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**THE ELDERLY IN EMPTY NESTS:
CHINA'S CHALLENGE**

By

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THE ELDERLY IN EMPTY NESTS: CHINA'S CHALLENGE

WEI KONG

1. Introduction

China has the largest elderly population in the world. At present, the older population aged 60 and above is close to 145 million while US had about 46 million people aged 60 or older (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). The older population in China made up about 10.2 percent of the total, with an annual growth of 3%. It is projected that by the middle of this century the figure will reach 400 million. Along with this increase, the number of elderly in empty nests is projected to soar. Among these empty nesters, many are weak and disadvantaged, insecure, unable to provide self-care or are emotionally drained. The ageing phenomenon in general and elderly in empty nests in particular has given rise to social problems that need urgent attention. The crucial question is therefore centered on the well-being of this group of elderly empty nesters. In recent years, both the local and central governments have taken active measures to give protection to this vulnerable group of elderly. The Chinese government has built homes for the aged and set up departments and welfare institutions for the elderly,

aimed at improving the well-being of the older people. At the end of 2003, China's has established 51,000 welfare institutions for the aged with 1,042 thousand beds accommodating 817 thousand old residents who have no next of kin to care for them.

This article focuses mainly on the current living conditions of Chinese elderly in empty nests, explains the background that led to the emergence of empty nest syndrome, and suggestions for possible protection measures. First, the common characteristics of elderly in empty nests are discussed. These characteristics include loneliness and feelings of insecurity. In the second part of the article, the author analyses the reasons behind the rise of empty nest families in China. Lastly, the author puts forward suggestions and recommendations for empty nest families which are based on the concept of active ageing.

2. Current Status of Empty Nest Families in China

“Empty nests” refer to families whose young adults have left home in search of either education or career opportunities, thus leaving the elderly alone, at home. Although these elderly have child/children, they are not at home to provide the necessary care and attention to the elderly. As a group,

the absolute number and percentage are increasing at an unprecedented pace. Presently there are at least 23.4 millions elderly people who do not live with their children (Xinhua News Agency, 2003). In the cities empty nest families account for at least 30% of families with elder members. The proportion will probably increase to 80% by 2010 (Chen & Chen 2001). According to the 5th National Population Census, in 2000 the number of the families with an elderly aged 65 and above constitutes 20.09% of the national total families, while empty-nest families take up 22.83% of the families with an elderly over 65 (Xu 2001). These elderly in empty nests live alone, have no one to care for them and they are in need of care and assistance.

The Emergence of Empty Nests

Several reasons could be suggested for the rise in the number of empty nest families. They are as follows:

First, improvement in living standard and better living conditions as a result of economic development has prolonged the average lifespan, which causes a marked increase in elderly population. Secondly, the successful implementation of family planning policy which limits birth to one per family and the decrease in birth rate have caused the gradual decline in

family size, which contributes to the number of empty-nest families.

The third reason is related to population flow and labor migration. The open market policy has created vast opportunities in major cities in China that also sees the rapid process of industrialization and modernization. The out migration of younger population to major cities in search of employment and education opportunities has caused the disintegration of the traditionally intergenerational living arrangements. As a result, a newer type of family structure, i.e., nuclear type of families emerged. This could also be complicated by the reluctance of older people to move to the city while in certain instances, the homes in major city might not be big enough to accommodate an additional family member. In other words, the two-way push and pull factors resulted in older people being left behind.

The fourth reason is related to the question of choice as some older people prefer to preserve their privacy by choosing to live alone. This is made possible again by the improvement in the standard of living among families due to the strong economic performance of China. With the present rate of economic growth, it is predicted that the number of empty nests will increase in the future.

Characteristics of Elderly in Empty Nests

Feeling of Insecurity

The feeling of insecurity stems from three sources: (i) income or financial insecurity, (ii) health and the costs of health care, and (iii) inability to perform activities of daily living (ADL). These three major problems warrant immediate attention. The situation among the elderly in Nanjing is a case in point to illustrate the feelings of financial insecurity. The average pension of retired workers is a paltry sum of between 400 and 500 RMB a month which is only sufficient to meet daily living expenses with hardly any to cover costs of medical care should they fall ill. The cost of medical care in the cities is estimated at about 5000 RMB a year, ten times more than their average pensions. Since most of these elderly do not have medical insurance coverage, the elderly often land themselves in abject poverty when illness strikes.

The second problem encountered is related to health care. The problems of health care are not only limited to the lack of financial resources to meet medical expenditure but also the problem of “who” is to provide care during time of illness. The situation is far more serious among single empty

nesters. In the case of couples, care is usually given by the healthy elderly, but when both fall sick the situation can be more daunting. Hence, the lack of care-givers among families of empty nesters is more serious than one could imagine besides the worries of meeting costs of medical care.

Related to the problem of care during illness is the third problem of ADL. Without the help of their children, the elderly in empty-nests may face more difficulties than others in their daily life, such as going shopping, doing housework, preparing meals and etc. Single elderly people are most worried about this. With age, the ability to care for one-self declines regardless of one's health condition. This is due to the decline in functional ability in which the decline in ADL could be graduated.

Loneliness

The sense of loneliness is difficult for elderly in empty nests. It drains on them physically and psychologically. According to the source of the first-aid center 120 in Qingdao City, there have been tens of tragic cases that the elderly were found dead days after their death since 1998.

