

# *Exploration of Rural Family Structure Changes and Remodeling of Rural Pension Modes in Contemporary China*

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**Abstract:** Social change in China has brought about changes in family structure and intergenerational relations in rural areas, which in turn have reduced the traditional family model of old-age care, the main mode of old-age care in rural societies, and to a certain extent have brought about difficulties in the material and spiritual support of the elderly. From the perspective of exploring the contemporary changes in rural family structure, this study analyzes in depth the impact of the changes in rural family structure on the rural old-age pension mode: the family old-age pension mode has been challenged, autonomous old-age pension has become a trend, and the role of daughters' support for the elderly has been enhanced. It also puts forward relevant countermeasures to establish a diversified pension system in rural communities, strengthen the spiritual support of the elderly, and reshape the culture of filial piety.

## **1. Introduction**

Chinese culture has always emphasized the spirit of collectivism with “family” as the unit, and this cultural atmosphere is more prominent in rural areas of China, which is centrally manifested in the fact that all kinds of behaviors of Chinese peasants start and end with “family” and “clan” rather than individuals. This cultural atmosphere is even more pronounced in rural China, and is centrally manifested in the fact that all kinds of behavior among Chinese peasants begin and end with the “family” and the “clan” rather than the individual, and that the interests of the family always take precedence over individual interests.

In recent years, with the social changes in rural China and the successful completion of the poverty eradication campaign, the material conditions in rural areas have been greatly improved, and the family structure has also changed, which in turn will inevitably pose a challenge to the traditional way of old-age pension in rural areas, and at the same time promote the formation of a new type of old-age pension.

## **2. Changes in family structure in contemporary rural China**

As a result of the impact of the market economy, population mobility and the process of urbanization and other factors, the traditional family structure in traditional rural China has been broken, and a new type of family structure is being generated, which is mainly reflected in three

aspects.

## **2.1 Simplification of rural household functions**

The family is a social institution, a primary social grouping based on marriage and blood ties, with irreplaceable functions for the functioning of society as a whole. The functions of the traditional Chinese rural family are very complex, including economic cooperation (mainly in the form of family-based agricultural production), emotional support, reproduction of offspring, education of children and care for the elderly. Among them, productive labor, reproduction of offspring, and old-age support are the most important functions. It is worth pointing out that in traditional agricultural societies, the material and spiritual support of the elderly is basically provided by the family, and family old-age care is the most important mode of the traditional social pension system.

Since the reform and opening up of China, a large number of rural surplus laborers have moved to the cities and towns, greatly simplifying the function of the rural family: on the one hand, a large number of rural young and middle-aged laborers have gone out to work, and the family is no longer a production unit, thus dissolving the production function of the family; on the other hand, the departure of the young and middle-aged laborers has challenged the traditional model of the family old-age pension; and the other hand, the popularization of family planning policy has caused the family's reproduction function to the promotion of the family planning policy has caused the reproduction function of the family to decline.

In short, as China's rural society changes, the functions of the rural family have begun to simplify and the socialization of family members has increased.

## **2.2 Reduction in the size of rural households and a shift in household types from extended to nuclear families**

In traditional rural societies, the main model of the family is the extended family formed by blood ties in a patrilineal line, with a family often comprising three or more generations, with larger family sizes and emphasizing blood ties with each other rather than conjugal relationships. Under this model, older and younger people live together, which also greatly facilitates traditional family ageing.

In recent years, the size of rural households has shrunk, and the type of household has shifted from extended to nuclear: according to the third population census, more than half of China's rural households had more than five members, and by the time of the fifth population census in 2000, the average size of a rural household was only 3.68<sup>[1]</sup>, while the data of the seventh population census in 2021 showed that the average household size was 2.62, a phenomenon that is caused by two main reasons: First, rural young adults are more willing to put down roots in towns and cities, and live separately from the elderly who stay in the countryside, so extended families are beginning to disintegrate; second, as women play an increasingly important role in social production, gender equality awareness has increased, and the nuclear family, which is bound by husband and wife, has begun to become the mainstream.

