

# *Family Support Networks in the Chinese Countryside*

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## About the Authors

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ISBN 962-441-711-3

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### *About the USC Seminar Series*

The Universities Service Centre (USC) was established in Hong Kong in 1963 by a group of Western scholars to facilitate the study of China. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Centre served as the main research base in the field for several generations of China scholars.

In the spring of 1988, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), which had managed the Centre since 1971, and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) reached an agreement to transfer the responsibility and ownership of the USC to the university. Thus, in that summer, the Centre was moved to expanded and upgraded quarters on the campus of CUHK.

Although field research is possible in China today, the Centre's library remains the most convenient base for documentary analysis. It is also useful as a station for supplementing field work in China. The Centre currently subscribes to 372 newspapers and more than 1,600 periodicals from Mainland China. One unique strength of the collection is a complete set, in bound hard copies, of major national and provincial newspapers published in China since the late 1940s. Other special materials include a complete set of provincial yearbooks and statistical compendia as well as an outstanding collection of local periodicals. Many of them are not found in most overseas collections on China.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong is committed to developing the Centre into a first-rate research library on contemporary China, open to scholars from all over the world. The Centre also assists them in applying for visas to Hong Kong looking for accommodation, hiring research assistance, and so on.

In 1990, the Centre established the Academic Visitors Programme with a startup donation from the Henry Luce Foundation. The USC Seminar Series was subsequently introduced to publish seminars presented by some visiting scholars. Since the end of 1993, the Academic Visitors Programme and the USC Seminar Series have been financed by the South China Programme of the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies. We thank Dr. Cheng Yu-tung and Dr. Lee Shau-kee for their generous donations which enabled the establishment of the South China Programme in 1991.

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China's countryside is in the midst of a massive organizational and economic shift. In that shift, one of the institutions likely to be reshaped is the family. Using new survey data, this paper examines the nature of parent-child ties, with an emphasis on how the shift to family farming, new economic opportunities, and migration reshape those ties. The examination includes not only coresidence patterns, visiting, and parental support, but also a particular emphasis on the changing nature of support from daughters.

### **Theory**

There are several aspects of changes over the last 15 years that should have reshaped family life. The existing literature, though far from completely consistent on predictions, provides some clues as to the probable consequences of those changes.



### *Parent-Son Relations*

The literature broadly classified as a literature on modernization suggests several mechanisms by which family relations are reshaped in the process of economic modernization. These mechanisms include weakening normative obligations and changes in the bargaining power of parents and children. If *normative obligations* weaken, then, parents could be neglected in old age. In Chinese settings, parents and communities try mightily to avoid this, socializing children into norms of filial piety which teach that the greatest shame in life is to neglect one's parents. It would seem that this socialization often succeeds. In Taiwan and other parts of East Asia, most parents continue to live with adult children, and most sons send at least nominal sums of money to their parents (e.g., Lee, Parish and Willis 1994, Casterline et al. 1991, Morgan and Hiroshima 1983). Nevertheless, even in East Asia there are some signs that some parts of the modernization argument is correct about the ways in which increasing education, mass media exposure, and work in new bureaucratized settings cause values of individual autonomy and freedom to weaken norms of family obligation (e.g., Inkeles and Smith 1974, Cain 1981, Nugent 1985). In other Chinese settings, with economic development, children move away more quickly. Parents lose some of the authority they did have in the past. And even as nominal gifts to parents continue, parents become anxious about support in old age. One indicator of the loss of elderly power and anxiety about economic security in old age is a sharply increasing suicide rate among the elderly (e.g., Hu 1988, Tang 1978, Wolf 1968, 1975, Headley 1983, Kuo 1989). In rural China, several things should work against the failure of old age support norms, including the government's insistence that rural children support their parents and the strong social pressures among neighbors whose rural communities became even more encapsulated in the decades after 1949 (e.g., Parish and Whyte 1978, Davis-Friedmann 1991). Nevertheless, examining how parental support varies by level of education and type of occupation should help reveal whether parental support

norms remain strong. If older ideas about weakening norms are correct, more education and new jobs should lead to weaker relations. If newer ideas about how extra parental investment in a person's education lead to higher obligations to support parents, then, just the opposite might occur (e.g., Cox 1987). Thus, here, as often below, our precise prediction about recent outcomes remains indeterminant.

