



4-2-1 Phenomenon:

New Partnership
Explores Aging in China

By Mu Mian

An argument breaks out between two parents about where they will spend their retirement. The father wants to live with their only daughter; the mother, however, does not want to be an imposition. It is an issue that an increasing number of families across China now must face. Mrs. Xia, 54, says she is unwilling to put more pressure on her daughter as she gets older.

"Today's young people are imposed on much more than we were," she explains. But Mr. Xia, who is the same age as his wife, argues that a nursing home will not make things better. "Good ones cost too much. Plus, I don't believe we will receive good care."

The couple now lives on their own in a small town thousands of miles away from their only daughter, Xia Shu, who works in Beijing. Their

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Peking University

situation also presents a challenge for their daughter. At 26, she earns a stable middle class salary (4,000 yuan or about \$500 per month), but cannot afford a house in the capital city, with Beijing's living expenses ranking the third highest in the country.

"If they come to live with me, we will need a spacious flat. I am afraid that I will not be able to afford this. But I want to make sure my parents are well cared for," Xia says.

The 4-2-1 Phenomenon

This conversation exemplifies the challenge on China's horizon. By 2040, 400 million Chinese (representing 26 percent of the population) will be more than 60 years old. This figure is larger than the entire population of France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom combined.

The issue not only poses chal-



65.5%



INCREASE
IN EXPENDITURE ON SOCIAL
WELFARE SINCE 2000*

* China National Committee on Aging as cited in Jing, W. (2006, February 23). China focus: China feels pressure of growing elderly population. Domestic News.

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Edward Lawlor, dean



Challenges for families but for the Chinese government, too. The One Child Policy (OCP) of Mao Zedong resulted in the fertility rate dropping from 7.5 children per family in 1963 to 1.7 in 2003. The increasing age of the Chinese people combined with the OCP has created the 4-2-1 problem. One child has to be responsible for two parents and four grandparents.

Taking a Closer Look

In July, 10 faculty and 32 graduate students from China's Peking University, Hong Kong's Polytechnic University, and Washington University's Brown School participated in a joint institute in Beijing to examine the 4-2-1 phenomenon and other age-related issues in China. The institute represented the first collaborative effort by all three universities.

"The institute is more than just a partnership. It is a way to build a learning community among the three schools where joint research and teaching opportunities can be identified," says Gautam Yadama, associate professor and director of international programs for the Brown School. "Washington University is committed to building relationships with other universities around the world to expose our students and faculty members to different ways of thinking about the same issue."

Professor Angelina Yuen-Tsang agrees. Yuen-Tsang is head of the Department of Applied Social Sciences at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which has 18 years of partnership with Peking University and frequently participates in student and faculty exchanges with Washington University.

"The program gives all three schools a chance to view the same

issue from three different perspectives," Yuen-Tsang says. "Through participation, we expect to develop some new theories and knowledge." She also hopes that students from the three schools can learn new ways of thinking and change their attitudes through exposure to students from the other universities.

The China Scenario

China's long history of children supporting aging parents is deeply rooted in the nation's belief in the social ideals of Confucius. His philosophy places special emphasis on filial respect between children and parents, leading to an expectation of care on the part of the parents. Most old people, especially those in rural areas, live with their children, usually with their sons. They live on both their own savings and their children's income.

"There is a traditional belief that every child will have a younger



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generation to support them. This has resulted in an obligation on the child to take care of the elderly," says Professor Wang Sibin with the Department of Sociology in Peking University and one of the lecturers at the institute. "In Chinese culture, the concept of being old equates to being

unable to work any more."

Demographers estimate that China currently has an elderly population of 143 million people. This figure is set to rise drastically and by 2040, there will be an estimated 400 million Chinese at least 60 years old.

As the country ages so does the

workforce available to drive economic growth. The shortage of young people may threaten the economic growth of the country and consequently compromise the quality of life for senior citizens. If the country's economy stagnates, the disposable income available to young people to support their elders will dry up quickly, which is one reason why the government needs to keep the economy growing.

The severity of this dilemma is augmented by the burden of care already on young people to support their elders.

"Young people feel the need to double their efforts to create enough wealth to support the elderly in an increasingly market-oriented economy," says Edward Lawlor, dean of the Brown School and another lecturer at the institute.

Xia Shu's story is a prime example of the challenge the age issue causes. Born under the OCP, Xia will have to look after four aging parents once she gets married. "Both of my parents have small pensions. So you can imagine the pressure on me," says the young woman.

Reducing the Burden

In Hong Kong, the increasing number of old people also has begun to challenge local social service providers.

"One of our headaches is we have limited space in Hong Kong," said Yuen-Tsang.

On the Chinese mainland the issues are greater. Developing a social security system to cover both urban and rural areas, standardizing welfare institutions, and creating social work educational programs are all urgent

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issues that require solutions from the Chinese government.

