



## Leisure Life of Elderly Residents in China: A Case Study of Difference between Rural and Urban Area

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### Abstract

This paper examined the current situation of leisure life of aging population in urban and rural area from an angle of history, policy, culture, and economy, revealing the differences in the leisure life between rural and urban elderly residents. While the Chinese government is proud of the achievement in making its people's life longer, it has to tackle the challenge of how to make the leisure life of aging population as an important part of their later year's life not just for the aged urban residents but especially for the aged rural residents. The underlying social and economic reasons that may account for such differences are discussed extensively. It is hoped the paper will be somewhat conducive to this area of study.

**Keywords:** Leisure life, Family planning policy, Domicile registration system

### Introduction

China has seen an unprecedented economic growth for recent ten years with its GDP at an increasing rate of 7-8 % annually. With the fast development of China's economy, Chinese people's living standard has advanced greatly. Meanwhile, China is undergoing a rapid growth both in the proportion of the total population and in sheer numbers of elderly people. Population aging is becoming one of the most significant demographic changes in China with the elderly share projected to reach 27 percent in 2050. Such a demographic shift combined with the other two social economic changes, namely, increased living standard as the result of 1980s economic reform in general and an extended period of post-work life for older adults living in cities because of the institutionalization of retirement in particular, have made aged persons' lives, especially their leisure life an increasingly important topic of social conversations in China.

### 1. Aging Population

In past 50 years the population more than doubled with a net increase of 14,349,000 per year (see Table 1). As early as in 70s of last century, Chinese government, realizing the serious consequences of population increase, launched the family planning campaign, encouraging one family with only one child. The rapid population increase was, thereafter, brought under control with less of 300 millions of birth being achieved since then. However, due to its huge population base number, China still sees a net increase of 14,349,000 population annually. Such a growth pattern will continue a long period of time as UN predicted and, therefore, constitutes a heavy burden on China's socio-economic development. What matters is it will cause a potential hindrance in the government effort to improve the leisure life for aging population, especially the aging population in rural area. With a 132 millions of population older than 60, the fifth national census predicted that in 50 years from now on there would be an annual increase of 3.2% of aging population. The census experts pointed out that there could be a 400 millions of population older than 60 in 2040 year. That is to say China will have a 1/4 of population older than 60 in 2040. It is a big challenge for the Chinese government to take in dealing with aging population problem. As table 1 shows, since the fourth nationwide population census in 1990, the absolute number of rural population has begun to decrease. That means the moving of rural population towards urban area has speeded up, and the capacity of the urban area to absorb rural population has improved a great deal. Beginning in 2000 China started the reform of domicile registration system in some cities and many medium and small-size county-based towns, which relax the control of rural domicile registration changing into urban domicile registration and, as a result, lead to the speeding of urbanization process to a great extent.

### 2. Rural-Urban Differences

The issue of Chinese aged people's leisure life will be deceptively simple if we speak of it without taking a closer look at the country's demographic changes in relation to the changing social-economic realities. The two aspects intrinsically intertwine with each other and together complicate the topic of aged people's leisure life to a great extent. China has seen a dramatic economic growth over the past ten years with its GDP increasing at a rate of 7-8 % annually. However, many challenges have emerged along with the fast economic development. Amidst the rural-urban tension is becoming

increasingly pronounced as various on-going demographic and social-economic changes, such as mass migration of young populations from rural areas to cities and enlarging social and economic inequalities, converge. The rural-urban gap in China has long existed as a result of the country's dichotomous societal structure since the establishment of the People's Republic, which had been imposed and enhanced by the well-developed system of household registration. Specifically, the household registration system (HRS) was meant to strictly control the movement of population, especially between rural and urban areas, in support of government's planned economy practice prior to early 1980s, including restrictive labor policies and tying distribution of food to official residence (Suyala, 2003). Except for effectively binding people to the locality in which they hold official household registration, the system also creates huge differences in the lives of rural and urban residents, with the urban dwellers entitled to more social services such as favorable social security assistance, more and better education resources, lower income taxes (relative to miscellaneous tolls on farmers), and many other privileges. The rural-urban differences, among other increasingly visible occupational, gender, ethnic, and educational differences, have become even more apparent since the massive economic reforms of the early 1980s, as China started to adopt aspects of a market economy and shifted the goal of the state from socioeconomic equality to economic development and growth (Riley, 2004). According to the World Bank, despite the great advancement in Chinese people's living standard over the past 20 years, 11.5% of China's rural population still lived below the poverty line in 1998 (Riley). Moreover, the urban/rural income ratio increased from 1.37:1 in 1985 to 2.05:1 in 2000 (Liu & Wen, 2004).

