

International update

Community social services: support for independent living of older persons in China

Zhu Chuan Yi*

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China

Abstract

Family care is a traditional source of support for older persons in China. However the forces of industrialization and urbanization in China mean that some older people have to adapt to social changes and live independently. The establishment of a social security system and the development of community social services provide great support for older persons who live independently. The majority of old people in China regard the community as their extended family. Since China has a large population and limited financial resources, it is estimated that social services and service facilities meet only 30 % and 20 % of the demand, respectively. The author proposes that in the process of rapid economic development, the government and non-government organizations need to pay more attention to the growing problems of older persons and to provide more support to them.

The concept of independent living is new to the majority of older Chinese. Chinese elders have traditionally lived with sons and daughters, and grandchildren or relatives; this tradition has long been cherished as "family happiness." Multi-generational co-residence is still the norm in China (see Table 1). Elders enjoy support and respect in the household, while providing child-care services, taking care of the house, and caring for the venerable old in the house. Hence, when one speaks of independent living of older persons in China, it may be misunderstood as referring to the living situation of unfortunate old widows and widowers, or old people who have been deserted by their sons and/or daughters.

Times have changed: modernization, urbanization and industrialization are advancing across the country and China is rapidly entering the market economy. Many of the age-old villages and townships have become small and medium-sized cities. Young people are leaving their homes behind and migrating to towns and cities to become workers, business people or service personnel. In the cities, which are also undergoing tremendous changes, most young employed people are given living quarters where they live on their own, away from the extended family structure. As a result, the nuclear family has become the predominant family structure in China.

Today a number of Chinese elders, in an attempt to accept new ideas, have begun to live independently and to accept the challenges of the social changes that are taking place. However, they still yearn for the times when they had grandchildren playing by their knees; they are not well prepared for independent living. The government of China and social organizations are adopting new measures to show concern for older persons, by developing numerous community-service agencies, improving the old-age pension system, and establishing older adult day-care centres and senior citizens' apartments, as well as introducing new technologies to meet the needs of old persons who live independently. But China has lacked the facilities and experience to assist old people to live independently and has much to learn.

Table 1

Living arrangements of older persons in China (percentages)*

Arrangement	Males			Females		
	City	Town	Village	City	Town	Village
Lives alone	6,2	9,7	8,0	9,2	11,3	9,0
Lives with spouse	21,5	24,2	18,1	15,3	16,8	14,5
Subtotal	27,7	33,9	26,1	24,5	28,1	23,5
Lives with children	72,3	66,2	73,9	75,5	71,9	76,5
TOTAL	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Source: State Statistical Bureau, 1990.
* 10 % sample.

Population ageing in China

China has the largest elderly population in the world. In 1992, people aged 60 years and over numbered 104 million; the number is growing at an annual rate of 3 %, i.e. by 36 million a year. By the turn of the century, the number of older people will reach 132 million and will comprise 10,6 % of the total population (see Table 2). The current growth rate of the 80-year-and-over age group is 5,4 %, which is far greater than previous growth rates for this age group. In short, population

* Address correspondence to Prof. Zhu Chuan Yi, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, (H) 18-6-201 Shenggunanli, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100029, People's Republic of China.

ageing and advanced ageing are developing at a rapid rate (State Statistical Bureau, 1990).

Meanwhile, a diminution of family size in China is continuous. In 1982 there were 4,4 members per family but in 1990 the figure was 4,0. The tradition of remarriage in old age continues, which is characteristic of a developing country. In both cities and country areas in China unmarried older persons constitute only 1 % of the older population. The divorce rate is 0,8 %. Old-couple families are stable, which means that partners are available to help one another. More women than men are without a spouse; these women comprise about 30 % of the elderly population. Most widowed old persons live with family (China Research Center on Ageing, 1992b). In towns and cities, a single man or woman and old-couple families constitute around 30 % of the families of older persons; single female families constitute 73 % of all families headed by an old single man or woman. The number of old families is on the increase, with the number of families in the 75-year-and-over age group (5,4 %) being greater than that in the 60-64-year age group (*ibid.*, 1992b). A trend towards independent living is thus apparent.

