Research Report

Deborah Lowry

Aging, Social Change, and Elderly Well-Being in Rural China: Insights from Mixed-Methods Village Research

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ABSTRACT

Studies of population aging and elderly well-being are often approached from a macro-economic perspective that evaluates national capacity to meet age-based healthcare and services need. This paper is based on the premise that to evaluate better the ability of government and families to fulfill the material needs of a growing elderly population, a clear and holistic understanding of those needs is necessary. Because later-life needs and expectations are situated within the context of complex social conditions and individual lives, research from the “ground-level” is needed to complement those macro-level studies of population aging and elderly well-being. This paper explores the experiences of growing old in China from the perspective of elders living in a southwestern rural Fujian community. Evidence from focus groups, a household survey, and in-depth interviews shows that these elders assess their present conditions and future needs in light of their biographies, many of which include long-term experiences of physical and economic hardship. Respondents’ desires for current and future material support are rudimentary and consist mainly of food and basic clothing. Need for companionship is often met through peer socialization or, when junior family members are away, through telephone communication. However, social comparison is prevalent and elders whose families have not “kept up” by building a large new homes or acquiring other conspicuous household items may experience shame and psychological distress. Comparison of village-level resources also produces dissatisfaction. This paper argues that (cohort-based) biographical experience and material expectations and (period-related) levels of inequality deserve further attention alongside (age-focused) studies of elderly well-being amidst population aging. These implications are relevant not only for generating theories of elderly well-being in rural China, but for other settings in which population aging is accompanied by rapid social change and inequalities.
INTRODUCTION

Although many nations now face challenges associated with population aging, the People’s Republic of China is distinct insofar as it is a developing country. As the proportion of elderly people grows in relation to other age groups, more resources will be required to meet demands for health care and other services. China’s still-developing infrastructure, combined with the possibility for traditional family supports to weaken amidst rapid social change, is cause for some concern about the well-being of the already 100 million people aged 65 and over (Feng and Xiao 2007). Smaller family sizes, potential preferences for “modern” living arrangements, and a growing rate of temporary migration (usually by junior family members) are other socio-demographic changes that may affect the extent to which elderly Chinese receive adequate material and psychological support.

Studies of elderly well-being and population aging are often approached from a macro-economic perspective that evaluates capacity to meet age-based needs for healthcare and other services. This paper is based on the premise that to assess as accurately as possible the ability of government and families to fulfill the demands of a growing elderly population, a clear and holistic understanding of those demands is necessary. Because later-life needs and expectations are situated within the context of complex social conditions and individual lives, research from the “ground-level” is needed to complement macro-level studies of elderly well-being. In other words, though “objective” information about national economic development, dependency ratios, and healthcare consumption is valuable, the extent to which people experience well-being in later-life is also a function of their “subjective” perspectives and expectations for later-life. Knowledge about the biographical contexts of elderly people’s lives, their needs, and how expectations might vary across subgroups can also add to general theories about later-life needs, family support, and socio-demographic change.

This paper examines the challenges and experiences of growing old in rural China – where the vast majority of Chinese elders reside – from the perspective of elders living in a southwestern Fujian community. The contributions of the study stem from its small scale and interest in elders’ personal accounts of life in rural China. The intent is not to provide generalizable descriptions of the later-life needs and expectations of all elders in China or of all elders in rural China. Instead, the objective of the study is to generate points of general theoretical significance that can contribute to a grounded theory of elderly well-being amidst rapid socio-demographic change.

AGING, FAMILY, AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN CHINA

Lloyd-Sherlock (2004) argues that “the well-being and quality of life of elderly populations are strongly conditioned by their capacity to manage opportunity and risks associated with rapid and complex change” (1). Today’s elderly Chinese are growing old during a time of rapid social and demographic changes in China, and these factors will surely come to
bear on their later-life chances. Decreases in family size, possible threats to family cohesion, economic development, industrialization and urbanization, and massive rural-urban migration are some of the key social contexts in which Chinese people are aging.

Population Aging and Family Size

Complementing press headlines such as "Nation Urged to Cope with 'Grey Tide'" and "Burdensome Population a Headache for China," demographers have anticipated for decades the rapid aging of China's population and the challenges associated with this transformation (Bongaarts and Greenhalgh 1985; Nan 1986; Poston and Duan 2000; Eberstadt 2000; Hussain 2002). Forecasts vary, but it is generally agreed that beginning in 2010, the proportion of people over age 65 will rapidly increase until it comprises 20 percent of the population in 2025 and over 30 percent of the population by 2050 (United Nations Population Division 2008). China's pattern of fertility change is largely responsible for this population aging (Riley 2004; Bongaarts and Greenhalgh 1985), although sharp mortality declines and immigration restrictions have also contributed (Banister and Hill 2004). As Riley (2004:10) notes, due to enforcement of a one-child-family campaign of the late 1970s, China experienced "one of the most rapid and impressive declines in fertility ever recorded in a national population." In the span of 15 years, the total fertility rate (TFR) declined from just over six children per woman to around two children per woman. The fact that China's rapid fertility decline during the 1970s was preceded by a "baby boom" responsive to strong pro-natalist rhetoric of the 1950s and '60s has further ensured that markedly smaller size younger generations will soon be responsible for the care of their elders. The "1:2:4" ratio is popularly cited to indicate that in the future, one child may have to care for two parents and four grandparents.

Reductions in family size are thought to be associated with reductions in family elder care (Yan and Chi 2001). Jia’s (1988) case study in a rural village in Hunan Province, for example, finds people in smaller households (4.08 people on average) juggling time and resources to care for elderly members. Yet other research suggests that only to a small extent does reduced family size negatively affect the provision of care to elders. Rather, children appear to provide support based on needs and resources (Zimmer and Kwong 2003; Logan and Bian 2003; Bian, Logan and Bian 1998; Shi 1994). Zimmer and Kwong (2003) find that having more children does not always mean having more support, just as having few children does not equate with inadequate support. They suggest that worry about elderly well-being based on family size and living arrangements might to some extent reflect a "moral panic" (Zimmer and Kwong 2003:41).

The increasing rate of rural-urban migration since the early 1980s is another demographic change that might affect the well-being of elderly people. Although rural-to-urban migration by
junior family members can improve the material living standard of elders through remittances, adult children’s absence poses a challenge to providing personal care for fragile elderly. Migration of adult children can also require elderly people to care for their grandchildren (Zhang 2004) and might reduce opportunities for companionship and psychological comfort through proximity to family members (Silverstein et al. 2006.)

**Traditional Old-Age Support, Elderly Well-being, and Social Change**

According to Chinese tradition, co-resident family members (almost always married sons and their wives) provide material and instrumental care for aging parents (Baker 1979). Underlying this tradition is the Confucian system of *xiao*, most often translated as "filial piety." It promotes obedience, respect, and reverence for elders and has long permeated Chinese society, apparently surviving the Cultural Revolution and other political upheavals (Davis 1983; Sher 1984).