## **2.3 Changes in intergenerational relations in rural families**

Intergenerational family relationship is a vertical relationship between members of different generations in a family based on blood or adoption <sup>[2]</sup>. According to Mr. Fei Xiaotong, a famous Chinese sociologist, the intergenerational relationship in traditional Chinese families is a “feedback model”, i.e., parents have the responsibility to raise their children and children have the obligation

to support their parents. This has become the basic theory for the study of traditional intergenerational relationships in Chinese rural families. However, in the face of social change, traditional intergenerational relations in rural Chinese families have been challenged, and changes in intergenerational relations have taken on prominent features:

The authoritarianism of the traditional intergenerational relationship of the parent generation over the offspring no longer exists, and the intergenerational relationship is more egalitarian, and even the center of gravity has shifted downward, with a “reverse tilt”: mainly in the distribution of economic resources, the parent generation is in a weaker position while the offspring is in a stronger position; the parent generation gives unlimited support to the offspring, but the offspring gives limited support to the parent generation. Among them, the unlimited support from parents to children is mainly reflected in the voluntary help of children to buy a wedding house, intergenerational parenting, and at the same time try their best to independently retire and reduce the burden of children, etc.; while children take the extra payment from parents for granted, and at the same time, they are only willing to or only able to provide limited support to parents <sup>[3]</sup>. The famous sociologist Weber divided rationality into value rationality and instrumental rationality. Value rationality focuses on the unconditional value of a certain behavior, emphasizing the purity of motives and the choice of what is considered to be the right means to achieve the end, regardless of the outcome; instrumental rationality means that actions are driven by utilitarian motives, and that the starting point of the actor is the least amount of effort and the greatest return, while disregarding the human emotions and the spiritual realm. Of course, the rationality of every member of society contains both value rationality and instrumental rationality. However, in general, the traditional intergenerational relationship in Chinese families relies mainly on value rationality to maintain, and pursues traditional Chinese morality and ethics, such as father's kindness, son's filial piety, the order of the upper and lower classes, and the harmony of heavenly families; whereas, under the influence of the value changes in contemporary society and the influence of utilitarian values, the intergenerational relationship in families relies more on instrumental rationality to maintain, which is especially obvious in the offspring. Analyzed from this perspective, although from ancient times to the present, family resources have been mainly flowing from parents to offspring, in contemporary society, the degree of return from offspring to parents is much lower than that in traditional society, and it is more based on the degree of payment from parents to offspring, and it is a contractual exchange of intergenerational relationship under instrumental rationality. Against this background, intergenerational relations in contemporary rural families are out of balance, and the exploitation of the parent generation is more serious.

### **3. The Impact of Family Structure Changes on the Traditional Old-Age Pension Model in Contemporary Chinese Rural Areas**

#### **3.1 Challenges to the traditional family model of old age care**

Changes in the structure of the contemporary rural family have directly challenged the main mode of rural old-age support, namely, family old-age support.

Firstly, the simplification of the functions of the rural family, especially the decline of the production function, has directly dismantled the moral norms of the traditional “elder-oriented” society and reduced the motivation of young family members to support the elderly. Secondly, the miniaturization of rural family size has made it extremely inconvenient for families to provide for the elderly. While the extended family in traditional rural China facilitated family old-age care, the nuclearization of family size in contemporary rural areas has led to a serious phenomenon of empty nests in biological families, with the elderly having fewer opportunities for contact with their children, and family old-age care has been hampered.

In rural areas of China, family old-age care is still the most important mode of old-age care. At present, the social security system for old-age care in rural areas has not yet been perfected, and family old-age care should not be downplayed.

### **3.2 Autonomous ageing as a new trend**

The decline of family old-age care has strengthened the awareness of the elderly in rural areas of the importance of self-support. There are many elderly people left behind in rural areas today who choose to live independently and age on their own, with their children voluntarily providing their parents with a certain amount of material support and moral support. However, the current model of self-support for the elderly in rural areas faces the following problems: firstly, due to the inverse tilt of intergenerational relations in contemporary rural families, the children have exploited the economic resources of their parents without reciprocating, making the nuclear family of the parents face greater economic pressure in self-support for the elderly, which is not embodied in the basic needs of survival, such as food and clothing, but rather in the higher level of needs, such as medical care. Secondly, the downsizing of the family has widened the spatial distance between the two generations and reduced emotional communication between them, so that the spiritual support of the elderly is stretched to the limit.

### **3.3 Increased role of daughters in supporting their parents**

Unlike the traditional rural family, the contemporary rural family has demonstrated the importance of the role of daughters in supporting their parents, and this is a very good phenomenon: in this family context, sons and daughters are separated from their parents, and it is the responsibility of the sons and daughters to contribute to the support of their parents.

