INCOME AND FAMILY SUPPORT AMONG RURAL ELDERLY IN ZHEJIANG PROVINCE, CHINA

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the net income of a sample of 100 elderly living in two villages in Zhejiang Province. A natural experimental study design was employed to examine village differences in prosperity while controlling for other linguistic and cultural/regional factors that might influence the economic status of the elderly. The paper examines the different sources of income for the sample elderly and assesses their general economic status. It found that while most of the income of the elderly derived from their own farming and sideline work, children also assisted elderly parents and provided a safety-net for them as their physical capacity waned. However, having many sons did not improve the economic status of the elderly and the majority of elderly now preferred only one son.

Key Words: China, elderly, economic status, family support, decollectivization

INTRODUCTION

Starting in the early 1980s, China transformed its rural economy by eliminating communes and returning to a household system of production with increasing emphasis on market economics. This shift to a more individualistic form of rural production raised questions about the economic status and security of the approximately 70 million elderly living in rural areas. This paper examines this issue by presenting data on the subsistence patterns of the elderly in two rural villages in eastern China. In particular, it examines the relationship between living arrangement and income/economic status.

FROM COMMUNES TO THE 'RESPONSIBILITY' SYSTEM

China's communal system of agricultural production was imposed in the 1950s. It replaced the traditional household system of production and dictated that individuals work under the management of a commune. The commune (and its sub-units, the production brigade and the production team) controlled the means of production and made the administrative and work decisions. Workers were paid indirectly via a system that awarded 'points' for the type of work done each day. At the end of each year, the cash value of 'point' was determined by dividing the total number of work points into the total cash value of the collective's production. Farmers, therefore, became somewhat analogous to factory workers.

This change broke the 'patriarchal autocracy' of elderly male household heads by ending their control of land, the key resource on which sons depended. In addition, the government consciously attacked patriarchy as a form of inter-generational exploitation. On the other hand, the new communist government did not provide old age pensions for its farmers. Instead it continued the

traditional system in which the family served as the primary source of social
security for rural elderly. In fact, the obligation of children to respect and care
for parents was codified as part of the nation’s new family law (1950) and
constitution (1954).

The commune oversaw the functioning of the ‘family support system’ and
provided an independent safety net for the elderly. D. Davis (1991: 107)
succinctly described the positive consequences of this approach:

“collectivization and the ideology of socialism directly increased the financial security
of the old. In rural areas between 1955 and 1980, each production team was required
to provide a basic grain ration to all members. In addition, most elderly could find
some form of remunerative job within the village economy. Old men ... who were
able to do little more than scavenge in the lanes, or stand guard at the orchard, earned
work points that entitled them to a share of the team’s paper year-end profits. Rural
women ... earned cash by selling vegetables and pork. And all rural elderly were
made more secure by the household registration system, which tethered Chinese men
to the villages of their birthplace and thereby guaranteed that at least one adult son
would be close by when elderly parents could no longer support themselves.”

In addition, collective leaders could, and did, enforce the obligation of sons to
care for elderly parents by transferring ‘work points’ from sons to parents if a
son was not fulfilling his obligations. The collective, therefore, had the
authority, power and resources to guarantee basic subsistence for the elderly.

The post-1978 reforms altered this situation by breaking up com-
munes/production brigades (‘decollectivization’) and dividing their land among
members. Under the new system – known as the ‘responsibility’ system –
farmers’ households became free to make their own production and marketing
decisions, although each household was responsible for paying a tax and selling
a portion of its grain production to the state at below-market prices. After
decollectivization, therefore, local communist cadres no longer had agricultural
income to draw on to meet social and welfare needs such as elderly support,
although some did still have the income from Brigade enterprises.

There are contrasting opinions on the effects of this change for the elderly.
One argument suggests that since peasants now work and manage their fields on
a household basis, the new reforms should reinforce Chinese values on filial
piety and the traditional extended family, and should add value to the labor of
the elderly, preserving or enhancing their status (Olson 1990; Yuan 1987).
Alternatively, it has been suggested that the new reforms are likely to worsen the
security of the elderly because welfare assistance previously provided by
production brigades is either no longer available or is very limited, and because
the pressure previously placed on children to support parents who can no longer
make an economic contribution has been weakened. Similarly, the younger
generation’s increased opportunities for out-migration and wage employment,
and the concomitant growth of materialism and consumerism, is fostering
generational conflict over spending household resources on unproductive elderly
(Sankar 1989; Goldstein, Ku and Ikels 1990). This view suggests that the elderly