Some scholars assert that family elderly support has already weakened since the post-reform era. Wang and Yao (2001: 77-78), for example, write that "the fragility of family eldercare under today's new circumstances" provides evidence that the "foundational stones under the pillars of support for the elderly are being shaken." Yet systematic empirical studies show little or no evidence of this trend to-date (Whyte 2003; Li 1998; Yao 2001; Mu and Yao 2001; Davis 1983; Sher 1984). Co-residence with adult children is still the most common form of living arrangement for Chinese elders, although an increasing proportion of elderly are living separately from children, especially in urban areas (Bian, Logan and Bian 1998; Yan, Chen and Yang 2003).

Co-residence enables junior family members to readily assist their senior family members with daily living activities and chores. Studies show that living with adult children tends to increase instrumental, but not material support (Yan, Chen and Yang 2003; Zimmer and Kwong 2003). These findings suggest conditions in which elders living with adult children receive financial support in the form of shared housing, food, and daily assistance rather than money. Research also suggests that, by living in multiple generation households, elderly people are able to occupy a “culturally sanctioned role within the family” and thus receive a sense of fulfillment. Silverstein et al. (2006), for instance, found that co-residence with grandchildren or with both children and grandchildren was beneficial to older people due not only to received material but also to opportunities to enjoy emotional bonds with children.

Still, studies suggest that the relationship between residence, family support, and elderly well-being is fairly complex. We should guard against defining "change or no change in residential patterns…as either the erosion or persistence of social norms," since co-residence does not necessarily represent continuation of traditional family values (Chen 2005:129; Logan and Bian 1999). Moreover, residence with family does not necessarily guarantee the well-being
of elders. Even as traditional living arrangements persist, the age-based status and power of Chinese elders can change. Wang’s (2004) study in Northeastern rural China found that by the early 1980s children had began more readily to disobey parents, demonstrating an “abandonment of absolute submission to parental domination in everyday practice” (27). The relatively early household division of contemporary times allows adult Chinese children, especially daughters-in-law, to assert more authority in their daily lives (Gallin 1986). Some recent studies include elders’ reports of frequent quarrels with children, lack of freedom in multiple generation households, and expectations that they “serve” younger generations (Zhang 2004).

Market Transition and Social Inequalities

Family size and the influence of Western values may or may not affect the will of families and elderly people to maintain traditional living arrangements and reciprocal exchanges. But growing social competition could, for some families, pose enormous challenges to their ability to care for elderly members (Hannum 2005; Zimmer and Kwong 2003; Joseph and Phillips 1999; Benjamin, Brandt and Rozelle 2000). Economic reforms have increased opportunities for many Chinese but have also promoted social inequalities as families and individuals compete for resources. Reform and privatization of medical services has also increased the price of health care, which can become cost-prohibitive especially in serious and chronic cases (Zimmer and Kwong 2004; Banister and Hill 2004: 67; Li and Tracy 1999). The most destitute of China’s elderly qualify for assistance in securing the “five guarantees” of food, clothing, medical care, housing, and burial expenses but with stipulations known as the “three nos.” Specifically, only individuals who have (1) no family member to support them, (2) no ability to work, and (3) no source of income are eligible. Currently only a small percentage of China's elders qualify for this support (State Council Information Office 2004). For elders living in poor, but not officially destitute, conditions, resources are scant.

Rural-Urban Inequalities

Zimmer and Kwong (2004:47) argue that rural-urban differences are “critical in understanding the well-being of older adults” in China. Yet many studies of China's aging and older adults focus on urban elders, possibly because fertility rates in China’s cities have been lower than in rural areas, resulting in relatively more rapid population aging in urban centers. For example, Shanghai has for some time been home to the highest proportion of residents age 60 and over (Poston and Duan 2000). However, it is very possible that rural-urban migration of young people could result in many of China’s rural villages having the de facto oldest populations (Zeng et al. 2002: 268). Additionally, the resources and services available to rural elders are inferior to those available to their counterparts. Most rural areas have not worked in state-owned or private enterprises and are not eligible for pensions, and although health services
in China's rural areas were upheld as exemplary before economic reform, this praise no longer appears applicable (Li and Feldman 2004; Joseph and Phillips 1999). Establishing “old age homes” and other services will be more challenging in geographically remote rural areas than in urban locations (Chen 1996; Jiang 1995). Considering these factors, additional attention to the situation of rural elderly is called for (Benjamin, Brandt and Rozelle 2000; Zeng et al. 2001).

STUDY SITE AND METHODS

This paper is based on a research completed between 2006 and 2007 in a rural southwestern Fujian village fictitiously named Seven Mountains. The data were produced by conducting a combination of methods: focus groups, a survey of elderly households, and personal interviews with older villagers during a period of six months in which the author lived in the village. The study site and the purpose of the mixed-methods approach are described below.

Seven Mountains Village

Seven Mountains is an administrative village including approximately 475 households at the time of this research and peopled mainly by Hakkanese (kejia) families. Hakkas belong to the Han ethnic majority group and speak a version of a Chinese dialect called kejiahua. Hilly geographical terrain had limited outside contact for many generations. One might therefore speculate that this region is more likely, rather than less likely, to maintain traditions than are other regions in the very large and diverse nation. Still, at the time of this research it was not unusual to see urbanites and foreigners en route to visit the traditional Hakka round earth homes that drew tourists from around China and elsewhere. In recent years, new highways had made the Seven Mountains area accessible from the large cities of Fuzhou and Xiaman, and the area was likely becoming relatively less isolated.

Like other mainland Chinese communities, Seven Mountains had experienced a good deal of turmoil since the establishment of the P.R.C. in 1949. Villagers faced food shortages and extreme hardship between the years of 1959 and 1961, in the midst of China’s “Great Leap Forward” campaign (1958-1963). Then, in the 1960s, workers were organized into communes with village households assigned to one of eight agricultural production units; a system that continued through the late 1970s. In 1978 when China to “opened” to the rest of the world, the Household Responsibility System allowed households to choose the crops they would produce and let them keep some profits from their labor in exchange for assuming certain responsibilities from the production unit. By the mid-1980s, restrictions on migration were eased and Seven Mountains residents could temporarily “go out” to cities for work. The wages earned by these migrants, along with increased local business opportunities, brought high income and wealth to many village households. In 1991, the first brick and steel three-story house, complete with western-style flush toilets, was built. By the mid-1990s most homes had landline telephones,
cellular phones, and color televisions. At the time of this research most Seven Mountains families who could afford to purchase a refrigerator, a water heater, and one or more air conditioners had done so.

