Labor Migration and the Role of Older Adults in the Prosperity of China

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“There is an urgent need for a new mentality that sees the family as part of the solution sought after, rather than part of the problem. In other words, what is required is a mentality that doesn't treat the family as a burden to development, but rather as a driving force behind it.”
Growth of the Older 65+ Population in China
Number of People Over 65 (millions)

- **United States**
- **China**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>China</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>2030</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>2050</td>
<td>300</td>
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Old Age Support in China

- Non-universal pension system (30%), with little coverage (10%) in rural areas
- Limited availability of long-term care services and social assistance (2%)
- State supported care only to “3-Nos” elderly: no children, can’t work, no alternative support
- Moral and legal obligation of children to provide family care
China’s Dilemma?

- China is in a rush to turn green before it turns gray.
Beijing National Stadium

- At its height, 17,000 construction workers worked on the stadium.
- About 300,000 migrant workers helped build the Olympics venues, many making $5 per day.
Labor Migration and the Chinese Economy

• China’s new economy requires mobile and flexible labor force--higher earning potential (4-5X rural earnings) has attracted younger workers to cities to work in industrial, service, and construction work.
• Migrant workforce at 150 million people and the largest internal migration in history.
• Rural migrants now account for 40 percent of the urban labor force.
• Three-quarters of older population live in rural areas.
Rural-to-urban Migration and the Aged

- Increasingly elderly rural populations in villages bereft of middle generation: the “left behind”
- Increase in geographic distance from adult children.
- Increase in economic support to elders
- Does a rising tide lift all boats?
Confucian Philosophy of Filial Piety

• Coresidence has been a traditional way of demonstrating filial piety and insuring that instrumental needs of elderly are met.

• But coresidence is in decline—and at what cost to the elderly?
Older People Living with Children in China: 1982 - 2000

Percent Elderly Living with Adult Children in China

Grandchild-Care in Rural China

- Grandchild care allows adult children the freedom to migrate and take jobs at a distance.
- Grandparent caregivers benefit from their role as caregivers.
- But they are also a vulnerable group who may struggle in their caregiving duties.
“In the countryside, the new vernacular phrase is ‘liu shou’ or ‘left behind’ child. Millions of children are growing up without one or both parents. Villages often seem to be missing a generation. Grandparents work the fields and care for the children.”
One Family in Huanghu Township

• Shan Yang is 10 years old and her brother Qinlin is 4. Their father lives in Beijing, making five-times what he can earn in his village. He needs money for a prostate operation and his parents’ medical bills. Their mother lives in a different city as a factory worker.

• “I think they are suffering in order to make my life better,” Shan said of her parents, adding a familiar Chinese expression: “They are eating bitterness.”
The 72 year old grandfather and 65 year old grandmother take care of the two grandchildren. For this, they receive $150 a year from their migrant children. But the grandparents have arthritis and stomach ailments which make their caregiver role difficult.
“For the Yang family and millions of others in the Chinese countryside, the only way to survive as a family is to not live as one. Migrant workers like Shan's parents are the mules driving the country's stunning economic growth.”
Question About China

• China is country with:
  – A rapidly aging population
  – A “free market” economy with little social or health care safety net
  – Increasingly smaller family sizes
  – Hyper rates of migration
  – Filial piety strongly embedded in the culture

• Are older people: passive victims or empowered actors and beneficiaries of these changes?
Sample

- Longitudinal Study of the Elderly in Anhui Province, China
- Joint project of Xi’an Jiaotong University and the University of Southern California.
- Random sample of 1,698 adults age 60 and over living in rural townships within Chaohu city
- 4,289 grandparent-adult child pairs in which there was at least one grandchild under 16 years of age.
- Surveys conducted every 2 ½ - 3 years
Anhui Province, China
Anhui Province, China

• Fifth largest province in China (60 million)
• 80% rural
• GDP is 28th out of 34 provinces
• 12% of its rural population is 60 years of age and older (compared to only 8.5% of nation).
Chaohu City

- Chaohu area—per capita income = $854.
  - High levels of out-migration of working-age adults to capital city (Hefei) and to Shanghai
A Chaohu Village
Distribution of Intergenerational Arrangements (N=1,698)

- Lives with child and grandchild
- Lives with child only
- Lives with grandchild only
- Child lives in village
- All children live beyond village