### 3. Urban Residents' Leisure Life

Facing the challenging situation of aging population, the Chinese government is planning to develop a so-called 'silver industry', a special industry dedicated to the production of service products to meet the aging population's needs for leisure life. Of course, the 'silver industry' is mainly designed for the aged urban residents who are mostly retirees of government workers, teachers, state-owned enterprise employees, professionals, scientific and technical workers, military officers, etc. and, therefore, qualified to get the guaranteed government pension every month after retiring. The word silver here means aging population whose hair look like silver color. The 'Silver Industry' is focused on such areas as rest home (somewhat like nursing home for the aged in America), scheduled tourism, specially designed dresses and household ware, health care service, and bank service. The aging population, as a special consuming group, is influencing the market in terms of consuming behavior and consuming conception. The experts in this area predict that the 'silver industry' will become one of the fastest growing industry in 21<sup>st</sup> century with a huge commercial opportunity in leisure market. Of the five areas of 'silver industry' the rest home is certainly a fastest growing area. The rest home has got prevalent in recent years due to its flexible operation and a variety of types based on the great demand by aging population in market. There are mainly three types of rest home. The first type is invested and operated by private companies for the profit-making purpose. The local government encourages private company to invest in rest home by freeing them business taxes for first few years. The second is subsidized partly by local level of government and operated by neighborhood community committee. The neighborhood community committee is the smallest administrative body of local government and whose members are elected by the residents and approved by a higher level of local government. In addition of these two types of rest homes, there is the third type of one called family-based rest home for the aged who have special needs or reasons such as loving to be alone, being particular about foods, disliking to leave old house, physical health problem, lower family income or lower government pension, etc. They choose to stay at family-based rest home because of different personal disposition, culture and education background as well as personal economic condition. The family-based rest home is the most popular type of rest home for the aged, and therefore, is encouraged and supported by local governments for several reasons; first of all, it satisfies the demand of most of aged population at a lower monthly cost of 300-500 RMB for single and 600-800 RMB for couple. Second, it makes them feel really at home with the care or service delivered and done at their own home. Third, its care delivery system is very flexible for different needs at different period of time, which can be fulfilled with just a phone call at home. Every day, if they like, they will be taken to amuse themselves for dancing, singing, chess or poker playing, reading, tea gathering party, TV watching, spots exercising and so on. The reason for its popularity is that it is financially supported and subsidized by local government, and is very efficient with less cost for better solution to the population aging problem. The family-based rest home is just one part of service network system for the aged residents at the neighborhood community level. Usually, each neighborhood community is required to establish residential service center, medical station, health archive room, recreational activity center, special senior school, sports playing ground, tea and chess playing room, reading room, and so on. All these leisure facilities along with rest homes constitute a service network for the aged residents, who reside under the jurisdiction of their neighborhood community committees. The tourism specially arranged for the aging population has been well received in recent years, especially at the off season for some benefits such as lower cost of hotel accommodation, flight fare, admission tickets, more choices of tourism products, easier reservation of desired hotel, avoiding the crowding of peak season. In recent years the majority of EU countries have lifted the ban on travel in these countries by ordinary Chinese tourists. Many of aged urban residents, most of whom are retirees of government workers, teachers, and professionals, showed their great

enthusiasm to join the tour group to these EU countries. Many of Asian countries have become outbound tourist destination for Chinese tourists before with a noticeable proportion of tourists older than 60. The tourism market for aging population has become a particular targeted market both in world and at home.

#### **4. Difference of Leisure Life between Rural-Urban Aged Residents**

In order to have a better understanding of the difference between rural-urban aged residents in terms of leisure life and living quality, a sample survey was taken using mailing questionnaires. The questionnaires are mainly composed of 5 big categories of questions regarding leisure life and leisure participation by rural and urban aged residents. 500 hundred questionnaires were sent out respectively to a neighborhood community of Hangzhou city and a suburban village-based town. We got back 469 questionnaires from the neighborhood community and 452 from the town, of which 456 questionnaires and 435 questionnaires are respectively valid. For the sake of comparison of relevant data collected from these questionnaires, the following table 2 was made omitting the parts of gender, age, marriage status, number of family members, education background, Personal incomes or earnings.