Table 2
Indicators of population ageing in China

Year	Number aged 60+ (millions)	% of total population
1953	42	7,2
1964	42	6,1
1982	77	8,0
1990	97	8,6
1992	104	8,9
2000	132	11,0
2025	284	19,3
2040	380	25,3

Sources: State Statistical Bureau, 1990.
China Research Center on Ageing, 1989.

Income security

Independent living has a direct bearing on the income and housing conditions of old persons. In cities, old people who have been in regular employment are eligible to receive a pension. The re-employment rate of retirees is 28 % but about 26 % of old persons receive no pension (China Research Center on Ageing, 1992). In general, agricultural labourers are not covered by an old-age security scheme; these schemes are only implemented in a small number of economically-developed areas, and where the collective and the individual jointly contribute to the scheme. Regarding living arrangements, old people typically have their own room(s) in a house; only a few own a house. Since family care is a traditional means of support of the elderly in China, it is stipulated in law that sons and daughters are obliged to support their parents and grandparents. Generally speaking, old people therefore enjoy support from their family. Surveys have revealed that 46,9 % of old people in cities and 73,8 % in rural areas are supported by their sons and daughters (China Research Center on Ageing, 1992c).

At present, economic development levels are still low in China. Although a social security system has been established it is not yet fully-fledged. Some old people, especially in the rural areas, are reluctant to leave their home and live alone. Even if they want to do so, this is not always possible as they lack the resources and suitable housing. It is therefore unlikely

that a large number of old people in China will live independently in a foreseeable period of time.

The matter has been raised about old people being collectively institutionalized in welfare homes. The construction of such welfare institutions however requires large sums of money; accommodation in urban and rural homes for the aged, at day-care centres, and in senior citizens' apartments is therefore only available to childless old people, or those who are in dire poverty. Statistics show that only 0,4 % of the aged are institutionalized in welfare homes or hospitals (China Research Center on Ageing, 1992b). Although there is a demand for collective welfare institutions, the possibility of the expansion of these facilities is very limited.

On the other hand the health status of older Chinese tends to be good. Life expectancy at birth has reached 71 years, more than double the figure (35 years) in the 1950s (see Table 3). A 1992 survey showed that 32 % of older persons are healthy and "feel fine"; 46,4 % report that they have "passable" health, while 21 % feel unhealthy (*ibid.*, 1992b). Chinese generally remain in good health in old age. In both urban and rural areas they do physical exercises, as well as shadow boxing, qigong (breathing therapy), callisthenics, and disco (localized foreign disco); use traditional acupuncture, moxibustion, massage and herbal medicine; and follow special diets. Most old people in agricultural areas have farmed all their lives and/or performed domestic chores; health problems and poor access to medical care remain major difficulties for them, especially for those who live alone. Statistics show that about 15 % of the older population has poor access to medical care (*ibid.*, 1992b). In the worst situations, ill old people, or venerable old persons who live alone, lie in bed in need of constant care.

Table 3
Life expectancy at birth in China (years)

Year	Males	Females	TOTAL
1950			35
1957			57
1981	66,4	69,3	67,9
1989	69,3	73,4	71,0

Sources: China Research Center on Ageing, 1992b.
China Senior Citizen, 1989.

In China a far smaller number of old people than in developed countries feel lonely. The majority of older Chinese have close relations with family members, even if they live apart from sons and daughters. As income constitutes an important element in their livelihood, most old people, if their health permits, continue to participate in the labour force. Traditional neighbourhood ties greatly reduce the extent of loneliness among older Chinese, as contact and meetings with their friends are sometimes more frequent than contacts with sons and daughters. According to survey findings, over 75 % of the elderly in both urban and rural areas experience no feelings of loneliness; only about 14 % admit to having such feelings. Seventy-five per cent of the elderly report that they are happy; 3,7 % in urban areas and 7,6 % in rural areas report that they are unhappy, and most of these people live alone (*ibid.*, 1992b).