Although industrialized to a degree, Seven Mountains maintained agricultural characteristics. It was still common to see local people (often women) planting or harvesting rice in the field, burning rice straw, or drying rice on the roof tops. Villagers could buy and sell livestock, produce, and other goods at the local market. However, villagers were free to establish businesses and in the past few decades, local officials had overseen the construction of two cement factories, a coal mine, and a brick factory. These township-village enterprises (TVEs) generated income for the local government but also generated pollution. Villagers had to acquire their drinking water from the upper mountain creeks or from wells since the river water had become undrinkable due to both household and industrial waste.

One of the most visibly striking characteristics of Seven Mountains and nearby villages was the widespread construction of new homes made of brick, cement, and steel. Villagers either built the homes together as families or, if it were financially feasible, they hired workers to construct them. According to residents, home construction had been increasing for several years, but the building “boom” observable during the period of this research was driven by a recent flood earlier that spring. With many homes in the area damaged or washed away, the local government had temporarily waived certain construction fees and restrictions, and families rushed to take advantage of these temporary money-saving conditions.

Mixed-Methods Data Collection and Analysis

The initial research phase included a set of eight focus groups with the purpose of generating knowledge of later-life themes and issues important to elders. Participants were recruited via a snowball sample and the focus groups were segmented by age (55 years – 69 years; 70 years and above) and gender. These group discussions were monitored by the author and led by graduate sociology students who had been born in the general vicinity and were able to speak Hakkanese. In these focus groups, elders discussed and answered general questions about social change in their households and village. The groups met at the local primary school for approximately one hour and averaged six persons per group.

A simple random stratified household survey followed the focus group phase and included 60 households in which a person aged 55 or older resided. An official roster of all village households provided the sampling frame. Village households were categorized into groups according to residence in the three hamlets (zirancun) that comprised the administrative village of Seven Mountains. A random list of households from each of the three hamlets was

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1 It was necessary during all research phases to pose questions in the local dialect because many older villagers, particularly women, spoke only the oral local language and were unable to read written Chinese characters.
drawn and the first 20 households from each hamlet that included a person aged 55 or above
were interviewed. The survey asked about living conditions, chores, recreational activities,
health, symptoms of depression, attitudes about living arrangements, and expectations for junior
family members. Based on focus group discussions, two questions about environmental
conditions were added to the questionnaire. Due to results of a pilot test, detailed questions about
wages and the time use of all household members were removed from the questionnaire. A local
English teacher conducted the survey interviews in Hakkanese and was accompanied by the
author in all cases. The presence of others during the survey interview was noted.

When more than one elder lived in the household, the target respondent was chosen
according to whose birthday was closest to spring festival (January – February). Although
approximately half of the respondents should have been female, women represented only about
one third of the respondents. It is possible that the “birthday rule” was either unclear, and/or that
it was evaded by helpers and household members in cases when women were busy or when it
was supposed that the men were more qualified to answer the questions.2 Although the survey
can be regarded as random at the household level, caution should be exercised in generalizing the
individual circumstances of the elders in the households to all village elders.

Personal interviews with 18 (nine women and nine men aged 55 and above) followed as a
last phase, and sought to understand more profoundly the later-life expectations and concerns of
the older villagers. Respondents were purposively selected from the roster of survey participants
with the aim of including people with a variety of socioeconomic, marital, and gender statuses.
Accompanied by the author, a local male English teacher conducted the interviews with the older
men whereas a female university student conducted interviews with the older women. In some,
but not all, cases, family members or friends were present during part or all of the interview.
Their presence was noted.

The goal of employing more than one research method was to maximize the quality and
depth of data analysis by triangulating findings from different phases (Axinn and Pearce 2006;
Creswell 2003). The use of a variety of methods also sought to capitalize on the strengths of each
method and to supplement their weaknesses. For example, the survey data is able to provide a
general picture of the household conditions and relations in which elders lived, whereas the less-
structured focus groups and interviews provide the opportunity to probe in-depth how elders’
perceived their current conditions and future prospects.

Focus group and interviews were recorded and transcribed into written Chinese and then
into English. Data from the focus groups, interviews, and open-ended survey questions were
coded and mapped using The Ethnograph software. This program was helpful for organizing the
qualitative data in such as way as to detect convergences, divergences, and main themes. After
each phase of research and at the conclusion of the data production phase it was necessary to

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2 This latter suggestion was raised by well-meaning assistants several times during the research.
analyze findings from each respective phase independently but then also, integrate findings from all three phases and attempt to reconcile contradictions.

**Measures and Definitions**

For the purposes of this study, *older adults* and *elders* are defined as people aged 55 years and above, and “later-life” refers to the years after age 54. Because so few Seven Mountains elders were over the age of 80 years by US standards, the common categories of “young old,” “old,” and “oldest-old” were collapsed into two categories to form the groups “young-elders” and “old-elders” when segmenting focus groups.

Drawing on advice from villagers, research assistants, and respondents themselves, this study defines a *household* (*jia ting*) as a group of people who, unless absent from the home due to school or work reasons, regularly ate meals together under a common roof. Household size in Seven Mountains ranged from 1 to 13 members and averaged 5.4 members. In most cases elders lived with a son and daughter-in-law and one or more grandchildren.\(^3\)

For purposes of understanding elders’ *material conditions*, the study relies on (1) respondents’ rating of their own household economic conditions, (2) observed household ownership of appliances such as water heaters, dish sanitizers, refrigerators, and air conditioners, and (3) self-reported household expenditures on food, medical treatment, and spring festival celebrations. Focus group and interview data provide additional information about individual elders’ self-assessed economic conditions and the standards they used to evaluate their material conditions.

Symptoms of *depression* were measured via a scale adapted from a Chinese short version of the *Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D Scale)*, which Sun (2004) used in a study of elders in Baoding City, China. Seven of the 14 items address somatic complaints (e.g., difficulty eating and sleeping), three items inquire about positive affective symptoms (e.g., feeling happy), three inquire about negative affective symptoms (e.g., feeling lonely), and one item asked about personal relationships (i.e., feeling disliked). As in Sun’s study, the items are assigned four labels (1-4) related to the frequency in which elders experienced them: *often*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, and *never*. Negative items were re-coded to reflect higher levels of depression. When all questions on the scale were answered, the minimum score was 14, reflecting a lower level of depression, and the maximum score was 56, suggesting a higher level of depression. Focus group and interview data also include direct statements from elders about their current and past levels of life satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In these discussions and narratives elders explicitly or implicitly (e.g., by crying) indicated in what ways and to what extent they were content, discontent, anxious, happy, and so on.

