

**Family Support vs. Self Support: The Impact of Cultural Change and
the Market Economy on Old-Age Support in Rural China**

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Introduction

Caring for the elderly has become an increasing concern in many societies, especially in countries with a large aging population, such as China. In traditional China the long-standing Confucian ethics of filial piety designated adult children, especially sons, the undeniable responsibility to provide old-age support for their parents ((Fei 1947; Freedman 1970; Potter and Potter 1990). Failure to offer sufficient support for aged parents would incur severe public criticism for unethical behavior. This traditional moral standard has persisted in contemporary China, especially in rural areas, where a lack of state retirement pension leaves the majority of peasants no choice but to rely on their adult children, in most cases married sons, for old age security (Benjamin et al 2000; Davis-Freedman 1991). The Chinese state has further promoted and reinforced the practice of family support through implementing family laws that stipulate the legal obligation of adult children for providing support for parents in need (The Law of Protection for the Rights of the Elderly of the People's Republic of China 1996). Therefore, it is culturally significant, economically crucial, and legally supported for a peasant couple to depend on family support from adult children, sons in particular.

In recent years there has been an emerging trend in rural China where a substantial number of young and middle-aged peasant couples have chosen to purchase newly marked insurance plans that highlight an old-age security fund. This phenomenon reveals a transition from traditional dependence on family support to a preparation for self support in rural China. Based on my ethnographic field research, in this article I examine the phenomenon of peasant couples purchasing insurance plans as a preparation for self support in old age in contemporary rural Northeast China, and I explore the sociocultural and economic factors contributing to this emerging transition of old age support.

Research Community and Methods

The ethnographic material presented in this article was collected during seventeen months of fieldwork in the summers of 2004 and 2005, and from July 2006 to July 2007, for a larger project exploring family change and reproductive choice in rural Northeast China. I conducted my fieldwork in Yushu County in Northeast China, focusing on a rural community, Lijia village². Lijia is a multi-surname village with a population of 824 in 2006. Residents in Lijia were engaged in maize cultivation and small scale animal husbandry, such as raising cows. Moreover, the burgeoning market economy had created non-agricultural employment opportunities for adult villagers, such as temporary jobs at construction sites, factories, and in the service industry in the local county seat and the neighboring cities. A newly established economic development zone of ceramic factories eight kilometers away from Lijia offered a large number of jobs for both men and women of different age. Lijia residents, especially young and middle-aged peasants, took advantage of these opportunities to increase their family income. During my stay in Lijia, almost every young and middle-aged couple had one spouse engaged in non-agricultural employment. In many families, both husband and wife took a second job besides farming on family contracted land.

The field methods for this project combined long-term participant-observation, a survey on insurance plan purchase and childbearing preference, and open-ended interviews with three insurance agents and forty-five residents in Lijia.³ During my fieldwork, I lived with two host families, one elderly couple in their late seventies, and a middle-aged couple in their thirties, and participated in daily activities, such as domestic chores and social interaction with the kinship

² All Chinese names in this article are pseudonyms.

³ These numbers only include people I interviewed for this project, not the total number of informants for my larger project.

and social groups of my host families. I also accompanied one local insurance agent on three family visits for insurance plan promotion.

Preparing for Old Age

My field research reveals that there is an emerging trend of peasant couples purchasing recently marketed insurance plans in Lijia. According to a comprehensive survey I conducted with 187 married couples younger than fifty-seven years old in 2007, 106 or 56.7 percent, of my informants had chosen to purchase at least one insurance plan.⁴ 62 or 58.5% had purchased two plans for both spouses. The average age for all people enrolled in an insurance plan was 39.5. More surprisingly, 62.9 percent of peasant couples who have purchased a plan have a son. Among qualified couples who were not enrolled in any insurance plan, some either did not believe such a plan was beneficial for them, or they had doubts on the credibility of insurance companies. Others did not have extra money for a plan, but expressed their interest in enrolling in an insurance plan and willingness to buy one once their economic situation improves.⁵ The popularity of insurance plans is closely associated with various benefits insurance plans marketed to offer to peasant couples.