Community social services

The surveys referred to above have found a need to develop community social services in China to ensure a better living

environment for older persons, especially those who live alone. Under the present social and economic conditions, such vision has wide ramifications: on the one hand there is a pressing need for such services and on the other hand favourable conditions exist for the development of these services. Since the mid-1980s, under a government initiative, the development of community social services has been in full swing. In recent years community social-service facilities of different types numbered 89 000, comprehensive community service centres in cities and towns numbered 4 376, and convenience networks numbered 169 000 (*China She Hui Bao*, 1994). (See Table 4.)

Table 4
Numbers and capacity of community social-service facilities for old persons in China, at end 1991

Type of facility	Number	Number of beds/clients
Social welfare home	930	67 248 (beds)
Home for the aged	39 820	667 126 (beds)
Service facility	21 534	
Service centre	47 502	
Guaranteed service group	54 000	88 000 (clients)
University/school	916	130 000 (clients)

Sources: *China She Hui Bao*, 1992, 1993.
State Statistical Bureau, 1991.

Community social services are being extended to country areas. Across the country volunteers have mobilized; a contingent of more than 3 million volunteers has registered at neighbourhood committees (*China She Hui Bao*, 1994). In October 1993 the Central Government together with 14 ministries and commissions under the State Council jointly published "opinions on speeding up community services," which urged localities throughout the country to take action to establish and develop a social security system and social services. By the year 2000, the growth rate of its output value should reach 13.6 %, with the number of various facilities reaching 260 000; by then community service centres should be set up in 85 % of the street committees (*China She Hui Bao*, 1993). This is a great show of support for independent living of older people.

Community social services are designed to meet the demands and traditional customs of the elderly. The basic principles and characteristics are as follows:

- (1) To bring into full play the initiatives of all groups, mainly relying on self-service and self-management. Inhabitants of communities are both served by and participate in the rendering of services.
- (2) To address the pressing needs of community residents, with service agencies being flexible, varying in form, adapting to local conditions, and taking minimum investment and maximum results as criteria.
- (3) To fully utilize Chinese traditional methodology to achieve the acceptance of the majority of residents.
- (4) To mainly deliver services to older persons' homes, owing to a lack of resources and space or other facilities, and out of consideration for the reluctance of older people to leave family, relatives or friends, and the locality or environment with which they are familiar.
- (5) To provide services free, or at a nominal fee in accordance with an ability to pay, in an attempt to offer support and to promote self-maintenance and self-development.

- (6) To provide relief for childless widows/widowers or indigent old people from the "Five Guarantees": food, clothing, shelter, health care and funeral assistance. In addition, social groups and volunteers in the community are organized to provide different guaranteed services, i.e. community dwellers sign mutual aid agreements to provide one-way, two-way or general services such as shopping, cooking, cleaning and house repairs, and helping older persons to see a doctor and to buy medicines (see Box 1). Such services are vital forms of support to old people who live alone.

Box 1

Types of community social-service facilities for older persons in China

Care for the aged agencies

- homes for the aged, day-care centres, senior citizens' apartments
- home-service centres, guaranteed service groups
- insurance agencies, consultation agencies, legal affairs
- matchmaking agencies, home-maker exchange agencies

Health-care facilities

- specialized hospitals, mobile hospitals
- rehabilitation centres (mainly based on traditional rehabilitation methods)
- health care
- medical consultation home services, psychological consultation services

Educational facilities

- senior citizens' universities, senior citizens' parenthood schools
- reading rooms, libraries
- cultural activities centres

Re-employment bureaus

- talent exchange centres
- labour exchange

Recreational facilities

- activity centres
- restaurants, tea houses
- sports centres
- dancing classes
- calligraphy and painting groups

Economic operations

- comprehensive economic development service departments
- farming, aquatic breeding
- science and technology development consultation departments
- units for economic operations

Other

- senior citizens' shelters
- service groups for signing family support agreements