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\(^3\) At the time of this research, having two children was permissible in this area, as long as the first-born child was female and the couple waited a number of years to have the second child.
**FINDINGS**

**Elders and their Households in Seven Mountains Village: Descriptive Information**

Findings from the survey provide a general overview of Seven Mountains elders’ household characteristics, living conditions, and mental well-being. Table 1 shows descriptive information about survey participants’ age, educational level, marital status, living arrangements, self-rated health, and perceived household economic conditions.

**Table 1: Survey Respondents: Descriptive Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n = 60)</th>
<th>Men (n = 41)</th>
<th>Women (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-69</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 +</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Level (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior high</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior high/vocational school</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-residing with children (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-rated Health (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived Household Economic Conditions (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just enough</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat well-off</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very well-off</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As expected, older women had received significantly less education than had their male counterparts. The majority of women (63.2 percent) reported receiving “less than primary level” or no formal education at all. There were also significant gender differences in marital status and self-rated health. Women were more often widowed than were men, and they reported poorer health. In fact, no women considered their health to be “very good,” compared to the 29.3 percent of men who did. Reflecting continuation of traditional living arrangements, most survey participants lived with one or more adult children. Respondents were also asked to rate their material living conditions. The portion of elders were those who said their households had “just enough” was 38.3 percent. Just over a quarter of elderly respondents (26.7 percent) described their household as “not having enough,” and an equal amount said their households were “somewhat well-off.” Only 8.3 percent of older villagers described themselves as living in a “very well-off” household. So, while it is accurate to say that the vast majority of elders (73.3 percent) felt their households had enough or more than enough on which to survive, only about a third of the respondents (35 percent) reported feeling to any degree affluent (i.e., being “somewhat” or “very” well-off).

Table 2 provides additional information from the household survey on elders’ household economic conditions. The average per capita reported income among these elder households was 7693.72 yuan, suggesting that, at least elder households in Seven Mountains are fairly well-off within the context of rural Fujian, which had an average per capita annual income of 4450.50 yuan in 2005 (2005 China Statistical Yearbook). However, findings show marked within-village variation, by hamlet. The average annual per capita income during 2005 for elder households in Hamlet 1 was 3072.00 yuan; below the average for rural Fujian and much lower than the averages annual per capita incomes reported by residents in elder households of Hamlet 2 (8918.53 yuan) and Hamlet 3 (9025.64 yuan). Accordingly, elder households in Hamlet 3 averaged much higher expenditures than did elder households in other hamlets, with the exception of food expenditures which were slightly lower than those of Hamlet 2 elder households. Results from the survey confirm villagers’ perceptions that households in Hamlet 3 were most well-off. The usual explanation for this relative affluence was that people from these families were employed in the transportation business or worked in the mine that was located in the hamlet. Perhaps these households’ ability to participate in mining and transportation industries was also related to family resources, such as family size or prior savings. The higher education levels in elder households in Hamlet 3 are probably also associated with their relative wealth, whether as a cause, effect, or both.

Elder households in Hamlet 1 reported owning (rights to) the most farm land, having the lowest household incomes, ranking lowest in terms of perceived economic conditions, and having the smallest proportion of households living in new brick and steel homes. These findings, as well as observation of the physical environments of the hamlets, suggest that Hamlet 1 remained relatively more agricultural and less industrialized than did the other two hamlets, a condition which may be related to the economic situation of families living there.
Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: Elder Households by Hamlet and Village

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hamlet 1</th>
<th>Hamlet 2</th>
<th>Hamlet 3</th>
<th>Village</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Number of Household Members</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported Mean 2005 Annual Household Income Per Capita (yuan)</td>
<td>3072.00</td>
<td>8918.53</td>
<td>9025.64</td>
<td>7693.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Willing to Report Income</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Highest Level of Education of Any Household Member (1=none; 5=H.S.)</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Amount of Farm Land Per Surveyed Household (mu)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household’s Mean Monthly Food Expenditures (yuan)</td>
<td>313.33</td>
<td>869.23*</td>
<td>782.14*</td>
<td>641.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Willing/Able to Report</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household’s Mean Annual Spring Festival Expenditures (yuan)</td>
<td>1664.71</td>
<td>1841.18</td>
<td>2077.78</td>
<td>1865.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Willing/Able to Report</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Number of CCP Members Per Household</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of Households Owning a New Brick and Steel Home</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of Households Owning an Air Conditioner</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>11.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of Households Owning a Motorbike</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of Households Owning a Water Heater</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>26.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of Household Including Someone Who “Goes Out”</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Number of People Going Out for Work</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Differed significantly from Hamlet 1 at p ≤ .05

Older Adults’ Evaluations of Current Conditions

Qualitative data offer deeper insight into the relationship between elders’ living conditions, needs, and well-being. In focus groups elders were asked general questions about social change and “development” (as understood by the respondent) in the village and in their households over the decades since 1949. These questions also led to discussion about family relations, life-satisfaction, and expectations for the future. Two broad themes about social change emerged from these data: (1) the convenience and comparative ease of present life, (2) changes in elders’ status in households.
Convenience and Comparative Ease of Present Life

According to participants, the availability of modern utilities and improvements in transportation had transformed daily life. Gas stoves and piped water from the wells and mountains had made cooking food and washing clothes much easier, and the official opening of a permanent paved road through the village, along with public transportation to nearby towns, allowed elders to quickly get groceries, sell vegetables, and visit with friends.

[T]here used to be a line from a song: "The villages have electric lights and telephones." Now it is a reality, now every house has electric lights and telephones! We even use cell phones! (Old-elder man, focus group)

In the past, these older people had used shoulder poles to carry goods long distances to sell or trade. A solid rain had made travel by bicycle impossible.

[L]ife before was really bitter. I would buy one water jug to use to bring back wine. Because there was no road, I used my head to carry the jug home. Before, there was only one store. You had to ask a person in order to get sugar, oil, and salt. Before everything required manpower to do, but now it’s not necessary. There is a road and you can travel by car. Life is much better. (69 year-old woman)

The most hardship was in 1954 and 1959. We ate tree leaves. There were no cars. Everyone used shoulder poles to carry things. As soon as the day began I'd go to [a small town now about a ten-minute drive by car] carrying material with a shoulder pole. All of the roads were through the hills, made of stones. When I got back I'd go back out and work. In 15 days I'd carry 100 jin [100 pounds] of fertilizer and only get 10 work points. In 1954 I carried millet every day to [another town in the area]. I could only get 6 mao [1 cent] for carrying 90 jin [90 pounds]. In 1960 I gave birth to my son. It was also very difficult. During the time I gave birth there was not enough to eat. (79-year old woman)

The relative ease of later-life was also a result of decreased responsibilities for caring for young children and seniors. Women especially spoke about the past heavy burdens of household chores.