The insurance plans promoted by insurance companies are set up as old-age security funds, purchased by investing a sum of money annually into accounts for set period of time. Once the payment ends, usually when insured people reach the age for retirement, they can receive an amount of money to support their old age. For instance, one of the most popular plans

⁴ Among these 187 couples, there was one widow and eight widowers and divorced men. The insurance plan was introduced in Lijia in the past several years. Only people under 50 years old were qualified for enrollment. The first person who purchased a plan was 56 years old in 2007. Therefore, I included in my survey every Lijia married couple who had one spouse under 57. The oldest person in this survey was 59 years old whose spouse was 56.

⁵ A small number of Lijia residents, including school teachers and local government officials, enjoyed a retirement pension from the government, and none of them purchased any insurance plan.

for a forty-year-old man involves paying approximately 900 yuan (120 US dollars) a year for twenty years. When the insured person reaches sixty, he can receive twenty thousand yuan (2667 US dollars) from his insurance fund, which will cover a modest basic living expense for almost ten years without any other income. The plans also include a death benefit which provides a substantial amount of money to a designated beneficiary, in most cases a surviving spouse, upon the death of an insured person. The surviving spouse can use the money to pay for the deceased person's funeral and for self support in old age.

Another attractive feature of the insurance plan is a coverage of critical illness insurance, which offers a certain amount of money to cover all or a proportion of medical expenses for catastrophic diseases listed in the insurance policy, such as cancer, diabetes, and heart attack, during the insured period of time. For example, for a commonly chosen plan that includes medical insurance, if an insured individual is diagnosed of cancer, this person will receive an amount of money ranging from ten thousand yuan to twenty thousand yuan to cover medical expenses. The insurance plan also ends once a benefit has been provided.

The amount of money for annual investment into an insurance plan is a significant portion of a family's income. For example, for an average household of a couple and one or two children, the amount for two insurance plans can take up 10 to 20 percent of the annual family income. Nonetheless, the majority of peasant couples have chosen to purchase a certain type of insurance plan. My further in-depth interviews with peasant couples who were enrolled in a plan reveal two major factors contributing to this decision, preparing for self-support in old age, and medical insurance for critical illness.

Instead of relying on adult children for old age, young and middle-aged peasant couples in Lijia have adopted a newly developed notion of old-age support, ie., "self reliance", or a "two-

hand preparation”, which means preparing for self-support in old age if their children turn out to be unreliable. Under such a notion, peasant couples have embraced the employment opportunities brought by the market economy and dedicated themselves in hard work in order to have some extra money saved for old age. Many of these peasants considered enrolling in an insurance plan as a way of saving money in a bank account and benefiting from it when they reach their old age. The majority of couples who were enrolled in an insurance plan were in their thirties and forties. When the plan ends, they will have reached sixty, an age when their physical condition prevents them from engaging in heavy labor employment. An insurance plan will offer them sufficient money for several years without any other income. A thirty-one year old woman, who had purchased two plans for her and her husband, told me that, “It is like putting money in a bank. This forces my husband and me to save some money every year, the money which we might have otherwise wasted. When we are too old to work, we will still have the money we saved (in two insurance plans). Plus, the plan also includes medical insurance which banks do not offer.”

The second motivation for purchasing insurance plans is to secure sufficient coverage for medical expenses for catastrophic illness. I was frequently told by my informants in Lijia that one of the greatest financial burdens for a rural family is paying medical bills for critical long-term illness, such as diabetes, and catastrophic disease, such as cancer.⁶ Medication for serious diseases, such as a surgery for a cancer patient, can place a family in severe debt for several years. Although the Chinese state implemented a rural cooperative medical plan, its limited coverage and restricted options for hospitalization cannot solve the problem a family may face

⁶ Other financial burdens include financing a son’s wedding and supporting a child for higher education.

when a tremendous amount of money is needed for medical care.⁷ The burden to pay medical bills for an aged parent often causes intergenerational conflicts between parents and married children and disputes on an equal share of responsibilities among adult children. For many families, adult children had to give up paying for further medication for a parent because of financial difficulty or unwillingness to spend a large amount of money for an aging parent.