The table 2 shows a huge difference or imbalance between urban-rural aged residents in terms of leisure activities, leisure conception as well the spending on leisure. 81.7% urban aged residents have at least one chance to travel, while only 25.2 % of rural aged residents have such chance, which is 69.15 % of travel less than urban aged residents. As for the daily doings, 49.1 % of the urban aged residents love to do reading, fishing, sports, arts, film and TV watching, radio listening, chess playing, and other types of leisure activities with another 21.8 % of them attending special senior school for fun. Whereas, 60% of rural aged residents love to do household chores and help look after grandchildren with only 14.6 % of them like to engage in the same leisure as the urban aged do. In regard to expending on tourism, it is obvious that urban aged residents have much stronger financial ability than rural aged to enjoy tourism. The reason for it is the majority of urban aged residents are guaranteed to get government pensions which make them have their own disposable income for tourism or other kinds of leisure activities. On the question of how often you travel out per year, there are 74.8 % of rural aged residents who travel out zero compared with only 18.3% of urban aged residents choosing the same question. For the question of what favorite thing you like to do most, 29.3 % of rural aged residents love to enjoy the time of playing with grandchildren, while 32.1 % of urban aged residents love to travel for good time, which shows their different leisure culture and life outlook. The Table 2 also indicates leisure facilities are scarce to be available for the rural aged residents with 63.6 % of them zero access to leisure facilities. There truly exists a huge gap or imbalance between rural-urban aged residents in relation to leisure life and leisure conception.

#### **5. Discussion**

Compared with the leisure life of urban aged residents, the rural aged residents are not so lucky. Here rural residents are those who were registered as so-called agricultural domicile as opposed to urban residents who are registered as non-agricultural domicile. The domicile registration system, based on each household as a basic unit, was first established in 1949 when Chinese Communist Party founded People's Republic of China. Those who resided in countryside or county-based towns were naturally registered as rural residents, namely peasants, while those who lived in urban area registered as urban residents. It is this kind of domicile registration system that makes the lives of rural-urban residents as different as sky from soil in many respects. First of all, it keeps the rural residents from residing in urban area. Second, it keeps them from finding a job in state-owned enterprise or government institutions. Third, it keeps them from enjoying the same health care and pension as those enjoyed by urban residents. The last one, the domicile registration system keeps their children from going to study in urban area for better education unless their children can successfully pass a nationwide university admission test, only then can they change their status from agricultural domicile to non-agricultural domicile and enjoy all the same government benefits as enjoyed by urban residents. That is why the nationwide university admission test once a year is regarded by them as a test jumping from earth to paradise, which decides their destiny whole lifetime.

Now let us analyze the background of why the domicile registration system was set up in 1949 by Chinese government from an angle of history, politics, and economy. As we know that the 50s of last century is what is called 'cold war' age with former Stalin Russia and America as two big opposing groups, socialist and capitalist. As a member of Russian socialist group, China followed almost every things practiced by Russia at that time, especially its policy of state planning economy as opposed to the market economy. Under such a political and economic background, it is natural for Chinese government to establish domicile registration system, as it makes state planning economy possible and easy to be implemented. Actually, state planning economy is rationing economy with almost everything in the market being rationed by government and consumed by ration card. The ration card was issued to the urban residents according to their domicile registration number. The state planning economy has made consuming goods and foods very scarce for shopping in market. But no matter how scarce they are, the urban residents are guaranteed to get them with ration card. However, the ration card is not issued to rural residents because of their status of agricultural domicile. The state planning economy seriously dampen people's initiative to make a good life, especially the peasants' initiative to grow what they think can produce better economic effects in field. They were asked to grow what the government planned to

