



An elderly homeless couple in Beijing - a grim reality facing some of the 129 million Chinese aged 60 years and over as China's population grows old in greater numbers than any other society in history

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Zhang Lijia reports

The grey tide

WHITE-HAIRED grandmother Yang Guicheng never expected that one day she would be driven from her own home. Widowed at a young age, the 85-year-old brought up five children single-handedly through innumerable hardships. When her son returned to Tianjin in 1985, after a long exile in the far west, Mrs Yang gave him and his family shelter. He repaid her kindness with brutal beatings, and, ill and aged, she was pushed out of the house. In desperation, she wrote to Beijing lawyer Zhang Kai for help.

Lawyers such as Mr Zhang have witnessed a dramatic upsurge in violations of elderly people's rights in recent years. As Chinese society modernises and economic reforms bite harder, the elderly have proved to be increasingly at risk.

China's population is growing old in greater numbers than any other society in history. More than 10 per cent - 129 million citizens of the People's Republic of China - are more than 60, comprising the largest group of elderly people in the world.

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Chinese will support one elderly person. Among the great achievements of the Chinese Communist Party: the lengthening of the average life expectancy from a mere 35 years in 1949 to the present 70. Because of the one-child policy, rising living standards and improving health care, China is no longer a country of high fertility and high population growth, but just the opposite.

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and interests of the elderly, requiring families to look after older members and prohibiting their neglect and abuse. But its enforcement has been far from satisfactory.

"Most elderly people are poorly educated or illiterate and simply do not know how to turn to legal means," says Mr Zhang. "Maybe in this fast-changing society, people become more money-oriented and more selfish."

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is an increasing market for such places," Dr Li said.

Despite the financial strain, Dr Li strives to give the hospice a pleasant environment, raising songbirds and pigeons. Now, the hospice houses more than 200 grateful in-patients.

Zhao Shuchun, a 70-year-old retired worker, had lived alone in a modern apartment block before suffering a major stroke in 1997. His four children took him to a hospital that saved his life but left him with large debts. The failing state-owned company for which he worked was supposed to pay 70 per cent of the HK\$10,000 medical bill, but simply lacked the funds. When his children heard about Songtang and its cheap rates, Mr Zhao was quickly installed.

"This is a great place!" Mr Zhao says with a big smile. He likes to amuse himself by feeding the pigeons and playing Chinese chess.

"Staying at home, I would be a burden to my children, who are busy with their own lives. I would also be lonely, but here I have plenty of people to speak to. On weekends, volunteers come to sing and dance for us, even foreigners. I've never met so many foreigners before!"

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The grey tide: China's aging population

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While China cannot afford a Western style welfare system, neither can the government rely on Confucian values of filial piety, whereby children look after their parents. A law was passed in 1996 to protect the rights and interests of the elderly, requiring families to look after older members and prohibiting their neglect and abuse. But its enforcement has been far from satisfactory.

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Not everyone is so cheerful. Nearby sits a gloomy retired teacher, Yu Yinghua, who has not seen her three children for six months. They sent her to Songtang a year ago after a stroke paralyzed her left side.

Because her school could not cover the costs, her children put her in a cheap room shared with two other women and instructed the doctors to simply stop supplying medicine.

Having lost the ability to speak, she can only express her bitterness on scraps of paper.

Dr Li blames the Cultural Revolution for the breakdown in traditional values such as caring for the elderly. At the same time, he knows, the fast pace of modern life means younger people have less time to spare and more pressure from work.

“The Cultural Revolution turned everything upside down,” he says.

“Political correctness was regarded as far more important than family ties. Children were encouraged to denounce their parents if they were labeled enemies of the people.”

China’s few state-owned old people’s homes have traditionally cared for childless urban residents. In Beijing, there are about 300 homes accommodating 10,000 people, only 0.6 per cent of all Beijingers over the age of 60.

To increase the capacity to three per cent, the minimum standard in the West, China needs to invest at least US\$200 billion (HK\$1.6 trillion), according to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which has made repeated pleas for public investment in facilities catering to the elderly.

The Beijing government even offers incentives such as tax exemption and reductions in gas and electricity bills.

Seeing out one’s days at an old people’s home may be commonplace in the West, but it remains an unusual last resort in China. Many old people want to share the same roof with their children’s family – the height of happiness in Chinese thinking. Some families feel embarrassed about throwing out their ageing parents.

Yet the times are changing. A recent survey of young people shows that half have no objections about entering a retirement home. The decreased influence of Confucianism and smaller family size mean that many of China’s old people will end their days there, willingly or otherwise.

One of the most daunting aspects of China’s worsening elderly crisis is the lack of established pension and security systems. Urban workers used to rely on their work units for pensions, a benefit never enjoyed by rural residents who comprise more than 70 per cent of China’s population.

State-owned enterprises, thrust into the marketplace, find it difficult to shoulder the increasing burden of retirees. One model under trial requires the government, employers and employees to contribute a certain proportion to a “basic pension insurance fund” to share the responsibility.

“From now on, China’s young people will have to learn to save for their old age. There will be a great leap in the ageing population in the next 25 years or so,” Mr Xu says.

“We had better move quickly, or China may find itself in a perilous situation no nation has ever encountered before.”