

China, the world's most populous country, has been experiencing continued low fertility for some time and all demographic indicators suggest that China is already an aging society. Although demographers generally agree that a population slowdown results in fewer societal changes than would a population explosion (Coale, 1986), the potential effects of continued low fertility in developing countries on economic development and social change should not be neglected. This paper will focus on one consequence of China's low fertility, the resultant changes in the lives of the elderly Chinese. We will also attempt to ascertain solutions for these challenges by examining qualitative data recently gathered from older Chinese who represent various walks of life in both rural and urban areas.

This paper begins by reviewing the phenomenal socio-economic transformations that China has recently experienced, focusing specifically on its increasing proportion of the elderly, and the cultural, social and economic implications this has caused. Next, we will personalize this social change by examining individual level qualitative data. The final section offers solutions that might be useful in reducing the socio-economic difficulties experienced by the Chinese elderly. This extended abstract will now briefly mention some of the solutions that are discussed in additional detail in our paper.

By adopting the life course perspective and relating these to in-depth interviews conducted with people from various positions in Chinese society it was possible to discern several feasible solutions. At the city level these include extending the skills of the elderly by increasing the retirement age and by building "elderly care centers." The challenges of the countryside are far more difficult to address given the proportionately larger elderly population located in the rural settings and the rapid drain of youth from rural settings to

urban centers. The Chinese government now selectively encourages some traditional filial piety practices to help reduce the aging burden. It is interesting that filial piety, which was once criticized as feudal garbage, “has been paradoxically called for and even revitalized” (Xu and Ji, 1999:273) in rural areas. Undoubtedly, the preservation of this tradition will help solve some of the issues arising because of this aging population.

With the loosening of the Hukou system and increasing labor mobility, still more rural elderly will be abandoned, creating yet another urgent problem requiring rapid resolution. Some have suggested that one possible solution to this situation might be to allow peasants more freedom in terms of land allocation such that the rural population can buy, sell or rent land as they desire.

In sum, it is both urgent and necessary for China to solve the problem of aging. In solving this problem, the process should be seen as a strategic move for China’s continued economic growth. On the one hand, China will still need the one child policy to regulate its population size; but on the other hand, China needs to solve the emerging aging issue in order to maintain its 7-8% annual growth rate. Eventually, the rise of economic development might help solve some of the negative consequences of the low fertility rates.