grow in field. For instance, in order to meet a rice production target set by the government, the peasants had to cut down fruit trees and turn orchard into paddy field even though the orchard could produce much better economic effects than paddy field. Under the state planning economy, all the citizens were supposed to work for the state, and in return the state takes care of everything for them, especially for the urban residents. As peasants don't have the same health care and pension as urban residents have when they get old, they have to turn to the traditional solution by raising sons and daughters as life supporter for their later years. The children are required to take care of their old parents by relevant state laws. As a thousand-year traditional culture in China, the parents, especially the parents in rural area, must work very hard to raise children generation after generation so that the grown-up children would in return take care of them when they get old. An old Chinese saying goes that raising sons is for the preparation of old time. So it is no wonder the daily doings for 60 % of rural aged residents are to help look after grandchildren and do household chore, and 29.3 % of them enjoy the time of playing with grandchildren as their most favorite thing to do. The more sons you have, the happier you are supposed to be when you get old. Then who come to take care of those, rural or urban, who have no son or daughter to depend upon? The government provides what is called 'five guarantee provisions' for those who are 'three no', namely no life supporters, no income sources for life, and no labor ability to earn. The 'five guarantee provisions' guarantees to provide food, clothing, living place, medical treatment, and burial service free of charge as the lowest basic living standard. The system was established as a counterpart to the retirement pension and government-sponsored rest home care commonly provided for urban older people. However, the "Five Guarantees" system has been poorly maintained due to long-existing financial problems (Wu, 2003). According to a survey conducted in 10 counties/villages in Hunan province, over 7000 *three-nos* people were left unattended (Zou, 1999). Even people living upon the "Five Guarantees" support could hardly say their lives were truly guaranteed in that their needs for medical care were often ignored due to lack of funds. As a result, most rural residents turn to offspring (if they have any at all) for support and rely on family for care in later years. This is reflected in our findings about rural elderly persons' source of income (refer to Table 2). Nevertheless, the lack of access to state support has caused an extreme sense of insecurity toward life among rural aged people.

On the whole, most rural residents are not covered by the social security system, which has provided urban dwellers with public support in every aspect of life from housing, health care, and education, to retirement pension or endowment insurance (Xu, 2003). Accordingly, most state investments in infrastructure, communications, schools, and other institutions were made in urban areas. On the other hand, rural residents received discriminative treatment such as very basic health care and "Five Guarantees" support for those who could not support themselves (Zhou, 2004). However, even these basic services have been considerably cut off by government since the country started to shift toward a market-oriented economy in the early 1980s. For instance, public health subsidies were considerably reduced when the Chinese government started to privatize many of its functions including health care, the access to which was guaranteed to all people prior to the 1980s. The withdrawal of state support in health care has resulted in an estimated 90% of rural residents lacking medical coverage. While the relatively better-off urban residents can turn to private fee-for-service medical care, most rural residents are unable to afford these increasingly expensive health services, if they are available at all.

However, we need to point out that the state-supported rest home system in urban areas is also facing many challenges. Currently, only a very small portion of Chinese urban older adults lives in nursing homes. According to a survey conducted in Shanghai, only 5.7% of people aged 50 and older are willing to move into nursing homes (Chen & Zhang, 1999). Such a low willingness for using public rest home services among the urban aged population may be largely because most urban elderly persons have a steady income (in forms of pension), which renders them able to afford a better life at home as opposed to living in a rest home. However, now and in the future, public support is to be in great need as the impacts of changing family structure take shape in China. The country's birth planning policy has resulted in increasing numbers of families of inverted pyramid shape, which means in each family fewer children will be available to care for elderly members. It is almost inevitable that a large number of older people in China will have to rely on public services for support in the future. Thus, the government needs to invest more heavily in developing a comprehensive supporting system for both rural and urban older adults.

## 6. Conclusion

The state planning economy has created domicile registration system, and domicile registration system has given rise to the huge gap between rural-urban aged residents in term of leisure life and leisure conception. More than ten years ago, China abandoned state planning economy for most part of it and turned to market economy with Chinese character, which allows private-owned businesses to compete with state-owned enterprises in market, and encourages peasants to grow whatever they think can produce better economic benefits in field. What is more, the 2000 year saw the reform of domicile registration system in some cities and many medium and small-size county-based towns. The reform has relaxed the control of rural domicile registration changing into urban domicile registration, leading to the speeding of urbanization process to a great extent. A large number of peasants have given up their farmland in order to find a job in cities and, as a result, left many villages lived by only the aged people and kids. It is grandparents who have to take care

