

New Issues on The System of Support of Old Age in China

---The changes of economic system, family structure and traditional culture and the slackness of the tie of intimate terms among family members are shaking the Basis of The tradition of family support of old age in modern China

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Since the implementation of family planning policy, the process of population ageing in China has gone faster than ever before. By the year of 2002, the number of old people at or over the age of 65 has come up to 96.92 million, which covered 7.5% of the total population. Such a proportion is somewhat higher than 7%, the standard of ageing society defined by the United Nations. It was predicted that the number of old people in China would exceed the 100 million mark in 2005, which covered 7.53% of the total population.

The decline of birth rate and the lengthening of lifespan of human beings are main factors to have changed original model of family life circle worldwide. As a matter of fact, the period that parents raise their child or children has obviously shortened while the period that old people live a life without any child accompanied has lengthened. Given these circumstances, issues concerned with ageing family and family support of old age have come into view. Some studies indicated that there had been a number of 450,000 families with the aged who lived alone by the end of 2002 in Beijing, which covered 38% of families with the aged over 60, while the rate of the families was even more than 40% in Shanghai.

According to an opinion poll on family and marriage conducted by All-China Women's Federation in 2003, the proportions of adults living apart from their parents were as high as 69% and 59.9% in urban and rural areas respectively. The survey regarded that family support of old age in urban and rural areas was mainly practiced in manners of separate living, common share on family's expenses and spiritual solicitude at the time, and living together with the aged was nothing but a supplement.

Social issues on the family with the aged who live alone and the family with the aged who is bereft of his or her spouse are revealed in quite different ways between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, the issues focus on psychological barriers of old people and their daily lives such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, fidget and etc. As a matter of fact, it is not rare to see that young people neglect emotional communication with and spiritual solicitude for their parents from time to time. Many a survey discovered that the absence of spiritual solicitude was the most important reason to have resulted in 70% of mental illnesses of old people who live in urban areas. For example, the cases concerned with family support of old age in 2002 told us that 25% of the aged made a request of spiritual solicitude. In rural areas, the issues are mainly concentrated on the matter of basic living of old people. The aged there do not make excessive demands on spiritual solicitude but the security of basic living. They would be very satisfied so long as they are afforded not to suffer hungry and cold. Unfortunately, such a request is not easy to be met even though it is simple and minimum. As family support of old age is the most important pattern in rural areas, once an old person is bereft of his or her spouse or loses labor ability, he or she will almost have no other means but rely on economic support and spiritual solicitude of the children. In

view of this, the old person would face the great risks of poverty and helplessness.

In terms of the support of old age in China, there are five patterns being put into practice at present, which in specific are understood as pension system, family support of old age, system for ensuring a minimum standard of living, system of allowance for living expenses and old-age insurance including rural endowment insurance and “*WuBaoHu*” system conducted in rural areas that in other words refers to the households enjoying five financial guarantees by the government including food, clothing, medical care, housing and burial expenses. However, all these patterns do have defects like this or that.

Firstly, pension system as a main form of the system of support of old age implemented in urban areas is affected by enterprise management and is always in a state of small and low increase, or even without any increase, although it is provided with the characteristics of relative stability and reliability. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for the pattern to perform a function in improving the living standard of old people. As a result, relative pauperism has become more and more obvious and serious in urban areas of China. In recent years, retired staff and workers, those who are forced to leave their working posts and the unemployed have been the major groups of newly increased pauper populations.

Secondly, as the most important pattern in rural areas, family support of old age is dependent on the commitments of family members. Not only is the practice of this pattern decided by the economic condition of family members, but also it is affected by their morality and willingness.

Therefore it lacks reliability. As a result, there would come great risks when the basis of family support of old age---the traditional culture that advocates to respect and take good care of old people--- has been

pounded by the fast process of population ageing, the movement of population, the change of family structure and the transition of a leading role responsible for the system of social security in rural areas from the People's Commune to each family.

Thirdly, system of ensuring a minimum standard of living has been a controversial topic of the public since it only provides a small number of pauper groups with the low level of economic support although it is relatively reliable. For this reason, it is difficult for the pattern to guarantee old people to live a stable and comfortable life.

