translate *jia*, and by household mean such *property holding* kinship units.

In addition to the normal multigenerational (stem, extended and nuclear) households, and the single generation households consisting of individuals living alone or with their spouse, rural China traditionally had a type of living arrangement known as “by turns.” “Eating by turns” (*lun chi*) and its variants such as “eating/sleeping by turns” (*lun chi lun zhu*), are among the traditional ways that elderly parents were supported by sons in China after the household (*jia*) estate was divided among the sons. In the former arrangement, the elderly person (or couple) sleep in their own house/apartment but rotate between the households of their sons for their meals. In the latter, the elderly person (or couple) has no separate residence and rotates among the sons, residing and eating by turns in their houses. In another version of this, the elderly individual (or couple) lives in one of their sons’ residences but eats by turns with each of their married sons. The precise geographical distribution of such “by turns” arrangements in traditional Chinese rural society is unclear, but it apparently was widespread as indicated by its frequent mention in the literature on village China and Taiwan (e.g., Chuang 1972; Cohen 1976; Fei 1939; Harrell 1981;

Hsieh 1985; Johnson 1910:150; Li 1967; Smith 1970).

These "by turns" arrangements have posed conceptual problems for researchers. Hsieh (1985:83) notes that "the elderly parents seem in part members of all their sons' households but not wholly members of any single one of these households." Cohen (1976:74) says, "They are somewhat less than full members of any family because this kind of collective arrangement for the father's support following division means that he is no longer coparcener to any portion of the old family estate." Some researchers have, therefore, suggested calling such elderly and their sons' households "conditional stem families" or "rotating stem families" (Wang 1967:64, Chen 1977:166 - as cited in Hsieh 1985). Cohen (1976:75) calls them "collective dependants." Hsieh (1985) suggests inventing a new category of "federated family" which he defines as a "high level household which links otherwise already independent families ... that transcends the limitations of residence, and cannot be strictly defined by a common economy."

While all of these seem reasonable on one level, on another they seem to beg the fundamental question of what is the *jia* of an elderly person (and his/her spouse) living in a "by turns" arrangement. It clearly is not the independent household (*jia*) of any of the sons. After the division (partition) of the household estate the "by turns" parent(s) are not coparceners with any of the sons and do not share joint finances with them. Like the elderly living and eating alone, they belong to their own corporate unit, their own household or *jia*. Though they eat in the households of their sons, the cash, jewelry, savings accounts and belongings that such elderly possess after division are their *own* and can be dispensed with as they like. Even in the case where the elderly person or couple physically sleep in the household of one son, they are not considered to be part of that son's household or to own the space they are using.

Thus, although the sons may be obligated by a written *jia* partition agreement (or the laws of the People's Republic of China) to provide food, grain or money to the elderly, conceptually this is best seen as a transfer from one autonomous *jia* to another. For example, some of the elderly involved in "by turns" arrangements in Pingyuan and Shancun receive government sugar ration coupons separate from those of their sons' households, an indication of the official recognition of their status as a separate household. Others are still on the *xiang* books as members of one son's household so that their ration coupons are given to the son.<sup>3</sup> In these cases, however, the son gives the elderly their per capita share of the coupons to use as they like. Consequently, the *jia* of elderly persons engaged in "by turns" arrangements contain only themselves (and their spouse, if he/she is alive), and as such, are structurally isomorphic with the households of those elderly actually living and eating alone. They fall under the rubric of single generation households and should be classified as such.

Table I presents information on the household status of the 100 elderly subjects comprising our study population (50 in each village).

In Pingyuan, the more prosperous village, 50% (25), and in Shancun, the poorer village, 26% (13) of the elderly are residing either alone or with a spouse.