Living Arrangements

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Intergenerational Arrangements by Functional Impairment (N=1,698)

- w/ child & GC
- w/ child only
- w/ GC only
- Child in village
- Beyond village
Intergenerational Arrangements by Depressive Symptoms (N=1,698)

- w/ child & GC
- w/ child only
- w/ GC only
- Child in village
- Beyond village
Intergenerational Arrangements by Cognitive Impairment (N=1,698)
Intergenerational Arrangements and Money Received from Children
Intergenerational Living Arrangements and Money Provided to Children

% Provided Money
- w/ child & GC
- w/ child only
- w/ GC only
- Child in village
- Beyond village
Percent of Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren

- Never: 0%
- Seldom: 5%
- Monthly: 10%
- Weekly: 15%
- Daily Part Day: 20%
- Daily All Day: 25%

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Grandparents as Caretakers of their Grandchildren in Rural China

• In the U.S., grandparents caregivers are often heroically assisting families beset with crises such as drug/alcohol addiction, divorce, incarceration, and economic distress.

• In China, custodial grandparents are part of a family system based on traditional norms of filial piety and mutual assistance across generations.

• Grandparents most often provide care for the offspring of migrant children (sons) that may imply reciprocity via remittances.
Circular Flow of Resources Between Grandparent Caregivers and Migrant Children

- Migration of Child
- Start-up Costs
- Grandchild Care
- Economic Return
- Improved Well-being
• Do older parents receive more money from migrant children than from other children?
Change in Amount of Money Older Parents Received from Sons by Sons' Migration Status (2001-2003)

- Recent migrants = migrated between T1 and T2
- Established migrants = migrants at T1 and T2
• Do older parents receive more money from migrant children in whom they invested money (start-up costs) and time/labor (grandchild care)?
Money to Children by Money from Children and Migration of Children

Note: Money provided/received = log (RMB) +1)
Money From Children by Grandchild Care and Migration of Children

Money Received from Children (T2)

Care for Grandchildren (T1)

- Non-Migrants
- Recent Migrants
- Established Migrants
- Return Migrants

Care for Grandchildren:
- None
- All day/everyday
• Does financial support from migrant children reduce depressive symptoms of older parents when it is “earned” (in return for providing care for grandchildren)?
Depressive Symptoms of Grandparents by Money from Migrant Children

Source: Cong & Silverstein (2007), Research in Human Development
Depressive Symptoms of Grandparents by Grandchild Care & Money from Migrant Children

Source: Cong & Silverstein (2007), Research in Human Development
Other Benefits and Costs of Grandchild Care to Grandparents

• Evidence suggests that grandparent caregivers have improved:
  – cognitive health
  – access to medical care (through remittances)

• But there is evidence that those who reduce their involvement or cease caring for grandchildren may be suffering from greater depression and health difficulties.
National Grandparenting Policies in China

• Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China (2001) stipulates that: “Grandparents who can afford it shall have the duty to bring up their minor grandchildren whose parents are dead or incapable of providing support.”

• “Grandchildren who can afford it shall have the duty to support their grandparents whose children are dead or incapable of supporting their parents.”
Provincial Policies: Report from Anhui Province

- In skipped-generation families:
  
  - “Children have lower academic performance, tend to be unsociable and lack communication skills, have safety concerns since the grandparents are too old to take care of them.”

  - “Grandparents have low quality of life since they are also responsible for agriculture work, have low education levels that make it difficult for them to tutor younger grandchildren, are very poor, and live a dull life.”
Provincial Policies: *Report from Anhui Province*

- Local governments should encourage:
  - Establish service to help skip-generation families; for example, specific schools for older adults and younger children
  - Provide job training to surplus work force so sons don’t need to migrate to cities to find employment.
  - Increase government funding for rural elderly pension system
  - Develop community-based entertainment activities to enrich older adults’ daily lives.
To Conclude…

• In China, grandparent caregiving fits with the strategic goal of families to maximize wealth by adapting to social and economic circumstances that require mobility of young workers.

• A such, the Chinese family is a “mutual aid” system that redistributes resources for benefit of older adults and the children they care for.
Discussion

• Concerns raised about the long-term health and economic consequences when aging grandparents care for young grandchildren for long periods.

• Are grandparents the “unsung heroes”, the foundation on which China’s economic boom rests?