A second, somewhat related mechanism, is the declining *bargaining power* of parents. According to this line of argument, if parents no longer control access to land and other inheritable goods, then, parents have few means by which to induce children to give the parents attention in either time or money (e.g., Bernheim et al. 1985, Lucas and Stark 1985). Were this a major consideration, then, attention to parents should have declined rapidly in China starting in the 1950s, as first land reform and then rural collectivization deprived parents of most economic resources other than the family home. Then, starting around 1981, with the return to family farming and the subsequent growth of private enterprises, parents should have recaptured some bargaining power. The recapturing is only slight, however, for in most areas land ultimately remains under the nominal control of the collective rather than under the control of parents, and most private endeavors remain extremely small in scale. Nevertheless, a study of how parent-child relations vary according to the occupation of the parent should help reveal whether bargaining power is a plausible explanation of continuing old age obligations.

Even though bargaining of the gross variety described in older models of family change may not occur, there could be more subtler bargaining. Studies of Taiwan and other societal settings suggest that there is often bargaining over the types of support children provide parents and over which sons provide support. Sons with more resources can trade time for money, refusing to live with the parents but sending more money instead. In that trade off, both because of personal need and because of little bargaining power, sons with less money may become the one who

lives with parents and provides daily and emergency physical care (e.g., Lee, Parish and Willis 1994, Hermalin et al. 1990).

*Migration* is an additional mechanism that is closely related to problems of bargaining and contract enforcement. In most societies, rapid economic growth is accompanied by migration out of the village as farmers abandon agriculture for more rewarding nonfarm jobs. With this migration, parents and children are almost inevitably separated by distance and time, with the consequence not only that coresidence and frequent visiting are more difficult but also that old obligations to provide parental support either diminish or are sufficiently variable that parents become anxious about old age support (e.g., Goode 1963, Caldwell 1976). In the language of economics, with increased distance, contract enforcement becomes more of a problem, with sons more easily abandoning the implicit intergenerational contract to provide support in old age in exchange. However, in China, migration out of the village is supposed to be slowed by the official policy of using rural industry to keep villagers at home even as they leave agriculture. All this suggests that we need first to examine patterns of migration and, then, to examine the consequences of what migration does exist for parent-child relations.

We will, thus, pay attention to three possible mechanisms that shape parent-child relations. If contract enforcement is a major problem, then, migration and physical distance between parent and child should sharply reduce parental support. If bargaining power is a major concern among parents, then, parents should attempt to maintain control of the house, one of their few tangible assets in the countryside. Parents with pensions and income should command more attention from children. If normative obligations weaken rapidly with increased education and modern occupations, then, people with more of these influences should pay significantly less attention to parents. If, in contrast, normative obligations persist, just the opposite should occur, with children who have gotten more resources (education, etc.) from children providing more support to parents. And, if normative obligations remain strong, parental support should be related

mostly to the needs of parents rather than to the characteristics of children.

### *Parent-Daughter Relations*

For patrilineal societies such as China, much of the literature on changing patterns of parental support emphasizes the changing nature of parent-son relations. There is a small, but equally important literature on the changing nature of parent-daughter relations. There are both parallels and differences in the sorts of mechanisms that shape parent-daughter ties. We will examine three. One is how the “modernization” of values, leading to an emphasis on individual autonomy and self-realization, can allow innate tendencies to emerge. If patriarchal obligations decline and the individual has more freedom to act on their natural instincts, this literature suggests, mother-daughter ties should become more important. In patrilocal families, the son’s wife is initially a stranger in the household, and the daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relationship is one fraught with potential tension. This tension is exacerbated when the daughter-in-law gains the power to resist her mother-in-law’s commands (e.g., Wolf 1975, Hu 1988). Relations between mother and daughter are much closer, enforced by years of life together and frequent affection nurtured by the mother’s attempt to maintain the “uterine” family (Wolf 1972, Hung 1994, Judd 1989, 1994, Tsui 1987). If earlier studies can be generalized, that ability to maintain close mother-daughter ties should have become easier in China over time. These studies report a weakening of village exogamy rules that required daughters had to leave the village at marriage (e.g., Parish and Whyte 1978, Lavelly 1991, Selden 1993, Johnson 1993). If true, more marriage within the same village means that daughters are increasingly able to maintain ties to their mother through visiting, care giving, and other kinds of parental support. Also, where incomes have increased, parents may have invested more in their daughter’s future from birth, leading to the expectation that close relations would continue (Parish and Willis 1993).