3. Recommendations

The recommendations suggested focus on ways to improve the well-being of elderly in empty nests so that quality is added to the prolonged years in life. They should be encouraged to enjoy life. Apart from various forms of assistance and support from society, the elderly should also be sensitized about their own responsibility towards self-help, i.e., they should adopt a positive attitude towards life. The following are some suggestions that could be adopted to improve the well-being of the elderly in empty nests.

Successful and Active Ageing through Self-help

Elders in the empty-nests should learn how to take care of themselves. First, they should be able to plan for their life and make full preparation for potential emergencies. Secondly the elderly should take active part in various recreational activities including sports, artistic activities, hobbies as well as make friends and form their own social support group. Being actively involved in extramural activities will help the elderly reduce their emotional reliance on their children, overcoming loneliness and promote mental health.

In addition, by being active, the elderly can overcome their sense of insecurity and loneliness, and at the same time contribute positively to society through their active participation in community activities. Through volunteering, they gain the sense of self-worth and at the same time contributes towards their neighbourhood. Under the concept of active ageing, some of them may be able to work on a part-time or full time basis that enable them to earn extra income to supplement their pensions. It is therefore crucial for the elderly to manage their life and be empowered to ensure quality of life during their golden years.

The Role of Adult Children

In the Asian culture where family is an important institution that forms the pillar of society and that filial piety is a virtue, children are expected to provide and care for their parents. As modernization and the practical aspects of modern living cause a strain on intergenerational co-habitation, a big family of several generations living together is slowly giving way to nuclear type of living arrangement. The pressure of earning a living further aggravated the situation of empty nest syndrome as adult children tend to begin to make less frequent visits to their elderly parents. The lack of care and attention for the elderly is a major source of loneliness and sense of

insecurity among them. It is suggested that adult children should be made aware of their responsibility towards their parents. Responsibility should take the form of financial support, affection and emotional support even if it means love from a “long-distance”. Communication is easy in the present era of advanced telecommunication. Constant contact through telephone calls is a good way of ensuring emotional support to these elderly people.

Community Care

Both the family and the community have long been recognized as primarily the most important sources of care. In the case of empty nest families of China, community care should be further developed and encouraged. From the perspective of public policy makers, the government should build more infrastructure and facilities such as day care centres, introduce training programmes for those who want to up-date or up-grade their skill levels, and to form an organized agency to manage and monitor basic care to the elderly. For example, in Tianjing a city with 120 first-aid centers has recently initiated an emergency service programme called “Lifeline Emergency” to assist elderly who face an emergency situation. This system works like an alarm system that can be triggered by pressing the button that

is installed within the home of the elderly. Once the alarm is triggered, the centre is able to respond within 15 seconds upon receiving the signal. And an ambulance will be sent to the site instantly for rescue purposes.

Institutional Care

In developed countries, nuclear families are prevalent and at the same time empty nests are common even among the younger segment of older people. In China, influenced by the deep-rooted tradition that dictates care by child/children and constrained by competing needs, institutional facilities such as old-age apartments, nursing homes and other facilities for the aged have not been fully developed. Institutional care can be a solution to the problems faced by elderly in empty nests. Sending parents to nursing homes does not mean a non-filial act among adult children; it is a last resort that is perhaps necessary to ensure care to the elderly, in particular for those who are unable to perform some or most of the activities of daily living. For elderly in institutions, the adult children should visit their parents, or take them home during holidays, in addition to keeping in constant contact through telephone calls. Through the support of institutional homes, the elderly and their adult children are both given a chance to lead their respective lifestyle. Under the institutional care environment, the elderly

make new friends which will help them reduce their loneliness which comes from want of their adult children.

With the past and current social and economic developments, China has made great progress to develop facilities for the aged, such as the elderly apartments, community health centers, activity centers, day-care centers, nursing homes and universities for the elderly. So far China has over 50,000 such facilities, serving more than 800,000 elders (Li & Sun 2004).

Policy Measures to Improve the Pension System

A sound old age pension system is needed to guarantee sufficient financial support for the elderly. In recent years, China has stepped up its effort to review the existing pension system. By the end of April 2005, the pension system covers 166 million workers who are retired, 50 million up from six years earlier, which has become the biggest pension program in the world. Looking into the future, positive steps towards an improved pension system are as follows:

- (1) expand the coverage of the pension system to bring more percentage of worker and employees into the social security system.

- (2) gradually increase the payment standards of the pension so that the participants of the system can get more benefits. Also, it can make the system more attractive to those potential participants.
- (3) improve the management of the fund, especially increase the net value of the assets by investing them in a prudent manner.

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Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) at Lingnan University

HISTORY

The Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) was established as a University-wide institute in 1998 and has been operating as one of the research centers in the Institute of Humanities and Social Science (IHSS) since September 2001. The mission of APIAS is to facilitate and develop research in gerontology and issues related to population ageing in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.

OUR MISSION

“To develop a better environment for older people and their families in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.”

OUR OBJECTIVES

- To develop an area of research excellence in programme evaluation and action research; both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
- To strengthen our collaboration within the Lingnan University and the local communities, particularly in relation to student learning.
- To strengthen the collaboration and network amongst the Asia-Pacific region.

For further information on APIAS and opportunities for research collaboration and affiliations with the Centre, please contact us:

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