The insurance plan with catastrophic disease insurance has been well received by insured Lijia residents. According to people I interviewed, the insurance offers a peace of mind for financing medication for an unexpected severe illness during times of financial difficulty or unavailability of any assistance from adult children. A forty-eight year old woman in Lijia was diagnosed with diabetes of minor conditions. Having known that diabetes is listed as one of the critical diseases covered in insurance plans, she and her husband decided to enroll her into an insurance plan in 2007. Her husband told me that if her diabetes got worse, they could claim a large amount of money for further medication. Since they could not afford any major expenses on medication all by themselves, nor did their married son and daughter have the financial capability to pay for their medical bills, the insurance plan became a practical and favorable solution.

Purchasing an insurance plan involves a process of careful and rational decision-making, especially for couples who can afford only one plan. A twenty-seven-year old married woman in Lijia bought her husband an insurance plan which included medical insurance. When I asked her the reason of buying a plan for her husband instead of herself, she frankly told me that, “If I become seriously ill, my husband can work and make money to pay for my medical bills. But if my husband is ill, I cannot make as much money as he can. Everyone in the village knows that I

⁷ Joining the plan involves investment of a small amount of money into a cooperative fund. The Chinese government offers partial financial support into this fund. An enrolled rural resident can claim money to partially cover medication in designated hospitals.

am not a capable woman to make money, and therefore they will not loan me money to pay for my husband's medical bills. Since we can afford only one insurance plan, I decided to buy him one just to make sure I have money to send him to the hospital if anything bad happens to him.”

My further examination suggests three major sociocultural and economic factors contributing to the recent trend of purchasing insurance plan in rural China: a decline of family support, the implementation of the birth-control policy and a transformed preference for fewer children, and the burgeoning market economy and insurance plan promotion in China.

The Decline of Family Support

The transition from reliance on support from adult children to preparation for self support in old age has first resulted from a decline of traditional gendered practice of family support. Currently in Lijia, an increasing number of sons have failed to fulfill their role to offer adequate support to their aged parents, who often expressed their grievance through moral condemnations. Many elderly parents have complained that their sons had refused to provide them with any support or only offered them minimum financial support. When there was more than one son in a family, sons were more likely to bargain with each other over an equal share of responsibility for their parents. Disappointed and outraged, some elderly parents even resorted to law suits against their unfilial sons.

During my fieldwork I investigated three cases of an elderly parent seeking a ruling from the court for sufficient support from their sons and daughters-in-law. In one case, an elderly widow, Zhang Shuwen, had five sons who refused to provide her with adequate support when they could not reach an agreement on an equal share of the responsibility and a division of Shuwen's house. The youngest daughter-in-law whom Shuwen was living with made her

situation even worse by frequently verbally abusing her and even smashing a window of her room for leaving the responsibility of old-age support to her and her husband. Shuwen had no choice but to resort to the last hope by filing a law suit against her five sons. As a result, the court ordered her sons to take turns to offer meals to their elderly mother. When I interviewed Shuwen in 2007, she sadly commented that even though she was offered enough food, her relationship with her five sons and daughters-in-law became even worse, because the law suit apparently made her children a target of public criticism and thus hurt their feelings.