A second possible mechanism leading to closer mother-daughter ties is the increasing role of private *economic networks*. Based on studies of Taiwan, scholars suggest that contacts with affinal (marriage related) kin were initially useful in organizing labor for busy planting and harvesting periods. Then, later, as economic growth led to endeavors outside one's home village, and the need for social networks broader than one's patrilocal kin, affines became even more important (e.g., Gallin 1966, 1978, Gallin and Gallin 1985, Chuang 1985). Such a movement could also have occurred in China in the 1980s, first as the collective organization of agriculture was displaced by family farming, creating a need to find new network ties to mobilize agricultural labor during the busy planting and harvesting seasons. Then, with the growth in private enterprise in the countryside, network ties to all kinds of kin within and outside the village should have been needed to help find new work opportunities, supplies, and outlets for new economic endeavors. If so, the linkages to kin related by marriage should be particularly strong in regions where private economic activities dominate over collectively organized production and among families with self-employed (*geti*) economic activities.

The third possible mechanism relates to the *bargaining power* of wives vis-à-vis their husband and his family. Historically, in both China and the European socialist states, the large influx of women into the labor market led to far fewer positive consequences for women than had been hoped. Nevertheless, in the one area of kin contact, additional income for women may have given them more discretion over their ties to their own parents, particularly to their mother. In Taiwan, for example, there is some evidence that additional income allows women both to visit and send gifts to their own parents more often (Tsui 1987, Lee, Parish and Willis 1994). If this same pattern is repeated in China, then, higher income women should see and assist their own parents more frequently.

The topic of women's ties to their parents will have increasing significance in the years to come. With rapidly falling birth rates,

more will have only a daughter to rely on. Or, in the countryside, even if most parents have at least one son, that son's income may be insufficient, causing daughters to be called on for more help. The question, then, is whether daughters will respond to their parents' needs in the same way as sons. Earlier work on Taiwan suggests that they will, though the levels of support from daughters will become large only when there is no son to provide parental support. Daughters are the insurers of last resort, stepping in when sons for some reason are absent or fail to provide the required support (Lee, Parish and Willis 1994). The issue is whether similar patterns are repeated in China.

## Data

Our data are from the Chinese General Social Survey, a spring 1993 study of ten counties scattered widely throughout the eastern two-thirds of China. Based on a multi-stage probability sample in each county, the data provide information from 32 towns and 141 villages on a base sample of 3,012 respondents and a total of 27,904 kin of these respondents. Some preliminary comparisons of the samples to the 1990 census results for literacy and age distribution suggest that our samples, particularly the kin sample, are broadly representative of the Chinese rural population (details not shown).

The ten counties in our sample vary sharply in level of economic development and urban proximity (see Table 1). Newly excised from several surrounding counties, Zhangjiagang is the third most prosperous county in all of Jiangsu province. It has benefitted from its favorable location in the Yangzi River delta, including excellent water and road transport and proximity to large cities such as Shanghai, Wuxi, and Suzhou. Though considerably less developed than the first county, our Guangdong county of Xinhui is still highly developed by Chinese standards. Known to many readers through work by Helen Siu (1989), this

**Table 1** County Data

Province	County	Sample		Agricultural output per capita ('000 Yuan)	Gross domestic product per capita ('000 Yuan)	Urban influence
		Family income per capita (Yuan)	Village income per capita (Yuan)			
Jiangsu	Zhangjiagang	2,012	2,075	.93	11.3	17.8
Guangdong	Xinhui	1,912	1,632	1.32	3.6	21.3
Sichuan	Xindu	943	1,018	.84	3.7	32.3
Gansu	Linxia	980	641	.34	.7	2.2
Hubei	Xiaogan	916	765	.75	1.4	9.6
Yunnan	Qujing	822	729	.58	.9	4.6
Guangxi	Yulin	814	752	.62	1.0	7.3
Hebei	Nanpi	466	269	.71	1.2	6.6
Liaoning	Zhangwu	635	770	.96	1.3	8.1
Fujian	Shanghan	748	687	.81	1.4	3.2
Average		1,026	907	.79	2.7	11.3

Note: Urban influence = population potential, which is sum of population of each surrounding city divided by distance to that city in kilometers.