For the past 10 years, the government has encouraged the construction of more nursing homes. But most of the homes are state-funded and located in big cities, with quality varying drastically. Almost all existing nursing homes in China only provide basic health care and service, without any trained social workers.

The Chinese government is starting to respond to the need to provide more social services and psychosocial supports for the elderly.

In 2004, the Ministry of Civil Affairs began reforms of the old welfare system, introducing an enterprise annuity system and substantiating private pension accounts. In Beijing, a star rating system will be implemented among nursing homes and will require each home to include at least one social worker.

However, according to Wang, it is probably more important to “involve

the community in the care of older people by including families and the government to help address the growing challenge.”

This point of view is shared by Michelle Putnam, assistant professor from the Brown School. She explains, “In the United States, there is a beginning trend of developing institutions that are more like communities, where older people interact, can grow plants, and even raise pets.”

Lawlor adds that “creative ways” are needed to provide instrumental support. He cited a project called On Lok in the United States as an example. “On Lok” refers to a community group where elderly people are involved by providing services for children. “It’s a win-win strategy,” he says.

Contrasts and Comparisons

The issue of age has the potential to dramatically impact both society and the economy in China and the United States. Populations in both countries

are rapidly aging and both are experiencing economic growth and the privatization of service provision. For both countries, the importance of creating a system that adequately and sensitively serves the diverse needs of aging individuals is glaringly obvious.

Despite the similarities, institute participants rejected the idea that the two countries could share one single turn-key solution because each country has its own culture.

“We need to develop our own solution,” Lawlor remarks. “But through sharing our thinking on the issue we expose ourselves to solutions that we ordinarily wouldn’t think of.”

There was wide support for Lawlor’s opinions amongst the institute’s participants. Sarah Hyduke, a first-year graduate student at Washington University, cited a number of similarities concerning the age issue in China and the United States. “For example, in both countries, older people tend to be more vulnerable to poverty,” says Hyduke, who once was a social services director in a nursing home in California.

Hyduke, who wants to be involved in policy-related research in her future work, joined the institute with an interest in the development of government policies in China and how they will affect the younger generation. Hyduke is also curious about how economic reforms in China have affected people’s ideology and how this has impacted older people.

Though the two-week experience in Beijing could offer her no more than an overview about the age issue in China, she was very impressed by the amount of family involvement in the care of older people. “I think it will be difficult to promote the same level of involvement in America because policies and institutions favor a more formal market,” remarks Hyduke.

3.02 million

Annual rate of growth*

143 million

China’s current elderly population*

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Sharing the same academic interests with Hyduke was Tang Rui, a second-year master’s student at Peking University.

“The U.S. does have a more comprehensive policy package than China. We shouldn’t copy the U.S. model, but we can borrow some ideas, such as the combination of formal and informal support,” says Tang.

Assessing the Institute

Students from all three universities came to the institute with a range of

social work experience. Peking University students had some experience in social work while those from Hong Kong Polytechnic University all had completed master’s degrees and had three to five years relevant work experience. Brown School students fell somewhere in the middle of the two groups.

“I wanted to hear some new theories and study results from them,” says Guo Weihe, a doctoral candidate with Hong Kong Polytechnic University and an associate professor

in the Management College affiliated with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Guo says a field visit to a local nursing home as part of the institute’s program gave him new insights. “Practical experience of staying with the elderly should be given more attention by us researchers,” he says.

Kris Udy, who once served in the Peace Corps in Cameroon as a voluntary HIV/AIDS prevention teacher, said she was especially interested in the health-care system in China. She spent a week in Beijing before the institute began visiting poorer areas of the city by herself.

“It appears we are being shown the ‘best’ that China has to offer its elderly people. I would like to see what the ‘average’ living situation is for Chinese elderly,” Udy comments.

Future Collaborations Planned

Plans for next summer already are under way. Based on this year’s experience, the next institute will include more workshops, joint conferences, and seminars.

“For our next institute, I hope we can participate in more than just lectures. Debate on the issue and the sharing of relevant experiences should also be encouraged,” said Yuen-Tsang.

Participants say they hope the institute’s collaborative process will help the spread of ideas among the next generation of social workers from China, Hong Kong, and the United States and will lead to a better understanding of how best to care for older people. With the promise of greater collaboration among the three universities and the continuation of the institute next year, students at the Brown School can look forward to a truly global perspective on the issue of care and the role of the social worker. ☒



350.2 BILLION YUAN OR 42 BILLION DOLLARS, CHINA’S EXPENDITURE ON SOCIAL WELFARE FOR THE ELDERLY IN 2004*

350.2 billion yuan



* Zhang, Y. and Goza, F. W. (2005) Who will care for the elderly in China? A review of the problems caused by China’s One Child Policy and their potential solutions. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 20, 151-164.