There are two major factors contributing to the decline of family support in rural Northeast China, the collapse of parental power, and the empowerment of women in marriage. Parental power in rural China has been declining since the establishment of socialist China in 1949 and the subsequent policies and movements initiated by the state.⁸ When traditional patriarchal authority has been shaken, intergenerational relationships have to be rearranged. Consequently, a new reciprocal relationship has emerged (Guo 2001; Yan 2003). Under this new norm, family support from an adult child, especially a son, was no longer taken for granted. Instead, a child's filiality had to be earned through fulfilling a parent's role as a caring provider for a child's education, career development, and most importantly financing a child's wedding. Failure to provide a decent marriage for a son would receive complaints and resentment from the son. During my fieldwork in Lijia, I frequently heard stories of several bachelors, who had passed their most desirable age for marriage, desperately expressing discontent and anger toward their parents for not being able to finance them a marriage.⁹

Parental obligation did not stop with a son's wedding. A good relationship with married sons and daughters-in-law needed to be cultivated and maintained by offering help when adult

⁸ For a thorough analysis on the collapse of parental power during after 1949, see Davis and Harrel (1993), Wang (2004), and Yan (2003).

⁹ In Lijia the most desirable age for marriage for a man in 2007 was between 20 to 23.

children are in need. Parents were expected to help with childcare and household chores, such as babysitting a grandchild and cooking for the young couple after they came home from work. Lu Li, a thirty-four-year-old woman told me that once their two-year-old daughter was sick and needed money for a doctor visit. Not having enough money in hand, her husband went to his parents' home to borrow some money. Disappointingly, he was refused by his parents. Upon his return, he resentfully told his wife to stop helping his parents in the future because they turned him down when he asked for help.

Such reciprocal relationships were more salient between a daughter-in-law and her parents-in-law. A daughter-in-law was reluctant to assist her husband to fulfill his filial obligation when she was not provided with what she had asked for her wedding and when she was not offered sufficient help from her parents-in-law, such as babysitting and financial support. Dissatisfaction with their parents-in-law often resulted in disrespectful behaviors, even verbal and physical abuse to the elderly, eventually preventing the husbands from offering adequate support to the parents-in-law.

Another contributing factor to a decline of sons' support for old age is the empowerment of married women, which is closely associated with women's increasing economic contribution to their families. In Lijia a large number of married women were engaged in non-agricultural works, such as working full-time in a neighboring garment factory, a brick kiln, or restaurants in the county seat. They brought home money which was an important source of family income. Some women raised livestock, such as cows, chickens and pigs for extra income. In a few families where the husband was physically ill and had lost the ability to work, the wife had become the only family member who produced income. As the cost of living has increased greatly in recent years, it is difficult for an average family to live a comfortable life on the

husband's income. Therefore, men valued their wives' economic contribution and their work at home.

Women who were not engaged in non-agricultural work took the responsibility of daily household chores and childcare. They prepared meals and washed clothes for their family and took care of family vegetable gardens and livestock. One thirty-three year old woman told me that although she did not go out to make money, she worked hard everyday taking care of household chores and her daughter. She said: "Though my husband is the one who brings home money, I am busy, too. I have my contribution to the money he makes."

Women's increasing contribution to the family has gained them decision-making power, including the decision to provide family support. They were reluctant to support their parents-in-law if they did not have a harmonious relationship with their in-laws. Women's empowerment also had a direct influence on men's filial support for their parents. Some married men told me that they would like to fulfill their filial obligation to their parents, but would compromise if it would cause a problem for their wives, in order to keep marriage harmony.

While a decline of traditional family support makes it crucial to prepare for one's old age, China's birth-control policy and an emerging preference for fewer children leave self support for old age a rational strategy.

The Birth-Control Policy and the Preference for Fewer Children

Implemented in 1979 China's birth-control policy limits a rural couple to only one child. Due to strong resistance from rural population, in mid-1980s the one-child rule was relaxed to two children for peasant couples whose first child is a girl (Greenhalgh 1993; Scharping 2003;

White 2006). Therefore, in rural China, the majority of peasant couples have a small family with no more than two children and a large number of families do not have a son.