Sources: First data column from respondent sample. Second data column from village administrator responses. Last three columns from official county statistics.

county is north of Macau, on the western edge of the Pearl River delta. Our Sichuan county of Xindu is the third most developed county in the sample, though our particular subsample is somewhat less prosperous than one would expect based on the county's close proximity to the city of Chengdu and the official statistics on the county.

Our Gansu province county of Linxia is a Hui (Muslim) minority area, where one-fourth of the labor force is in services of one sort or another, many of them privately owned. The remaining counties are much more average on all dimensions, though a few quirks are worthy of note. The Hubei county, on the north-south rail line from central to north China is highly involved in services and it sends many laborers afar. The Yunnan county specializes in high quality tobacco, and much of the tobacco processing remains under collective control. Because they are located distant from the developed urban cores of their provinces, several counties have more modest economic activity levels than one might expect from their provincial labels alone. The Fujian county is in the less developed western corner of the province. The Hebei county is in the underdeveloped southeastern part of the province. And the Liaoning county is in the underdeveloped northwestern part of the province.

## Findings

Our analysis begins with an approach that emphasizes a visual presentation, using graphics to show simple underlying relationships. After these bivariate relationships are illustrated, we will conclude with a multivariate approach that statistically controls for the many influences on parent-child relations.

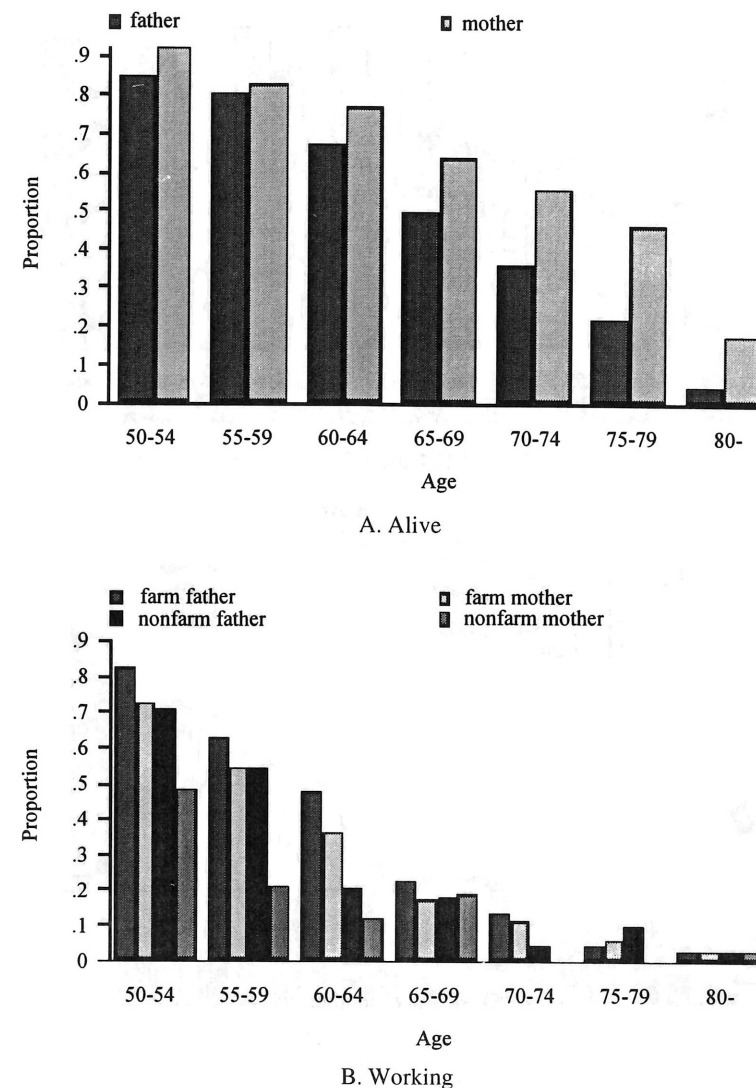
### Parent Characteristics

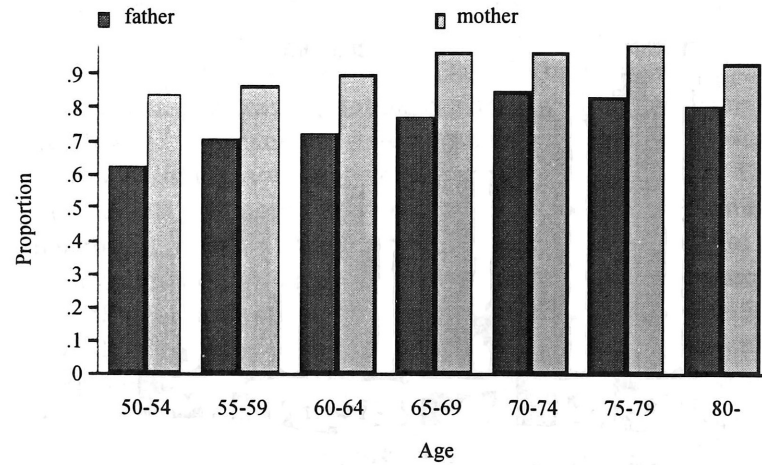
Need for support from children should vary by several parental characteristics, including age, former occupation, work status,