Before there was farm work to do every day until late, and still not enough money for food. If clothes were ripped and tattered I’d mend them again. I made shoes by myself. There were 12 people in one family. That's 12 pairs of shoes. Every day I was working before dawn. I had to get up very early to make food for everyone, and the food was really bad. Every day we ate vegetables. When we celebrated Spring Festival, each person ate only a little pork. At times it was even more difficult. During 1960 there wasn't enough to eat. If there wasn't food we just ate sweet potatoes and pumpkin. I remember one time there was a
neighbor who cooked a kind of rotten tree leaf and gave it to her husband to eat. Her husband wouldn't eat it. She asked me if I wanted to eat it. I tried a bite, then I quickly took it all and swallowed it down. That tree leaf smelled bad and made me choke -- it was very slimy. At that time I was extremely hungry, I just ate gulp after gulp. At that time everyone had much hardship. We ground peanut shells to eat. Sometime we ate weeds. (80 year-old woman)

The hardship was greatest when I first married. I had to support so many children. I also had to make clothes for them to wear. Each person needed one outfit. That is more than ten outfits [including clothing for the husband, mother- and father-in-law]. That's not the case now. (79 year-old woman, interview)

**Social Change and Elders' Status in Households**

A second important theme was perceived changes in elders' household and village status.

The young people before were more filial. Before when I was a daughter-in-law, when I saw my father- and mother-in-law I had to get water for them to wash their hands. After they had washed their hands I got water for them to wash their faces. I had to call them to come to meals. At night I had to get water for them to wash their feet. When I saw them I had to greet them "Father" and "Mother." Not greeting them was not okay! I would be scolded by them. Young people these days are not like this. (74 year-old woman)

We watch the [television] programs that young people want to watch . . . . [O]ur most important need now is for an elderly person's activity hall. This way we elderly people would not stay at home watching young people give us dirty looks. (Old-elder man, focus group)

Some elderly respondents also spoke critically of contemporary social values and priorities and complained about gambling, materialism and a general lack of concern for other people.

You can use four words to describe people today: crafty, tricky, slippery, and evil. People's level of civilization today is generally quite high; however people today put more importance on money. Care for elderly people and children is quite far down the list (74 year-old man)

Still, not all elders believed that filial piety was declining among young people. Elders who understood filial piety as (whether partially or entirely) the fulfillment of material obligations pointed out that filialness was actually more possible in contemporary times than in previous eras, to the extent that children had access to modern appliances and opportunities to earn money.
Before I had to prepare the fire for my parents and get them water to wash their hands and feet. Now life is good. My children directly buy water or an electric radiator for me. It's much better now (78 year-old woman).

Of course I wish for good health and that my sons will get rich -- that they will fix up their houses to be a little more beautiful. If they have money they can be filial. If I don't have money they could really be filial to me! (Old-elder woman, focus group)

[My children] don’t have money for themselves and their lives are not good. How can they be filial to me? They can just care for me with words; say to me, "Ma, take care of your health." (69 year-old woman)

**Expectations for Future Needs and Support**

Following Chinese tradition, respondents overwhelmingly relied on families for future old age support. However, the support they expected from family members varied according to gender, perceived household economic conditions, and the type of support (financial, instrumental, or psychological) anticipated. Contradicting villagers’ frequent remark that Chinese elderly people “rely on sons” for support in old age, many elders also expressed expectations for daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, and grandchildren.

**Expectations for Financial Support**

Table 3 shows descriptive results about elders’ expectations for three types of old age support. The majority (76.7 percent) of elderly respondents expected a son to provide financial support, and 60.0 percent reported expecting a daughter-in-law to provide financial support. Respondents who considered themselves to live in a “somewhat well-off” or “very well-off” household were more likely than their poorer counterparts to expect financial help from a daughter-in-law. Contrary to beliefs that daughters do not provide material assistant to older parents, 36.7 percent of respondents reported anticipating that a daughter would provide financial support, and 30.0 percent of elders expected that sons-in-law would do so. Interview data suggest that, although daughters are not traditionally required (or, in the past, able) to provide financial support, quite a few elders received and appreciated material support and demonstrations of filial piety from daughters.

My daughter gives me a pair of leather shoes every year and is very filial. Some daughters are even better and spend a lot of money to build a house for their parents. (73 year-old man)

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4 It should be noted that expectations are based on actual family composition. For example, it is possible that some elders did not anticipate help from a daughter because they did not have a daughter. For these reasons, it is safest to regard these results as indicative of elders’ resources rather than as indicative of expectations about filial piety, etc.
[My daughter] gives me 200 yuan every month. But right now she hasn't gotten married. If she marries into a poor family later, she will not have money for herself. In that case she certainly will not look after me. (69 year-old woman)

I have one daughter. She is more filial than my son. Other people are very pleased to have a son. I am more pleased to have a daughter. (78 year-old man)

Table 3. Elders’ Expectations for Family Support: Household Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of Respondent</th>
<th>Son</th>
<th>Daughter-in-law</th>
<th>Daughter</th>
<th>Son-in-law</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
<th>Son</th>
<th>Grandson</th>
<th>Granddaughter</th>
<th>Sibling</th>
<th>No One</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Percentage of Elders Anticipating Personal Care from Particular Family Members |
|-------------------|-----|-----------------|----------|------------|--------|----|----------|---------------|---------|--------|
| Total             | 58.3 | 56.7           | 28.3     | 23.3       | 23.3   | 0.0| 1.7      | 0.0           | 1.7     | 0.0    |
| Women             | 63.2 | 63.2           | 26.3     | 21.1       | 10.5   | 15.8| 0.0      | 0.0           | 0.0     | 0.0    |
| Men               | 56.1 | 53.7           | 29.3     | 24.4       | 29.3   | 0.0| 2.4      | 0.0           | 2.4     | 0.0    |

| Percentage of Elders Anticipating Psychological Comfort from Particular Family Members |
|-------------------|-----|-----------------|----------|------------|--------|----|----------|---------------|---------|--------|
| Total             | 76.7 | 68.3           | 56.7     | 41.7       | 10.0   | 6.7| 1.7      | 0.0           | 0.0     | 0.0    |
| Women             | 68.4 | 57.9           | 52.6     | 15.8       | 10.5   | 10.3| 0.0      | 0.0           | 0.0     | 0.0    |
| Men               | 80.  | 73.2           | 58.5     | 53.6       | 9.8    | 4.9| 2.4      | 0.0           | 0.0     | 0.0    |

In general, elders did not expect financial support from a spouse. Notably, no women reported relying on or planning to rely on husbands for financial support. Of the elder men who said they expected wives to help provide financial support, most of them said that they would also provide support for wives (results not shown). In other words, these men imagined a mutually supportive situation.

A very small percentage of older villagers expected that grandchildren would provide financial support. Among survey respondents, all of the people saying they expected a grandson to provide financial support were women. From my anecdotal observations, older women spent more time with grandchildren, and perhaps they anticipated that this investment would
encourage reciprocation in the form of future material support. A very small portion of survey respondents expected support from a granddaughter, with no significant difference in terms of gender.