TABLE I  
Household composition of the random sample  
of elderly age 60+ in Pingyuan and Shancun

| Living arrangement                                | Pingyuan |    | Shancun |    |
|---|----------|----|---------|----|
|   |          | %  |         | %  |
| Single generation households: total               | 28       | 56 | 24      | 48 |
| alone or with spouse                              | 25       | 50 | 13      | 26 |
| eat/sleep by turns <sup>a</sup>                   | 1        | 2  | 1       | 2  |
| eat in own home, eat by turns                     | 1        | 2  | 3       | 6  |
| sleep with one son, eat by turns                  | 1        | 2  | 6       | 12 |
| sleep in own house, one eat by turns <sup>c</sup> | -        | -  | 1       | 2  |
| Multigeneration households: total                 | 22       | 44 | 26      | 52 |
| with married son                                  | 8        | 16 | 13      | 26 |
| with married daughter <sup>b</sup>                | 1        | 2  | 2       | 4  |
| with unmarried children                           | 13       | 26 | 9       | 18 |
| with older mother                                 | -        | -  | 1       | 2  |
| with married granddaughter                        | -        | -  | 1       | 2  |

<sup>a</sup> The elderly individual or couple rotate sleeping and eating among their sons' households. They have no home of their own.

<sup>b</sup> The daughter stayed in her parents' household and the groom moved uxorilocally at marriage.

<sup>c</sup> The elderly husband cooks by himself, but his wife eats by turns.

In addition, another 6% (3) in Pingyuan and 22% (11) in Shancun are part of "by turns" arrangements. Thus 52% of our elderly sample in these two villages live in single generational households. Conversely, very few of the elderly are living with married sons (and their families). In Pingyuan, only 16% (8) reside with a married son and in Shancun only 26% (13) do so. The "ideal" Chinese household consisting of parents and married son(s), therefore, is attained in only a small minority of cases.

The importance of "by turns" living arrangements are treated in other recent studies of household composition in China. Surprisingly, with one exception, "by turns" arrangements are not mentioned at all. While it is theoretically possible that this once extensive custom is no longer widely practiced, we suspect otherwise. For example, the study conducted in Tianjin that was mentioned above reported in a table that 86% of the elderly were living in 2, 3, or 4 generation households (Wuqing County Committee on Aging Problems 1986: Table III, p. 85). However, the discussion section of the paper stated somewhat cryptically that "eating by turns" was also present, perhaps in as much as 10% of the sample, and the phrasing indicates that these arrangements were categorized as instances of multigenerational households (*ibid.*). This, plus our own findings, suggest to us that "by turns" living arrangements are indeed present in other parts of rural China and that their absence in the recent literature is an artifact of their being classified under multigenerational household categories. If this is correct, the literature on household composition in contemporary China may be seriously flawed in that it *underreports* the extent to which

the elderly are really part of separate economic units – separate single generation households.

The Shancun data can illustrate the hypothetical impact of such a misleading categorization. If we subsume the elderly involved in “by turns” arrangements in the category “multigeneration households” (i.e., households including married sons/daughters, unmarried children and others such as a grandchild), the percentage of elderly in multigenerational households would increase from 52% (26) to 74% (37) in Shancun and the average of multigenerational households in both villages would increase from 48% to 62%. And if we classify them more specifically in the category “living with married son”, that household type increases in Shancun from 26% (13) to 42% (24). While our small sample size precludes us suggesting that a parallel classificatory change in other large surveys would produce an analogous change in the proportion of single generation households, accounting for this type of “by turns” elderly is clearly not a trivial issue. It can substantially alter conclusions regarding the elderly’s living arrangements.

An equally serious consequence of such misleading lumping of the “by turns” category is the masking of important inter-village differences with regard to the consequences of the recent economic reforms on the living arrangements of the elderly and ultimately their social and economic status.

#### INTER-VILLAGE VARIATION REGARDING SINGLE GENERATION HOUSEHOLDS

Although the overall percentage of the single generation household is similar in the 2 villages – 56% in Pingyuan and 48% in Shancun, there is a striking difference in the composition of the single generation household category.