and health (Figure 1). As might be expected in a sample of the general population, many parents are still in their 50s, and this group tends to have considerable resources of their own — they are often working, they are more likely to be in nonfarm jobs where incomes and savings for old age are higher, and they are in better health.<sup>1</sup> However, there are also many older parents as well, and they are much more likely to need support from children. The older parents are more likely to have worked only in farming when they were in the labor force, and therefore more likely not to have accumulated savings of their own and not to have a pension. Some of these farm parents continue working into their late 50s and early 60s.<sup>2</sup> But even among farmers, work has shrunk to only one-fifth of all people by the time they reach their late 60s. After that age, less than a tenth of everyone is at work, implying that most must turn to other sources of economic support. And, unsurprisingly, these later ages are also the times when health begins to deteriorate (Figure 1D). Also, unsurprisingly, many of the eldest people are women, which makes the question of mother-daughter ties particularly pertinent among the very old (Figure 1A). Though unexceptional, these patterns are presented to remind the reader of the set of background conditions to which children and parents are responding and to suggest that the sample behaves pretty much as one would expect for the larger population.

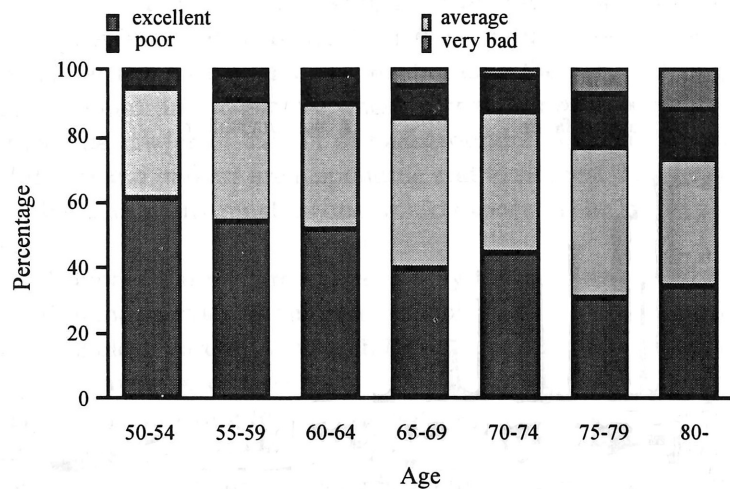
Whether parents are supported by their children is also related to the number of children available to provide that support. Among older parents, whose children were born several decades ago, an average of two sons are available to provide support (Figure 2). Allowing for some counting errors, almost that many daughters are potentially available for support.<sup>3</sup> More recently, among the very youngest parents, there are only 1.5 sons and 1.5 daughters to provide support. Thus, the consequences of declining birth rates are beginning to show. The tendencies are modest so far, particularly among the parents age 50 and above who are the focus of the analysis in this paper. But the tendencies suggest the trends that will occur in the near future as the extreme birth