A small portion of elders, 1.7 percent, said that they did not expect that any family member, including themselves, would be providing financial support. Expectations for people outside the household unit to provide financial assistance were minimal, with only 1.7 percent of elders expecting support from a sibling, and no respondents expecting support from a friend or other person such as a neighbor.

**Expectations for Physical Care**

Approximately 58 percent of elderly respondents said they expected a son would provide physical care, and around the same portion, 56.7 percent, expected a daughter-in-law to do so. Respondents who considered their households to be somewhat well-off or very well-off were also more likely than their disadvantaged peers to expect personal care both from sons and daughters-in-law. Perhaps these “better off” elders believed their junior family members to have more time and resources than did their disadvantaged counterparts. Elders’ relatively advantaged living conditions might also reflect better family relations that would in turn encourage reliance on household members. Daughters were expected to provide future physical care among 28.3 percent of respondents and 23.3 percent said a son-in-law would help in this regard. These expectations did not differ significantly by gender of the respondent. With regard to spousal assistance with physical care, 10.5 percent of women anticipated help from a husband, although quite a larger percentage (29.3 percent) of men said that they expected their wife to assist with physical daily care. (This gender difference might be due to women’s reasonable expectations that they would outlive their spouses.) In other words, overall, approximately 77 percent of respondents did not expect that a spouse provide help with personal care in the future.

While no men said they expected grandsons to provide physical care, 15.8 percent of women did. This difference might again relate to grandmothers’ expectations of future reciprocation in exchange for physically caring for grandsons as children. Also, perhaps women expected to live to older ages than did their husbands, and therefore anticipated needing assistance with physical care. Only 1.7 percent of elders expected help with physical care from granddaughters. As in the case of financial support, only 1.7 percent said that no one would be available to assist in this aspect. No respondents reported expecting physical care help from siblings.

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5 Still, for example, an older man who participated in a semi-structured interview spoke hopefully of the future saying, “I am working so hard to bring [my grandson] up -- he will also care for me and look after me.”
Expectations for Psychological Support

Respondents were also asked about anticipated psychological support (jing shen wei jie). The majority of elders expected that a son (76.7 percent of elders) and a daughter-in-law (68.3 percent) would provide psychological comfort. Daughters were cited as expected sources of psychological support 56.7 percent of the time, while 41.7 percent of elders anticipated psychological comfort from a son-in-law. Older women and older men differed significantly in the extent to which they expected a son-in-law to provide support: Over half of the older men surveyed (53.7 percent) said that they expected a son-in-law to provide psychological comfort, whereas only 15.8 percent of women respondents said the same. Male elders thus appeared to anticipate a level of emotional closeness with their sons-in-law that older women did not.

Notably, a minority of participants said that they expected a spouse to provide psychological support: 10.5 percent of older women and 9.8 percent of older men. Respondents generally did not consider grandchildren a future source of psychological support; only 6.7 percent of elders listed grandsons as an expected resource in this regard, and only 1.7 percent listed granddaughters. Unexpectedly, no elders reported expecting to receive psychological comfort from a brother or sister. There were no significant differences in expected psychological support from family members based upon elders’ perceived household economic conditions.

Confidence in Family

Although some respondents perceived shifts in age relations that were unfavorable to older people at the household level, most of them maintained confidence that their families would continue to be a main, stable source of support as long as economic resources were adequate. In fact, due to increases in wealth and income in comparison to previous eras, many elders believe that an increased proportion of elderly people at the household and national levels would be a relatively minor issue:

As an elderly person looking at the situation right now, there will be no influence [of population aging or smaller family size on elderly well-being]. If it were before, when everyone had no money, there would have been a big effect. (Young-elder man, focus group)

Similarly, a 79 year-old woman predicted that ten years later her “grandchildren will be finished with school, [her] daughter-in-law's business will be bigger and earning more money, and a house should be built.”

Older villagers also expressed ability and willingness to look after themselves to a large extent. They were confident about finding ways to entertain themselves and socialize that were independent of younger generations. Their doubts about family support in the future were mainly regarding general household well-being, not about the extent to which family members would abandon tradition, migrate to the cities, live separately from elders,
or not have enough siblings to help them shoulder the burden of elder care. In fact, large families did not guarantee adequate old-age support. In some cases, interviewees with five sons or more lived in relatively poor conditions and maintained little hope for future prosperity. One old-elder woman with many sons advised the author:

If you have too many children they will try to pass along the responsibility. You should just have one. That way at least there will be one to take care of you.

This perspective echoes findings from some larger-scale studies in China (Zimmer and Kwong 2003) that challenge the traditional wisdom that having more sons will increase the chances of good quality of life in old age.

**Hopes for the Future**

Older respondents were asked to describe an ideal life for an elderly person and to list three wishes. Almost all of them described scenes in which their basic needs were met and they did not have to be concerned about survival. Having enough food and being able to enjoy some “special treats” occasionally were situations described as bringing great joy. Disadvantaged people such as one 58-years old woman dreamt of “having three meals a day and eating until… full, not needing to borrow money from other people, having clothes to wear.” But even elders who lived in well-off households appreciated simple pleasures:

I just think about eating and having something to eat. I want all sorts of things to eat. Soon it will be the New Year! I love to eat all the oranges and cakes. (80 year-old woman)

As long as [my children] give me living expenses and I have money to spend, life can go on. If I have money, I can go into town and buy beef soup to eat! [laughing]

(73 year-old man)

A common desire for more recreation and entertainment opportunities was also apparent in a few elders’ dreams of traveling to scenic and historic places in China and visiting Hong Kong or foreign countries. But most of all, respondents wished that an elderly activity center would be built in the village by the local government. They thought such a center could provide opportunities for elderly people to dance, sing, play musical instruments, and chat. They imagined playing card games, chess, and majiang -- “but not for money” -- and enjoying books, newspapers, videos, and television. Many elders also envisioned an elderly activity center as a place where older villagers could exercise. (Not everyone was able or willing to hike up the hills, and having seen the exercise equipment in older people’s centers in other villages, towns, and cities, older villagers were eager to enjoy similar facilities.) An elderly activity center was described by a 79-year old woman (who lived in a self-perceived “well-off” household), as a place where “everyone could go, have fun, talk and laugh, and that would make the days pass
more quickly,” – opposed to her current daily routine in which she was “just idling at home all day, with nothing to do.”

**Concerns about the Future**

Respondents in focus groups and interviews often described their current lives as markedly better than the past precisely because they had “no worries.” They also expressed a good deal of faith in the ability of technology and modern science to facilitate labor and solve problems:

> Previously people who depended on labor needed to exert lots of manpower. Now many people rely on machines; they don't need labor power. Most older people are idle. Younger people [also] have no work to do and are idle.

