

Patterns, Sources, and Implications of Living Arrangements among Middle-aged and Older Adults in China

Ming Wen

Chinese society has undergone profound economic, cultural, and social changes over the past four decades. Together with the "double transformation of demography and family patterns" (Hu and Peng, 2015), these factors have contributed to a weakened role of the family, which has traditionally been the primary source of support in old age. Significant transformations have occurred in the pattern of intergenerational co-residence and the exchange of support between older parents and adult children (Hu and Peng, 2015; Lei et al., 2015; Zeng and Wang, 2018). As China's population ages rapidly, it is imperative to better understand the patterns and sources of living arrangements of older adults in contemporary China as well as how those arrangements may impact their health and well-being.

Patterns and trends of living arrangements

Over the past three decades, there has been a significant decline in intergenerational co-residence between older parents and adult children in China. In 1990, 70.3% of older adults aged 65 and over lived with their children, according to a study by Zeng and Wang (2018) that analyzed data from the China censuses conducted in 1990, 2000, and 2010. However, as we entered the 21st century, this proportion decreased to 63.3% in 2000 and further dropped to 53.9% in 2010 (Zeng and Wang, 2018). The latest data from the 2020 census yearbook shows a significant shift, with only 39.69% of individuals aged 60 and above living with their children, indicating that older adults living with their children are no longer the majority (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

In addition, there is an increasing trend in China for older adults to live independently, either alone or with their spouse, while still maintaining proximity to their children (Lei et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2022). The China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS) conducted in 2011-2012 revealed that a considerable portion of older adults (34.3%) had at least one child living in the same village or community, despite not residing together (Lei et al., 2015). This suggests that while intergenerational co-residence has declined, older adults are still able to maintain close connections with their children within their local communities.

Intergenerational co-residence rates have also declined in East Asia and Singapore, although they are still higher than those in Western countries (Yasuda et al., 2011). In Japan, households with individuals aged 65 and over made up 49.4% of all households in 2019, according to the Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions conducted by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2020). The most prevalent household structure for individuals aged 65 and over is that of a couple only, which accounted for 32.3% of households in 2019, up from 18.2% in 1986 and 29.9% in 2010. Furthermore, the proportion of single-person households has steadily increased from 13.1% in 1986 to 28.8% in 2019. Households comprising older parents and their unmarried child(ren) accounted for the third-highest share at 20.0%, up from 11.1% in 1986. In contrast, three-generation-family households have shifted from being the most common (44.8%) in 1986 to the least

common (9.4%) in 2019 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2020).

South Korea has witnessed the most rapid decline in intergenerational co-residence rates among East Asian societies (Yasuda et al., 2011). In the 1970s, 93% of older adults in South Korea lived with their children, but by 1994, this figure had decreased to 54% (Kim, 1999). According to the United Nations (2022), in 2020, 20.2% of older adults aged 65 and above in South Korea were living alone, while 39.2% were living with only their spouses.

The rapid economic development of Taiwan since the late 1950s has brought about significant changes in its traditional living arrangements. However, in comparison to its East Asian counterparts, Taiwan still maintains the highest rate of intergenerational co-residence, as indicated by the 2006 East Asian Social Survey (Yasuda et al., 2011). The proportion of older adults aged 65 and above living with their children in Taiwan has experienced a decline from 58% in 2000 to 52.1% in 2010 and further to 51.9% in 2020. Concurrently, the percentage of older adults living solely with their spouses has increased from 17.3% in 2000 to 21% in 2020, and the percentage of older adults living alone has increased from 6.8% in 2000 to 12.8% in 2020 (National Statistics, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2022).

Singapore is one of the few developed countries that maintains a relatively high percentage of intergenerational co-residence. Singapore Department of Statistics (2022) reports that living with a spouse and children has remained the most common living arrangement among older adults, although it has slightly declined from 35.5% in 2010 to 34.5% in 2020. As of 2020, 26.5% of older adults live solely with their spouses, up from 19.4% in 2010. Living with children but without a spouse is the third most common living arrangement among older adults, despite a decrease from 31.2% in 2010 to 21.1% in 2020. Over the decade, the proportion of older adults living alone has risen by only 2%, from 8.2% in 2010 to 10.2% in 2020 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2022).