Fourthly, system of allowance of living expenses and old-age insurance including rural endowment insurance also has obvious defects although it seems effective in some regions. One of the defects is that rural endowment insurance prefers the rich to the poor. In rural areas, those who are capable of bearing fixed costs on endowment insurance throughout the year are required to have stable sources of income. But for most of the poor especially the aged, it is only a matter within sight but beyond reach. On the other hand, the system is also deficient in the aspects of coverage item and security level. Since peasants can only bear relatively low level of insured value, the pensions that they will receive in the future could not meet their needs. And hence, the role of rural endowment insurance is under suspicion. In addition, the instability of policies concerned and no proper objects for investment are also the barriers to make the system perform a function smoothly. In fact, the funds of endowment insurance have even suffered devaluation in some rural regions.

Finally, with regard to “*WuBaoHu*” system, we can see that only a small number of old people have been benefited from the system if we take the

total population of rural old people into consideration. Being the traditional system of social security in rural areas, it was pillared by collective economy in the past. But since the implementation of household contract responsibility system with remuneration linked to output, the money demanded has to be provided from fees paid by farmers for overall township planning and village reserve. Given these circumstances, the money is hardly guaranteed in some poor regions.

In contrast to the state that a large number of old people live a lonely and poor life and are in need of support, welfare institutions are greatly insufficient in China. According to statistics concerned, there were less than 50,000 welfare institutions and commercial agencies for destitute old people in which could only accommodate a total number of 862,000 old people at the end of 2001. In fact, the state could not meet the needs of 2 million old people who were completely cared by the society. At present, there is a common sense in the society that insufficient welfare institutions, unsatisfactory service and facilities, excessive expenses on staying at houses for destitute old people especially the commercial houses and traditional notions of old people are the factors to affect their living at public facilities.

To support the aged is a traditional virtue of the Chinese people. Family support of old age has always been encouraged and advocated by the Chinese government. However, such a tradition is quite different from the value of western societies. For instance, according to the reports from the US sociologists, 76.7% of old females and 80.3% of old males in the United States insisted that the government but not the young generation bear the responsibility of providing for the aged. At present, it is no longer realistic for the Chinese families to follow the tradition---family

support of old age. Along with the change of family structure, young people have changed their ideas of the support of old age, and they have had a new understanding of the pattern of providing for their parents. Some surveys reported that the young people in urban areas who get married were more likely to take care of their parents by paying a regular visit, while the unmarried would prefer economic support to physical labor. According to the surveys, 49% of young people admitted that they were involved themselves into the conflicts with their parents from time to time due to the different understandings of living style and value concept. In addition, owing to the severe competition for survival among the young people in urban areas, the cross-regional movement of population, the change of living style and the implementation of “one child policy”, the relation between generations in an urban family will be inevitably affected. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult for the young and middle-aged groups to take much time and energy or to provide more materials for their parents at present. So many young people have appealed that the society should share more responsibilities of providing for old people, and they want to renew the traditional model of family support of old age.

Social basis of family support of old age has not existed any more.

The issues in rural areas are more serious. Along with the damage to the basis of traditional culture, the introduction of foreign culture and the movement of peasants to urban areas, the tie of intimate terms between the parents and the children has not been as tight as before on one hand, while filial piety is being replaced by consumerism and hedonism. In rural areas, as more and more young people move into urban areas, there have occurred more and more conflicts between generations in a family

in the fields of value concept and living style. In addition, old people always rank the last in the allocation of family limited resources, or their names are even not on the list of allocation. In order to pursue more comfortable material lives, many young people are involved themselves into the cases concerned with non-support of old age. Survival crisis of old people have emerged in many families indeed. Furthermore, the land that is the main property and the most important source of income of a family is suffering the decline of profitability and the constant devaluation. Since the system and the economic basis that support the culture of filial piety have been damaged, old people do not have any right of controlling family economy any longer. In general, the changes of economic system, family structure and traditional culture are shaking the basis of family support of old age in rural areas, and the issues concerned are becoming more and more intense and severe.

Reform on the system of support of old age is extremely urgent and near.