I: Do you worry about the future?

P: I don't worry. I just hope for world peace. In this case we elderly people would feel relieved. Now we don't worry about food and clothing. The most important thing is world peace.

I: You don't worry about anything else? Do you worry about your health being bad?

P: No. As long as there's money, you can treat any illness...

(old-elder woman, focus group)

Although the accessibility and affordability of health care has decreased in rural China over the past few decades, some respondents pointed out that the availability of ready-to-consume medicines (Western, traditional Chinese medicine, and combinations of the two) and the development of surgical techniques were positive changes. According to some elderly people in Seven Mountains, some traditional medicines had in previous times been difficult or costly to acquire and had required time-consuming preparations at home.

Still, despite the sense of general optimism that was voiced in focus groups and interviews, results from the household survey suggest that older villagers were as a whole quite concerned about some of the basic necessities of later life (see Table 4).6

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6 The relative optimism expressed in focus groups and personal interviews could be due to sample composition (these people being relatively better off than average) or to differences in the way people defined “concern” within the focus group and interview contexts. Focus groups and interviews centered on social change and likely, respondents were comparing current conditions to those of the difficult past when referring to the extent to which they now worried about survival.
### Table 4: Depression Scale: Respondents’ Mean Scores and Tests of Correlation with Select Variables

**Respondents’ Scores By Gender & Age Group** (range: 4-56; higher scores = higher levels of depression)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender &amp; Age Group</th>
<th>Overall Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young-Elders</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old-Elders</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>37.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young-Elders</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old-Elders</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tests of Correlation with Select Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Member Composition</th>
<th>Depression Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Old-Elders in Household</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Young-Elders in Household</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Members Under Age Five</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Economic Conditions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Condition</th>
<th>Depression Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Household Economic Conditions</td>
<td>0.326*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005 Income</td>
<td>0.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Household Members with Steady Income</td>
<td>0.162</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Household Expenditures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expenditure Type</th>
<th>Depression Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>0.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>0.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>0.135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>0.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Festival</td>
<td>0.297*</td>
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</table>

**Household Conditions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Depression Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Rooms</td>
<td>0.317*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of Farm Land</td>
<td>0.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of People Working Out</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Household Members</td>
<td>0.085</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Target Respondent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Depression Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Statistically significant (p ≤.05)
In all but two areas, the majority of respondents said that they were either “concerned” or “very concerned” about these needs being adequately met. For example, 61.7 percent of respondents said they were concerned or very concerned about future housing, 65 percent of respondents said they were concerned or very concerned about future food and nutrition, 50 percent of respondents said they were concerned or very concerned about having adequate clothing in the future, and almost 80 percent of respondents said they were concerned or very concerned about future medical care. Just over half of respondents, 56 percent, said they were concerned or very concerned about future companionship. The only areas about which fewer than half of survey respondents said they were concerned were help with chores (43.3 percent) and personal care (46.7 percent). Notably, there were no significant gender differences in terms of types or extent of concerns about the future.

**Social Comparison, Perceived Inequality, and Subjective Well-Being**

Although there was a consensus among respondents that life had on the whole improved for everyone, it was clear that some households and elders had gained more from China’s economic development and market transition than had others. Within hamlets and the village, elders’ housing conditions ranged from yellow mud structures that housed a number of families to private three story white- and pink- tiled homes with up to 40 rooms and numerous modern appliances. In addition to being intensely aware of inter-household inequalities, elders also frequently compared village-level amenities with those of villages nearby.

**Family and Household Inequality**

Whereas their better-off counterparts had ceased to worry about survival, elders living in disadvantaged circumstances still engaged in farm work and household chores, and they coped with the stresses of financial strain. The starkly different perspectives of elders who lived in financially stable homes and those who did not were notable in focus group and interview data:

We don't worry about food to eat. Our children all help us. Also, before we all had to tend to our own survival. Now you can work or not work. If you don't work there is still food to eat. Children help us with chores. We don't worry about food. Children can provide you with food (young-elder woman, focus group).

I get up about 6 o'clock. I'm very busy. My mother-in-law is over 80. Since last year she falls out of bed. I have to look after her. . . . I must grow vegetables and sell a little for money and manage the home subsidy money. I am extremely economical. I buy just a little pork. The child [her grandson] eats a little, my mother-in-law eats a little, but I don't eat any. I also raise some chickens and ducks to eat only at Spring Festival. Sometimes our luck is not good and at Spring Festival there is no chicken or duck meat to eat. My life is very difficult. (58 year-old woman)
While some young elders made small amounts of money from selling goods at the market, most old elders were reliant upon the children to provide for them. Disparities in family resources (e.g., social networks, number of family members, savings) could perpetuate and magnify household inequalities and old-elders were particularly vulnerable because they had no means to improve their conditions. Moreover, because many people in the village held that “these days, anyone can make money if they are smart enough,” elders and families who failed to so do could be implicitly – or explicitly – blamed for being incompetent.

My family has no economic base. There’s no family property. There’s no money to start doing business. Also, no one is willing to loan us money . . . . Commercially-minded people can all get rich. First I’m not smart enough [to get rich]. Second, I’m too old – I don’t have the physical strength. So there’s no way.... Now people have to use guanxi [social connections] in order to [receive subsidies]....If you have money people will speak with you. If you don’t have money people will not pay attention to you. Rich people look down on small sums of money, but we who have no money cannot even get a little bit of money. (58 year-old woman)

I: Elderly people think a house is very important?
P: Everyone has built a new house, but I haven’t. Moreover my house isn’t big enough. Right now I’m living in some other people’s older house.
I: Do you have to rent it in order to live there?
P: No, I don’t need to pay money.
I: So can’t you just stay there and live? Why must you absolutely build a new house?
P: Everyone has one. I also want one. That would be much better.
I: Is it that everyone has one but you don’t, so you will be looked down on?
P: Yes. I will be looked down on. If everyone has one and I have one, then I can be happy. (73 year-old woman)

Table 5 shows correlations between selected variables and overall scores on the 14-item depression scale. On average, women respondents scored lower on this scale, demonstrating higher levels of depression. Among the selected variables, gender, perceived household economic conditions, ownership of “big ticket items,” and the number of rooms in a home were significantly related to the level of depression reported by older villagers. Based on conversations with villagers, the association between household ownership of “big ticket” items and fewer depressive symptoms could be explained both by the physical convenience and social status afforded by such appliances. First, ownership of these items probably reflected household finances, which could directly influence elders’ mental state. Also, water heaters and air conditioners made life much more comfortable, and transportation by private vehicle was both
convenient and expanded one’s opportunities to travel. Likely, elders both enjoyed these appliances on a practical level but also felt proud (and physically comfortable) living in a household successful enough to afford these items.