**Figure 1** Parent Characteristics



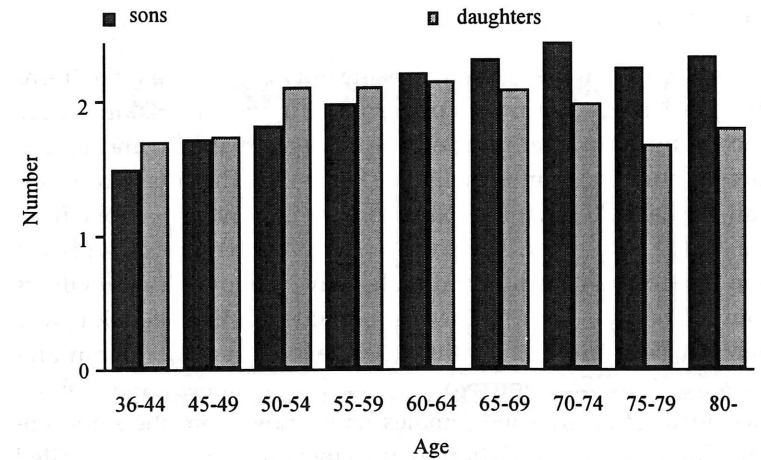
**Figure 1** Parent Characteristics (Continued)

C. Farmer

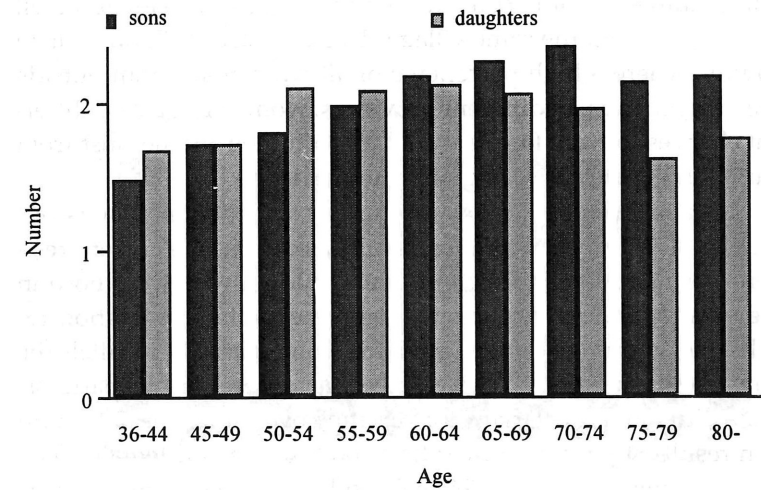


D. Health of mother

Note: "Age" = age of mother or, if she is deceased, age mother would be if alive. Though fathers are about 5 years older than mothers, they are recorded here according to the mother's age.

**Figure 2** Children by Parent's Age

A. Children ever born



B. Surviving children

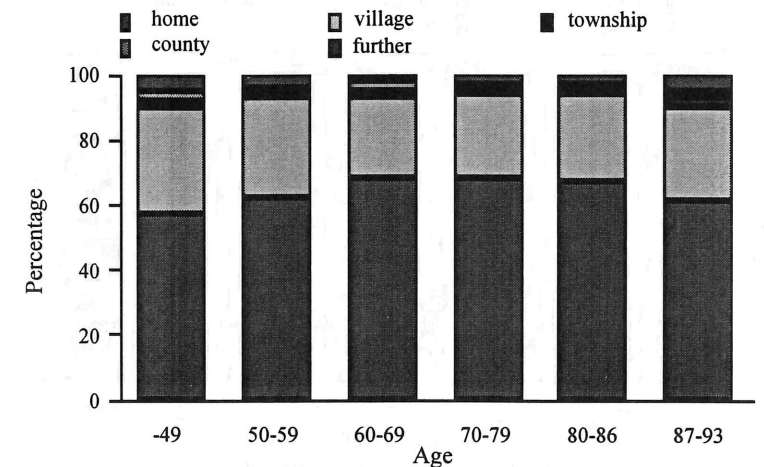
control policies of the 1980s begin to affect the number of adult children available to provide support.

