Dynamics of Family and Elderly Living Arrangements in China: New Lessons Learned from the 2000 Census*

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Abstract

The analysis in this article is based on micro data sets of the Chinese 2000, 1990, and 1982 censuses. The percentage of three-generation family households in 2000 increased considerably as compared to 1990 and 1982; the proportion of two-generation nuclear family households substantially dropped by about 17% in 2000 as compared to 1990. Such change, however, does not mean that Chinese families are returning to the more traditional structure. This is mainly caused by the demographic effects: given that most old parents still live with one married child (although declining), generations born after the early 1970s who have
much fewer siblings have a smaller chance of moving out of the parental home to form an independent nuclear family household when they reach the family formation stage. In fact, the one-person and one-couple-only households have been increasing quickly; average household size decreased significantly; the proportions of elderly who did not live with children and elderly-couple only households substantially increased in 2000 as compared to 1990. We conclude that the family transformation in contemporary China was caused by the tremendous fertility decline and by significant changes in social attitudes and economic mobility related to co-residence between old parents and adult children.

Introduction

China’s economy has been rapidly growing and Chinese society has been dramatically changing since the early 1980s, when economic reform and the open-door policy were launched. Previous studies based on the 1982 and 1990 census data have shown that, while family household size has reduced substantially, Chinese family household structures and the traditional norm regarding the living arrangements of the elderly were relatively stable in the 1980s. In the tremendously changed economic and social environment, what were the dynamic changes in Chinese family households and the living arrangements of the elderly in the 1990s? This paper sheds light on such questions concerning the main aspects of family dynamics, using the micro data files of the 2000, 1990, and 1982 censuses with a sample size of more than one million persons for each of the three data sets.

Coale combined and analysed the 1982 one-per-thousand fertility survey data and the 1953, 1964, and 1982 census data on the numbers of persons by sex and single year of age up to age 100. He concluded that the data passed a series of stringent tests of accuracy and consistency. Other scholars who have analysed Chinese 1982 census and survey data have reached similar conclusions. Underreporting of births has, however, become more serious in the 1990s; this underreporting has contributed to the underestimation of family household sizes and the fact that the ratio of persons aged 10–20 enumerated in the 2000 census to those aged 0–10 enumerated in 1990 was abnormally high (1.046). A common explanation among demographers in China is that census enumerations have become increasingly difficult since the early 1980s (after the market economic reforms were launched) because (1) many more people are moving around; (2) administrative control of the census-taking was significantly weaker in