Table 5. Percentage of Elders “Concerned” or “Very Concerned” about Future Needs Being Met: Household Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of Respondent</th>
<th>Future Housing</th>
<th>Future Food/Nutrition</th>
<th>Future Clothing</th>
<th>Future Medical Care</th>
<th>Future Help with HH Chores</th>
<th>Future Physical Personal Care</th>
<th>Future Companion-ship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Hamlet</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet 1</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet 2</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet 3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Village Development and Elderly Well-Being**

In addition to noticing how their household conditions compared to those of their peers, elders were keenly aware of the resources available to older adults in neighboring villages. The distribution of subsidies and access to an elderly activity center were concerns for many respondents.

I: [This hamlet] has developed a lot. Has that helped elderly people?
P: No. But in some places, for example in [two nearby villages] elderly people have a support subsidy. We don’t have this.

I: In other words, economically-speaking, the village has not subsidized elders, right?
P: They haven’t! I’m very angry, but there’s nothing that can be done. (78-year old woman)

I: Do you think village development has helped you in terms of daily life?

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7 Owning a refrigerator appeared to be primarily a type of “conspicuous consumption.” Many families showcased their refrigerators proudly but used them infrequently, preferring to store food in cupboards in the traditional fashion.
**DISCUSSION: TRADITION, RELATIVE DEPRIVATION, AND RISING EXPECTATIONS**

What can these findings contribute to grounded theory about elderly well-being and satisfaction during times of social change? First, for the most part, data shows that these elderly respondents maintained confidence in the willingness of sons and other family members to care for them in old age, and many were particularly optimistic about the ability of families to care for them. From a practical standpoint, and insofar as filial piety was defined as provision of material support rather than as a reverent attitude, the social changes that had occurred in elders’ village and households encouraged, rather than discouraged, the likelihood of receiving traditional family support in old age. This perspective supports an understanding of the relationship between social change and tradition that contrasts with the one that underlies concerns about the erosion of traditional family support in China. As reflected in respondents’ viewpoints, tradition and social change need not be opposed to one another. Rather than asking if and how tradition will withstand social changes, scholars concerned about elderly well-being might be open to examining the ways in which tradition is supported and perpetuated by social change.
Second, findings from this study suggest that elderly respondents perceived their current and future conditions favorably in contrast to previous times. On the other hand, when comparing their household and village conditions to those of peers, they expressed dissatisfaction or even anger. Here, the concept of relative deprivation, as elaborated by Runciman (1966) provides some insight into the conditions contributing to elder’s dissatisfaction in this village. He proposed that relative deprivation emerges when subjects (1) do not have X, (2) know of other persons who have/had X, (3) want X, and (4) believe that obtaining X is realistic (Runciman 1966:10). Had elders been unaware of the activity centers in other locations or felt that obtaining a center was unrealistic or undeserved, they would not have felt deprived. We can adapt Runciman’s concept of relative deprivation and consider elders’ favorable assessment of current conditions in contrast to the past as an expression of “relative abundance.” Although the material conditions of many elders were simple, their prior experiences of adversity fostered appreciation, even decades later, for life’s small comforts and basic necessities. Despite some complaints of strained family relations, poor housing, financial worry, or lack of an activity center, memories of past hardship kept standards for contentment at rather basic levels.

I posit that elders’ dissatisfaction with current conditions (sense of relative deprivation) was somewhat mitigated by the improvements in material conditions they had experienced over time (sense of relative abundance). A theory that seeks to explain or anticipate elderly well-being amid social changes should consider the ways in which individuals can simultaneously benefit and lose from a particular form of social changes. Moreover, period-related conditions such as levels of inequality during later-life can interact with the biographical experiences promote or detract from later-life satisfaction.

In the case of Seven Mountains, such a theory suggests that elders will be content with rudimentary material conditions unless their sense of relative deprivation becomes too great. In this case, memories of the bitter past may not be enough to keep elders’ satisfied with basic clothing, housing, and having meat a few times a week. Other period-related factors such as changes in standards of living, goods, and services that come with economic growth may also promote rising expectations (Chan, Ofstedal, and Hermalin 2002; Hagerty 2000; Easterlin 1995; Brickman and Campbell 1971). Social comparison in such contexts as China’s growing inequalities and industrialization could produce distress and dissatisfaction among elders, regardless of “objective” conditions. 8

Thirdly, this research finds that even within a relatively well-off village, there are elders who are living in meager conditions. The psychological distress expressed by some of these elders suggests that disadvantaged elders may face another type of “double jeopardy” (i.e., both physical and psychological hardship) when neighboring households are better-off. These findings encourage attention to the potential for such “neighborhood effects” to shape later-life expectations and subjective well-being.

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8 Quality of life might be relatively higher during youth, for example, and temporal comparisons in later-life might promote dissatisfaction regardless of “objective” material conditions.
CONCLUSION

This paper aims to contribute toward a grounded theory of elderly well-being amid social change by drawing insights from research on Chinese elders living in a southwestern Fujian community. Research findings suggest (1) the value of a non-oppositional view of traditional family support and social change; (2) that (potentially simultaneous) losses and benefits brought by social change evaluated in light of life course experiences; and (3) that social comparison might intensify or moderate (dis)satisfaction over these losses and benefits.

This paper should not be interpreted as being dismissive of concern about elderly well-being where elderly people claim to be happy with minimal provisions. On the contrary, this research is based on the premise that subjective experiences and perceptions should complement, not substitute for, large scale studies and expert assessments of needs related to healthcare, help with daily activities of living, housing, and so on. Moreover, the argument is not that biographical experiences influence current and future expectations in a determinant way.9 Instead, this paper marks a preliminary attempt (1) to indicate, outline, and encourage theorizing about the interactive role of life course experience and period conditions in shaping later-life well-being and expectations and (2) to demonstrate how “ground-level” studies of the perspectives, priorities, and needs of elders can help inform theoretical understandings of the relationship between old age well-being and social changes.

The importance of cohort experience in shaping later-life expectations has been previously indicated (Hermalin and Yang 2004; Hermalin 2001:138; Keith et al. 1994:110) but continues to remain underemphasized in research on population aging and elderly well-being. Whereas the value of a life-course perspective for studies of health and socioeconomic status outcomes is now quite widely appreciated, such a view can be further extended to research on other “dependent variables” such as subjective well-being and later-life satisfaction. Factors contributing to later-life satisfaction and expectations may differ by cohort and social context; longitudinal research initiated now may be helpful in understanding these factors and can provide the opportunity to test the theoretical propositions outlined above.

9 For example, memories of bitter adversity could instead cultivate a sense of being entitled to a high quality of life in old age. In what cases and for whom this occurs would be of interest.
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