TABLE II  
Household composition of single generation households  
in Pingyuan and Shancun villages

| HH type                 | Pingyuan | Shancun              |
|-------------------------|----------|----------------------|
| Alone                   | 11 (39%) | 3 (13%) <sup>a</sup> |
| With spouse             | 14 (50%) | 10 (42%)             |
| Some form of “by turns” | 3 (11%)  | 11 (46%)             |
| Total                   | 28       | 24                   |

<sup>a</sup> Rounding makes the total percentage for Shancun 101%.

Table II shows that whereas almost half of the single generation households in Shancun, the poorer village, are living in “by turns” arrangements, only 11% in Pingyuan are doing so. The greater proportion of elderly living alone (or with a spouse) in Pingyuan is not a demographic artifact generated by an absence of

available sons to provide the "by turns" arrangements. In pingyuan, the mean number of sons living in the village for elderly living alone or with a spouse is 1.9. Only 4 (16%) do *not* have a living son in the village, and one of these has an adopted daughter. 83% of such Pingyuan elderly have one or more living sons in the village, and 33% actually have 3 or more living sons. An analogous situation was found in Shancun. The mean number of sons living there for such elderly was 1.8. Only 3 (23%) of the elderly living alone or with a spouse did not have a son living in the village. 77% have one or more living sons in the village, and 54% have 2 or more sons. It is clear that the relatively high proportion of elderly living alone or with a spouse in Pingyuan is not simply the result of the unavailability of sons due to outmigration, high mortality or low fertility.

The difference in the proportion of elderly living alone also does not appear to be an artifact of marital status or age differences between the two villages. For example, whereas 15 (54%) of the single generation elderly are married in Pingyuan, 14 (50%) are in Shancun. And 11 (39%) and (46%) are widows/widowers respectively in Pingyuan and Shancun. Two (7%) are unmarried/divorced in Pingyuan versus one (4%) in Shancun. And with regard to age structure in the two villages, we have shown that the mean age and age-category distribution is similar in each village.

TABLE III  
Percent of elderly age 60+ in single generation households  
in sample population who are living alone, with a spouse and "by turns"

| Household type  | 60-69    |          | 70-79    |         | 80-89    |          |
|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|---------|----------|----------|
|                 | Pingyuan | Shancun  | Pingyuan | Shancun | Pingyuan | Shancun  |
| Alone, w/spouse | 95% (20) | 71% (10) | 75% (3)  | 43% (3) | 67% (2)  | 0% (0)   |
| By turns        | 5% (1)   | 29% (4)  | 25% (1)  | 57% (4) | 33% (4)  | 100% (3) |

TABLE IV  
Household composition and marital status of sample  
population in Pingyuan and Shancun villages

|          | Married | Widow | Widower | Divorced/unmarried |
|----------|---------|-------|---------|--------------------|
| Pingyuan |         |       |         |                    |
| alone    | 0       | 5     | 4       | 2                  |
| w/spouse | 14      | 0     | 0       | 0                  |
| by turns | 1       | 1     | 1       | 0                  |
| Shancun  |         |       |         |                    |
| alone    | 0       | 2     | 0       | 1                  |
| w/spouse | 10      | 0     | 0       | 0                  |
| by turns | 2       | 7     | 2       | 0                  |



Table III reveals that the difference between villages with respect to single generation households exists in all age categories – more Pingyuan elderly at all ages live alone and with a spouse than in Shancun. For example, 95% of Pingyuan's elderly age 60–69 are living alone or with a spouse versus only 71% of Shancun's. And while 75% of the Pingyuan elderly aged 70–79 live alone or with a spouse, only 43% of Shancun's do.

Table IV reveals the source of the different composition of single generation households. In both villages, those who are married live predominantly with their spouses (93% in Pingyuan and 83% in Shancun), while those who are unmarried/divorced live alone. However, whereas all but 1 of the widowers and widows live alone in Pingyuan, in Shancun, all of the widowers and all but 2 of the widows live in “by turns” arrangements. Put another way, altogether only 18% of the Pingyuan widows and widowers live by turns whereas 82% in Shancun do so.