of grandchildren for their sons and daughters. Some of aged rural residents have to make a living by doing farming work in field themselves. The population researcher indicate there are 120 million of floating population in China, who were peasants moving from rural areas to urban areas. Most of them are surplus labor in rural area and come to work as unskilled labors in cities for very low earnings. The problem caused by the reform as a by-product is that it has speeded up a population aging in rural area and further widened the gap between rural and urban area. For recent ten years, Chinese economy has kept growing at an increasing rate of 7-8% GDP, with most of the capitals invested in the building of infrastructure and public service facilities in urban area. The job market of manual labor is brisk with a continuing moving of rural labors into cities. However, the government investment in rural area has been decreasing for these years. For a great part of rural population, the living standard has not kept abreast with the rapid economic growth and society progress. The average income of a rural family is about one-fifth of an urban family's. One of the biggest political and economic topic on the central government's agenda now is how to deal with a 'three farming' problem, namely agriculture production, peasants' living quality, and countryside construction. The government has owed too much to these three farming problems since the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949. The problems now have developed to such a serious extent that the all levels of governments are required to exert the utmost to increase the peasants' income level as a biggest political and economic challenge to take. The challenge ahead is terribly huge as we can expect. The good news for the peasants is the central government proclaimed to decrease the agricultural tax year by year until complete revocation of it this year. It can be concluded that unless the government takes efficient measures and policies to narrow down the gap between rural-urban aged residents as we see, the gap will become further widened with the China's continuing economic growth in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Table 1. Population and a Ratio of Urban Residents to Rural Residents from 1952 to 2003 (Ten Thousand)

Year	Total pop.	Urban resident	% of totals	Rural resident	% of totals
1952	57482	7163	12.46	50319	87.54
1957	64653	9949	15.39	54704	84.61
1962	67295	11659	17.33	55636	82.67
1965	72538	13045	17.98	59493	82.02
1970	82992	14424	17.38	68568	82.62
1975	92420	16030	17.34	76390	82.66
1980	98705	19140	19.39	79565	80.61
1985	105851	25094	23.71	80757	76.29
1990	114333	30195	26.41	84138	73.59
1995	121121	35174	29.04	85947	70.96
2000	126743	45906	36.22	80837	63.78
2003	129227	52376	40.53	76851	59.47

Notes to table 1: the data of population before 1982 was made based on the statistics of domicile registration survey; the data of population from 1982 through 1989 were made and adjusted respectively based on the statistics of 1982 and 1989 nationwide census; the data of population from 1990 through 2000 were made and adjusted based on the statistics of 2000 nationwide census. The data of population of 2003 was made according to the calculation of sample population survey. There are total 5 nationwide censuses since the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, which are 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, and 2000 respectively.

(Source: Chin Statistic yearbook of 1999, 2001, 2003 published by China Statistic Administration; the statistic bulletin of national economy and society development in 2003.)

Table 2. The Difference of Leisure Life between Rural-Urban Aged Residents

Questions	Item selected	Rural aged residents(%)	Urban aged residents(%)
What is your doings at daytime?	Taking care of and playing with grandchildren	19.6	6.2
	Household chore doing	40.4	15.1
	Attending senior school for fun	1.8	21.8
	Visiting friends at home	12	3.2
	Chess & poker playing, reading, chatting, TV, film, walking for fun, spots, radio, collecting, relaxing rest, dancing, fishing arts, thinking, singing, shopping	14.6	49.1
	Nothing special to do	11.6	4.5
How often do you travel out every year?	Zero	74.8	18.3
	Once	14.8	57.1
	Twice	7.8	18.9
	3 times up	2.6	5.7
What is your expending on tourism per year (RMB)? (¥100 RMB equal to \$780 US dollars)	Less than ¥500	63.4	12.6
	¥500 to ¥1000	19.2	29.4
	¥1000 to ¥2000	9.8	35.7
	¥2000 to ¥3000	5.2	11.7
	¥3000 to ¥4000	1.5	5.1
	¥4000 to ¥5000	0.6	3.4
	¥5000 up	0.3	2.1
Which one is your most favorite to do?	Traveling for good time	14.1	32.1
	Special hobbies or interests	12.2	16.7
	Community volunteer work	8.7	16.2
	Enjoying time of playing with grandchildren	29.3	10.7
	Chatting with old friend for fun	24.1	10.8
	Outdoor physical exercising	4.3	7.3
	Other else	7.3	6.2
How many leisure facilities can you enjoy nearby?	zero	63.6	13.4
	So-So	24.6	32.5
	Good	11.6	45.3
	Good enough	0.2	8.8