## **4. Exploring the Remodeling of China's Rural Retirement Model**

Contemporary rural family structure change is a manifestation of China's social change, which greatly diminishes the traditional family pension mode, but other pension modes are currently imperfect and cannot replace the traditional pension mode, which undoubtedly increases the plight of the elderly in rural areas, to which this study proposes the following countermeasures:

### **4.1 Encouraging the establishment of a diversified pension system**

Family and self-supporting old-age care are currently the main forms of old-age care in China's rural society, but the development trend of China's old-age care system must be towards social care. The transition from family to social old-age care requires a lengthy transformation phase, during which a multifaceted old-age care system should be established, in which the State, society, the family and the individual share responsibility for old-age care. At the macro level, the State should further promote the basic pension insurance system for urban and rural residents, so as to guarantee the basic material needs of the elderly in rural areas, and to make old-age care no longer a heavy personal and family burden. From the social level, the service function of rural communities should be brought into play, the construction of old-age institutions should be strengthened, institutionalized old-age care should be promoted, and the combination of medical care and nursing with Chinese characteristics should be promoted; meanwhile, home care can be tried out in developed locations, so that the rural elderly can obtain some of the old-age services through paid, offset or unpaid ways to make up for the deficiencies of the traditional family old-age care in some aspects<sup>[4]</sup>. Finally, at the family and individual levels, efforts should be made to change the bad

habits of the rural elderly, such as arranging marriages for their children and financing the purchase of houses, so as to reduce the economic exploitation of the offspring by their parents, and to enable the elderly to have more generous material conditions to plan for their old age.

#### **4.2 Strengthening spiritual support for the elderly in rural areas**

The nuclearization and miniaturization of the contemporary rural family has created difficulties for the spiritual needs of the elderly in rural areas; therefore, while improving the material support of the elderly in rural areas, we should strengthen their spiritual support. In July 2013, the State amended the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, which stipulates that the spiritual support of the elderly should be provided as follows: “Family members shall care for the spiritual needs of the elderly and shall not neglect the elderly. They shall not neglect or cold-shoulder the elderly. Family members who live apart from the elderly shall frequently visit or greet them”. This marks the Government's incorporation of spiritual support for the elderly into the law at the national level, but the provisions of this law are rather general and not very relevant in reality, so the details should be quantified and their operationalization strengthened.

#### **4.3 Promoting traditional family virtues and reshaping the culture of filial piety**

The home is the first place of activity for the elderly; focusing on family construction, maintaining family harmony, and respecting the elderly and loving the young are traditional family virtues of the Chinese nation, and the reshaping of a culture of filial piety is also part of the promotion of family virtues, and is an important base for the elderly to have a sense of security in their old age. Contemporary “filial piety” culture mainly consists of two aspects: first, respect and gratitude to parents. The nurturing and support of parents and children in the family is not simply a matter of cost and benefit, and the intergenerational relationship between families is not a matter of “exchange-type” accounting. The gratuitous contribution of the parent to the offspring is largely based on the natural attributes of human beings, while the filial piety of the offspring to the parent is based on the social attributes of human beings, and is premised on gratitude and respect, rather than on the cost of payment to the parent. The same is true for rural families. Only through equal communication and mutual understanding between parents and children on the premise of filial piety can they obtain high-quality material support and emotional comfort. The second is to promote the “big filial piety” way. “Small filial piety” is to respect and honor one's parents, ‘big filial piety’ is to love one's parents to extend oneself to others, courtesy and respect for other elderly people, so as to learn to pay attention to the vulnerable groups in society, spreading positive social energy. This is not only the promotion of family virtues, but also the embodiment of China's national sentiment.

### **5. Conclusion**

Chinese society has changed dramatically in the last hundred years, with the core being the transition from an agricultural society to a modern industrial society. The family, as one of the most basic social settings, has also changed along with it, from the traditional agricultural family structure to the current family structure, including the simplification of family functions, the downsizing of the family, and changes in intergenerational family relations, among other things. In general, this is a reflection of social progress. At the same time, however, family changes have gradually broken down the traditional Chinese family model of old age, but a new model of old age in line with modern society has yet to be fully established, especially in rural areas. For this reason, there is an urgent need to reshape China's rural old-age care model, in which the most important

things are to establish a diversified old-age care system, to increase spiritual support for the elderly in rural areas, and to promote a culture of filial piety and to reshape the virtues of the family.

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