Consequently, despite both Pingyuan and Shancun having similar high proportions of single generation household elderly, they actually reflect two different types: one with heavy reliance on “by turns” arrangements and the other on elderly living alone. We suggest that this difference is caused by social-cultural and economic factors. Since space limitations preclude a full discussion of these factors, we shall indicate the dynamics underlying this situation only cursorily.

#### CHANGE AND HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

A parallel process of changing attitudes and values regarding intergenerational interaction, filial piety and household composition is well underway in both villages. Although our probing of attitudes and feelings on these issues (through informal discussions and conversations) revealed clearly that under ideal conditions the elders' preferred household arrangement remains the traditional one, i.e. living with at least one married son and his family, at the same time it also revealed that the elderly no longer considered this a realistic aspiration. The elderly in Pingyuan and Shancun perceive a change in the attitudes of their sons (and daughters-in-laws) toward less filial piety and greater independence. Their sons, they say, are more concerned about their own conjugal relationship and nuclear family than about the parent-son linkage, and sons want to rapidly acquire a host of status-giving material possessions for themselves and their children.

Not surprisingly, in Shancun, 86% of the elderly in our sample responded negatively to an open-ended question asking whether children today respect and support their elders as they did in the past. None said they did, and 4% said that some do and some do not. In Pingyuan, 56% responded negatively to this question, 26% replying that some do and some do not. Only 4% answered affirmatively. It is particularly interesting to note that 78% of those elderly who are living with a married son in the “ideal” household type in Pingyuan and 92% in Shancun, responded negatively to this question.

The elderly feel that these shifts make extended family life more difficult today than in the past, leading them generally to prefer the greater freedom and lesser conflict/stress of living alone (or with a spouse). The word freedom was commonly used by the elderly to express the advantage of living alone, and conflict was a common topic of discussion regarding intergenerational relations. These shifts also make living alone preferable to "by turns" arrangements for while the "by turns" arrangements may separate the elderly jurally and emotionally from the extended family and its conflicts over the allocation of resources, they do not avoid the day-to-day conflicts of being a dependant in the household of a son and daughter-in-law. The elderly are expected to contribute their labor to each son's household when eating there, and this can generate its own unpleasantness and discord – e.g., "You work harder in X's household than here."

However, despite this perception, living completely alone requires that certain conditions be fulfilled. The elderly person must have enough income to survive; there must be enough residences; and he/she must be physically able to cook and conduct the daily activities of living. The greater prosperity in Pingyuan has allowed the first two of these conditions to be fulfilled more often there than in Shancun. More new homes have been built and more old ones expanded, and because sons in Pingyuan are generally doing well economically, the elderly are 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. Consequently, our data suggest that the single generation household category in Pingyuan consists predominantly of elderly living alone or with a spouse because economic conditions have improved to the point where this is financially viable. Shancun's relative poverty, by contrast, has made the "by turn" option preferable because it costs sons less to operate – they have to provide only an extra meal, not actual cash. Selection of the "by turns" alternative more frequently in Shancun than Pingyuan, therefore, appears to be an artifact of the differential impact of the new economic system, not different value orientations.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This paper has demonstrated the high prevalence of single generation households in two rural Chinese villages and a large proportion of "by turns" households in one of them. It illustrates the methodological importance of disaggregating and classifying separately the "by turns" living arrangements in studies of the household composition of the elderly in rural China. Although such arrangements are strikingly absent in the recent literature on the elderly in China, we suspect that they exist but are being classified misleadingly as some type of multigenerational household. To the extent that this is true, the recent data on household composition in rural China are underrepresenting the number of elderly living in single generation households. Inconsistent classification may

also explain some of the contradictory findings on the proportion of single-generation households reported by different studies. Finally, the apparent failure to treat "by turns" living arrangements as a separate type of single generation household may also be obscuring the differential impact of China's new reforms on the household situation of the elderly in richer and poorer villages.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pingyuan and Shancun are pseudonyms.
- <sup>2</sup> One U.S. dollar = 3.72 Yuan.
- <sup>3</sup> We found that *xiang* records were often several years out of date.

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