In Lijia the birth-control policy has been strictly enforced since the late 1970s through various strategies ranging from government propaganda and education, compulsory contraception, penalties for those who did not comply, and coerced abortion for those who violated the birth limits. A committee was designated to be in charge of the birth-control policy, including a woman's leader and two assistants who closely monitored every woman of reproductive age for unauthorized pregnancy. Since the inception of the policy, Lijia has an almost perfect record of birth-control implementation.¹⁰ According to my survey in 2006, of all 153 couples of reproductive age (20-49), 49 had more than one child. For the rest 104 couples with one child, 61 had one son and 43 had one daughter.

Besides the mandate from the state on birth limits, an emerging transition of reproductive choice was taking place in Lijia. The majority of the couples of reproductive age had preferred a small-size family and had willingly embraced only one child. According to a survey I conducted with 61 couples who had a singleton-son (one child, a son), 42 (69%) of them said that they would not have another child even though the birth-control policy permitted them a second birth. This transformation is especially surprising among couples who have chosen to have a singleton-daughter (one child, a daughter), rather than taking advantage of the modified birth-control policy which allows them to have a second child. Among the 43 couples with a singleton-daughter, 25 (58%) of them had even applied for a singleton-child certificate, a pledge not to have a second child.

The birth limit and the choice to have one child present a practical concern for future old-age support for peasant couples. Peasant couples in Lijia envisioned the potential burden for their

¹⁰ Since 1982 only two families in Lijia violated the policy and had three children.

only child and the limited resources they can get from their adult children. According to these peasant couples, when their child gets married, the young couple not only has the responsibility to support two sets of parents, i.e., natal parents and parents-in-law, but also the parental duty to raise a child. This situation is often called the 4-2-1 model in China, meaning 2 couples supporting 4 parents and at the same time caring for 1 child. It is therefore not realistic to rely on family support from their adult children. They felt that they need to prepare to support themselves as much as they can to reduce the burden for their only child and to secure sufficient support for their old age. The decision to purchase insurance plans was a strategy to cope with the situation. When they were young and still active for work, they could invest money into an insurance plan as a preparation for self support in old age.

The decline of the practice of family support and a small family size make it practical to prepare for one's own old age. China's burgeoning market economy under which insurance companies have mushroomed has further facilitated the transition from family support to self support for old age.

The Market Economy and the Promotion of Insurance Plans

Private insurance industry has been newly developed under China's emerging market economy. The majority of peasants in Lijia purchased insurance plans from China Life Insurance Company, the largest insurance company with the most extensive sales network in mainland China and a Fortune 500 Company since 2003. There are two major strategies insurance companies have adopted to promote their products to the rural population: organizing product promotion lectures and hiring local representatives to promote insurance plans.

Take the example of China Life which has stationed a local branch in the Yushu county seat, about four kilometers away from Lijia. The company frequently invited potential customers to their office to participate in their product promotion lectures. At the lectures, sales representatives detailed their various products and benefits for insurance holders. As an incentive, gifts, such as low-price watches elegantly wrapped, were provided for participants. One fifty-year-old man who was considering buying an insurance plan for his wife, was invited to such a lecture. He happily returned with a gift for his grandson and information for the policy he was interested in. He positively commented on the lecture and recommended his son and his daughter-in-law, who were considering purchasing an insurance plan at that time, to a lecture held the next day.

A more pervasive and effective way to promote insurance products is through local sales agents. Insurance companies hired local sales agents from rural areas and trained them for sales promotion. In Lijia there were three local sales agents working for two insurance companies, including two for China Life in 2007. There was another sales agent in a neighboring village, who started to work for China Life when the company first started in Yushu and had several customers in Lijia. Some families purchased their insurance plans from their relatives or friends from outside of Lijia.

