

Living Arrangements of the Elderly in China and Consequences for Their Emotional Well-being

Qiang Ren, Beijing University
Donald J. Treiman, UCLA

Extended abstract

We study the living arrangements and consequence for emotional well-being of the elderly in China using data from the 2010 wave of the *Chinese Family Panel Study*, a national probability sample survey of 14,960 households consisting of 57,115 individuals. All family members age 10 and older were interviewed, with information for younger children provided by parents or other adult family members. The sample includes 7,040 people age 60 or older. This is the group we study.

Currently about half of elderly Chinese (those age 60 and over) reside with their adult children. However, co-residence has been steadily declining, due to the replacement in urban areas of *hutong* (courtyard) housing stock with small high rise apartments designed for nuclear families; the increased urbanization of the population; and massive rural-to-urban migration with elderly family members left behind, often with responsibility for grandchildren.

Our first goal in this paper is to describe the distribution of non-institutional living arrangements experienced by the elderly population. We will construct a typology of living arrangements. Each category is defined by the presence or absence of the focal arrangement, ignoring other household members. The categories are¹:

- Living with a grown child
- Living with grandchildren but not with any grown children (“generation-skipping household”)
- Living with a spouse but not with grown children or grandchildren (“empty nest household”)
- Living with other relatives who are not spouse, grown children, or grandchildren
- Living with non-relatives
- Living alone

Although there is a large literature on the living arrangements of the elderly in China, most studies either are dated (e.g., based on the 2000 census) or are restricted to subsets of the Chinese population (the urban population, specific provinces, etc.). We will provide a more

¹ Because we utilize a survey of family households from which institutional quarters are excluded, we are not able to study the determinants of living in an institution. While this group is growing, it still includes only a tiny fraction of the elderly Chinese population. As of 2000, only about 1/3 of 1% of people age 60 and over lived in collective quarters (computation from a 1:1000 sample of the 2000 Census).

comprehensive and up-to-date account of the rapidly changing living arrangements of the elderly in China.

Second, we will study the determinants of living arrangements, about which relatively little is known. We will consider the effects of age, sex, marital status, health status, size of place of residence, socioeconomic status, socioeconomic characteristics of adult children, including their migration status, and type of housing. Our expectations include the following:

- Urban residents are less likely than rural residents to live with their children, mainly because the change in urban housing stock—in particular, the shift from *hutong* (courtyard) housing, in which extended families occupy sets of rooms in a building surrounding a courtyard, to small high rise apartments. It also is the case that such apartments are increasingly available to elderly people who wish to live independently of their grown children.
- High SES parents are more likely than low SES parents to live independently of their grown children, because they are more likely to afford independent housing.
- The rural elderly are more likely than the urban elderly to live in “generation skipping” families—that is, with grandchildren but not with grown children. This is particularly true when the grown children have “gone out for work,” that is, have migrated to other communities for work. Migrants tend to live in conditions unsuitable for children and thus the children often are left behind or sent to live with grandparents. But even non-migrant urban parents sometimes send children to live with grandparents in rural areas because they regard such places as safer for their children than large cities.

Third, we will consider the consequences of living arrangements for the emotional well-being of the elderly, on which there have been only a few, rather limited, previous studies. Our data include measures of happiness, life satisfaction, and depression (a 6-item version of the CES-D scale). For the happiness and life satisfaction items, we will estimate a logistic regression of outcomes on a set of dummy variables representing the living arrangements typology plus a standard set of control variables. For the depression scale, we will estimate outcomes via OLS using the same set of predictor variables as for happiness and life satisfaction. Our expectations include the following:

- The presence of grandchildren will increase emotional well-being
- For elderly people living with spouses, the effect of living with grown children but not grandchildren is unclear. It could be that living with children increases emotional well-being but alternatively it could be that living with children increases conflict and reduces emotional well-being.
- For elderly people not living with spouses, living with grown children will increase emotional well-being. Such people may have heightened feelings of loneliness, which are mitigated by living with grown children.