Despite the major development of community social services in China, the system is still far from perfect. As the rate of population ageing accelerates, more older people will live independently, and the number of handicapped and ill old persons who are in need of care will grow. It is estimated that throughout China the coverage of social services is only about 30 %; service facilities meet only 20 % of the demand (Li Yong, 1994). Moreover, the quality of the services is not up to standard. Specific problems include the following:

- (1) The key to the continuous development of community social services is to establish a fund-guarantee system. At present, in a bid to raise funds, many communities start economic entities for their elderly and mainly target them at giving consultations, labour service, and processing and other tertiary industry. In rural areas, farming, aquatic breeding, and the processing of agricultural products initiatives have been started. Funds for social services are mainly self-supporting with government subsidies and supplemented by assistance from the community. However, accumulation of capital and management are not yet in the hands of a fully-fledged foundation which applies scientific methodology.
- (2) A greater number of trained and competent community social workers are badly needed to develop community social services. China has few of these workers. To meet the demand, the Chinese government has initiated a system of issuing a Community Service Certificate, but the system can hardly be carried out nationwide within a short period of time.
- (3) China is not yet ready to use modern technology in community social work to meet the independent living needs of old people. Only simple equipment is installed in the rooms of old persons, such as electric bells. In some cities emergency rescue centres are being set up.

At this stage, international co-operation with experienced scholars, social workers and entrepreneurs from foreign countries to explore ways and means to improve the community social services system would be helpful.

The role of the family

In China, the family continues to play the main role in the care of elders. To consolidate family care and bring it into full play remains the key link of the social security system in China, no matter whether from the point of view of the wishes of older persons, or the cost-effectiveness of the social security system or its social effects.

In line with traditional Chinese thinking, the community could be regarded as an extended family; community social services could play the security role of an extended family. The community could be regarded as an extension or a development of family care (security).

On the other hand, judging from development trends, it is inevitable that with the advancing social forces of modernization, urbanization and industrialization, the main source of support for the aged will be shifted from the family to the community. This shift will be due to social structural changes, diminishing family size, a weakening of kin relationships, and

other social factors, as well as the existing family-planning policy whereby a young couple supports and cares for four parents with increasing longevity and has only one child.

The future

The course of social development in the West tells us that a trend towards independent living for the elderly is inevitable. The same trend is expected to follow in China under the existing market economy. We therefore need to be prepared for these changes.

Along with economic development, it is possible to establish various collective welfare institutions as homes for the aged. Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should show greater concern and give more support to the elderly. However, since China has such a large population and limited financial resources, the development of collective welfare institutions is naturally limited.

Hence, an emphasis on the development of home-care delivery is a must for the community. As for the elderly, they need to cultivate a consciousness and the capability to live independently, as well as to reduce their reliance on sons and daughters or the family, and to try to adapt to the changing situation.

References

- Bulletin on Civil Affairs Development Statistics. 1994. *China She Hui Bao*, May 21.
- Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs and 13 other ministries and commissions demanding stepping up of community services. 1993. *China She Hui Bao*, October 8.
- China reconstructs. 1989. *China Senior Citizen*, August.
- China Research Center on Ageing. 1989. *Report on ageing*, No. 3. Beijing.
- China Research Center on Ageing. 1992a. *Analysis on livelihood research of elderlies in Tianjin, Hangzhou and Wuxi, China*. Beijing.
- China Research Center on Ageing. 1992b. *Report on ageing*, No. 2. Beijing.
- China Research Center on Ageing. 1992c. *Survey data on China support system for elderly*. Beijing.
- Li Yong. 1994. *Present situation of social welfare work in China and some thoughts on its macro-development*. Social Work study.
- Report on Chinese Social Welfare Development. 1992. White Paper. *China She Hui Bao*, October 13.
- State Statistical Bureau. 1990. *The Fourth National Population Census*. Beijing.
- State Statistical Bureau. 1991. *Statistical Year Book on Chinese Civil Affairs*. Beijing.