The sources of living arrangement trends

China

The changing intergenerational living arrangements in China can be attributed to various factors, including but not limited to the implementation of the one-child policy, economic development, urbanization, population mobility, cultural shifts, and improvements in housing conditions (Hu and Peng, 2015; Huang et al., 2022; Niu et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020). These changes have had profound implications for intergenerational living arrangements in China.

The implementation of the one-child policy in China from 1979 to 2015 had far-reaching effects on the country's demographics. This policy led to significant changes, including a sharp decline in fertility rates and family sizes, a notable increase in the number of single-child and elderly-only households, and a rapid aging of the population (Huang et al., 2022). As a result, there has been a noticeable shift towards a small-family culture, which has disrupted the traditional norm of two- or three-generation households and weakened the family's ability to provide support for older adults (Cheung, 2019; Zhu, 2003).

Improved household financial conditions resulting from China's economic development have facilitated independent living among households (Lei et al., 2015). The

economic reforms in China have also led to massive rural-to-urban migration of adult children, which has had a profound impact on intergenerational living arrangements. This migration has resulted in greater geographical distances between generations and has reshaped family structures and intergenerational exchanges (Liang, 2016; Song and Chen, 2020).

China's economic reforms have brought about a challenge to Confucian family values, as the spread of individualism and materialism has gained traction (Sereny, 2011). With higher levels of education, older adults have increasingly accepted or even preferred independent living arrangements (Sereny, 2011). The implementation of the one-child policy has further contributed to a shift from elder-centric to child-centric family relationships (Feng et al., 2014). While modernization has weakened the concept of filial piety, it still remains a prevailing norm that governs intergenerational relationships (Yeh et al., 2013). However, the expectations of filial responsibilities among older adults have been modified in light of these changes (Cheung, 2019). Thus, the interplay between traditional values and evolving societal dynamics has shaped intergenerational relationships in China.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, co-residence in China can also be influenced by practical constraints. These include the housing shortage, the absence of adequate eldercare and childcare facilities, as well as the health conditions and widowhood of parents (Huang et al., 2022). The housing reform in China has played a role in addressing housing shortages, providing a spatial foundation for the two generations to live separately and expediting the transition in living arrangements (Logan et al., 1998; Meng and Luo, 2008). These practical considerations have further contributed to the changing intergenerational living arrangements in China.

Elsewhere in East Asia and Singapore

Similar trends in demographic shifts are observed in other east Asian countries and Singapore. These countries are all seeing decreased marriage rates, increased divorce rates, lower fertility, and continued population aging. As a result, there has been a decrease in multigenerational households and an increase in single-person households and elderly-only households. In addition, cultural changes, such as increased individualism and changing gender roles, have also influenced living arrangements in these areas. Younger generations are more likely to prioritize personal independence and individual aspirations over traditional family obligations, leading to a decrease in intergenerational cohabitation.

Economic factors such as rapid urbanization over decades, long work hours rooted in competitive occupational culture and demands, and high cost of housing, particularly in urban areas, and women's labor market participation and career aspirations have all made it challenging for union and family formation and for families to maintain multigenerational households (Lau and Fukutome 2023). Additionally, economic pressures and the desire for independence have led to an increase in young adults living separately from their parents.

Policy interventions have also played a role in shaping living arrangements in these areas. In Japan, the government has implemented policies to promote independent living and provide support for older adults, such as long-term care insurance and housing subsidies. These policies have contributed to the increase in single-person households and the availability of alternative care options for older adults (Raymo et al., 2015). In South Korea, the government has implemented various housing policies to address housing

shortages and affordability issues. These policies include the provision of public housing, housing subsidies, and low-interest loans to encourage homeownership and improve housing conditions. These interventions have influenced the choices individuals and families make regarding their living arrangements. South Korea has implemented a national long-term care insurance program to provide financial support for elderly individuals who require long-term care services. This program aims to promote independent living by offering services such as home care, community-based care, and institutional care. It provides alternatives to multigenerational living arrangements and supports older adults in living independently or in smaller households.