Insurance companies give incentives to their sales agents by relating the profits agents can earn directly to the number of insurance plans they can sell. For example, an agent from China Life receives ten percent of the total amount of each sold insurance plan. The potential profit encourages sales agents to passionately promote insurance plans to their customers. Their major strategies include frequent family visits, introducing insurance plans to potential customers, and persistent persuasion. During my fieldwork in Lijia, I followed a China Life sales agent, Li

Lijuan, a fifty-year-old woman in Lijia, on several home visits for product promotion. Lijuan had a full-time job in the local township government and spent her spare time visiting families to promote insurance plans. She was very persistent about her job as an insurance sales agent, and her previous experience as a successful women's leader in charge of birth-control policy implementation made her the best qualified person for this job.¹¹

As a long-term Lijia resident and a former village official, Lijuan knew every family very well, including the financial situation of each family, the person who made most decisions in each family, and the time when that person was most likely to be home. She was also from the largest kinship group in Lijia, which made her more trustworthy when she tried to persuade her relatives for insurance purchase. She told me that couples under fifty-years-old, who had the financial capability, made up her pool of potential customers. Once she had chosen a couple as her potential customers, she would frequent the family until both spouses finally decided to purchase a plan. During her visits, she would introduce the benefits of a specific plan. She gave examples of Lijia policy holders who had already benefited from an insurance plan, including a widow who received a large sum of money from her husband's insurance plan upon his sudden death. Lijuan also explained the insurance benefit of reducing the child's burden for future family support. She even told couples with an unmarried son cases she heard that young women favored men whose parents were enrolled in insurance plans when looking for a marriage partner, because parents-in-law's enrollment in insurance plans would relieve her and her future husband of providing family support. For couples who did not have the financial capability for insurance plans, Lijuan would persuade an adult child who was earning income to purchase insurance plans for parents. She reasoned that it relieved the child from future financial burden for family support,

¹¹ Everybody who is familiar with the implementation of the birth-control policy in rural China during the 1970s and 1980s will understand that a women's leader was one of the most determined and persistent officials in a Chinese village.

and emphasized the importance of being filial and considerate to one's parents. Besides frequent visits to families of her kinship group, she also developed a partner relationship with one woman who was not from Lijuan's kinship group to promote insurance plans to those outside of her kinship group.

In order to promote insurance plans, sales agents also gave discounts or gifts out of their own profits. For example, Lijuan frankly told her potential customers the amount of money she could make from their purchases, and promised to give them a discount from her profit. Some agents offered gifts to their customers, such as clothes for children. They even loaned money to couples who had financial difficulty to pay for insurance plans.

The market economy has not only facilitated the development of insurance industry, but has also introduced a new money-oriented notion. For the insurance plan purchase, such a notion is manifested by putting a value on human life. Villagers were frequently exposed to the idea of how much their lives were worth. For example, during one family visit, Lijuan tried to convince a woman to buy an insurance plan. Lijuan cited another Lijia insured woman who once told Lijuan, "Now I have insurance. If one day I am walking on the street, and someone kills me with a heavy hit on my head, I know my life is worth twenty thousand yuan!" Lijuan then said, "Her life is valuable because she has insurance. Why don't you make your life valuable, too (through buying an insurance plan)?" In her study on ideological work on insurance sales agents in Shanghai, Chan (2007) argues that the sacralization of money and insurance is an ideological attempt to resolve the problem of putting a price on human life. I would add that the sacralization of human life sales agents have introduced to their customers has further facilitated insurance promotion.

Conclusion

The choice for purchasing insurance plans reveals a transition from traditional family support to a preparation for self support in old age in rural China. Contributing to such a transition are the decline of family support, which is a result of the collapse of parental power and women's empowerment in marriage, China's birth-control policy and a preference for fewer children, and the burgeoning market economy and the promotion of insurance plans. As China is becoming a country with an increasing aging population and as the traditional mechanism of family support is vanishing, seeking alternative solutions for old-age support becomes a critical issue. Purchasing insurance plans for self-support in old age through the highly marketed insurance industry might be a continuing strategy adopted by many rural couples in China.

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