The health implications of living arrangements for middle-aged and older adults in China

That living arrangements matter for health has been long recognized, yet, there is no consensus as to which living arrangements are most beneficial to health in middle and later life. Traditional Chinese cultural norms suggest that older adults would benefit more from living with adult children, but is that necessarily the case? The majority of existing studies would suggest otherwise.

Studies find that *co-residence with adult children* had no effect or even negative impact on the subjective well-being of Chinese older adults (Ren and Treiman, 2015; Xu et al., 2019). In contrast, *living with one's spouse* provides the greatest benefits to SWB (Han et al., 2021; Ren and Treiman, 2015; Zhang et al., 2019) and cognitive function (Yu et al., 2022), while living with spouses while being close to children has the most benefits (Yu & Chen, 2020).

The health implications of *living alone* are complex. In terms of psychological health, living alone among people aged 65 or above seems to be a risk factor for psychosocial outcomes such as depression, loneliness, and subjective well-being possibly via perceived lower social support (Pei et al., 2022). People from collectivist cultures, such as the Chinese, may be more sensitive to social isolation and more vulnerable to loneliness since collectivism, which is emphasized in Chinese culture, values support among family members and overall interpersonal relationships (Yang et al., 2020).

The negative psychological effects of living alone among older adults aged 65 or above may affect their physical health. Niu et al. (2020) found that loneliness is highly associated with mortality. Research has shown that particular changes in living arrangements, such as moving into an institution after living with family, are associated with a high mortality risk (Feng et al., 2017).

As the same time, evidence is mixed as to how solo living is linked to disability. While one study Liu (2018) reported that co-residence reduced the odds of IADL damage among older adults compared to those who lived alone, another study found that living alone is associated with the lowest odds of ADL and IADL disabilities, while moving from independent living to co-residence with family is associated with higher risks of disability (Wen and Gu, 2021). Gu et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of conceptualizing solo-living status as both a cause and an outcome of health status. Only older adults in good health could afford to live alone, and living alone is associated with lower risks of disability and mortality.

Studies show both a positive and negative relationship between living alone and cognitive health among older adults. Zhou et al. (2018) found that older adults who live alone are less likely to have cognitive impairment compared to those who live with others. Older adults who live alone need to be capable of handling everyday events and activities by themselves. Thus, they are more likely to have better cognitive functions as they are less dependent compared to those who live with families (Yang et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2018). However, another study conducted by Yu et al. (2022) measured cognitive function by three categories, including mental status, visuo-construction, and episodic memory, and the results showed that solo living leads to faster rate of cognitive decline among Chinese older adults since they are more likely to experience greater social isolation and have smaller social circles. In addition, despite the possibility of older adults choosing to reside alone voluntarily, living alone could suggest the experience of losing a spouse through separation, divorce, or widowhood, which also harms their cognitive functions (Yu et al., 2022).

Understanding the relationship between living arrangements and health can help identify potential risk factors or protective factors that may influence health outcomes. Additionally, studying living arrangements and health can contribute to our understanding of public health and healthcare planning. By identifying patterns and trends in health outcomes related to different living arrangements, policymakers and healthcare providers can develop targeted interventions and support systems to address specific needs and promote healthier living environments. More studies are needed to examine the nuanced differences in health implications across prevalent different living arrangements. Meanwhile, research is warranted to investigate rapidly emerging new living arrangements such as living in skipped-generation-households where grandparents living with grandchildren without adult children present in the household, living apart together where couples, who are married or in intimate relationship, live separately for various reasons, and living in institutions such as private retirement homes, senior living facilities, and senior care homes.

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