### Migration

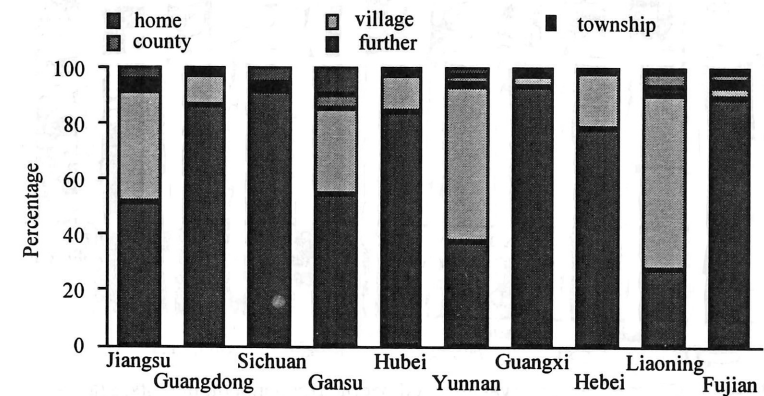
Contact with parents is likely to be heavily influenced by patterns of migration. We begin with patterns of immigration, asking about place of birth for ever-married respondents, parents, and grandparents now living in the village (Figure 3). The top two panels reaffirm the belief that it is extremely rare for males to move from one village to another. The patrilocal emphasis remains, with less than 5 percent of the married males having moved to the village from some other location.<sup>4</sup> More females are from outside, and there has been surprisingly little change in this pattern of immigration over time (bottom two panels). In all time periods, about one-fourth of all married females have come from the same village. There is more variation by province, which a more detailed analysis shows is partly related to the prosperity, population density, and size of villages in different locales (details not shown). For example, in our Yunnan county, a high percentage of all women are from outside the village. This contrasts with our Gansu county, where a high percentage of all women are from outside the village. Thus, in different provinces, women have very different chances to have frequent contact with their mother just from variation in patterns of migration at marriage.

Data on *outmigration* provide further evidence on these issues (Figure 4D). The outmigration results ask about the current residence of married children and grandchildren who were born in the village. Though not exactly the same as the immigration results, the amount of outmigration for women largely parallels the immigration patterns. Where there are differences in patterns, these differences are largely for variation over time. The outmigration results suggest that over time, both males and females may have become less likely to leave the village when they marry. This generalization is potentially problematic on two counts. First, the results are for “synthetic cohorts,” which means that part of the

**Figure 3** Immigration

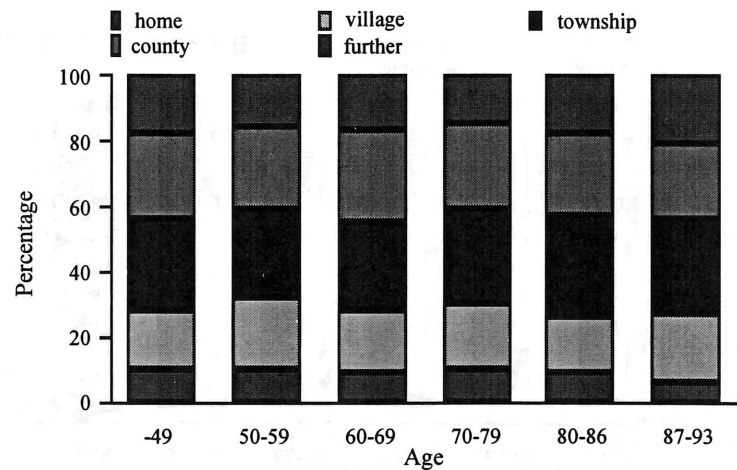


A. Men by year of adulthood

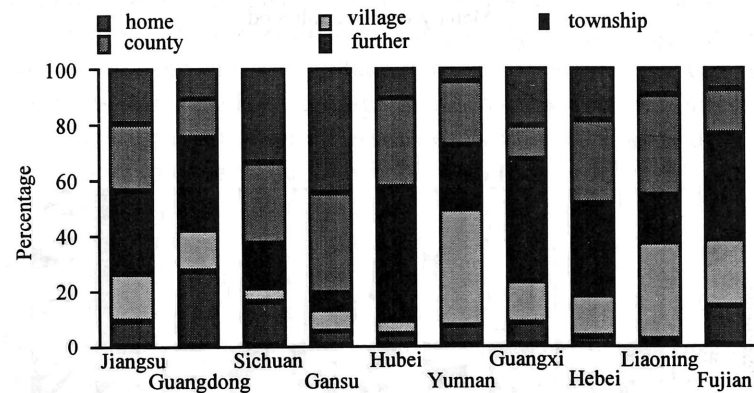


B. Men by province



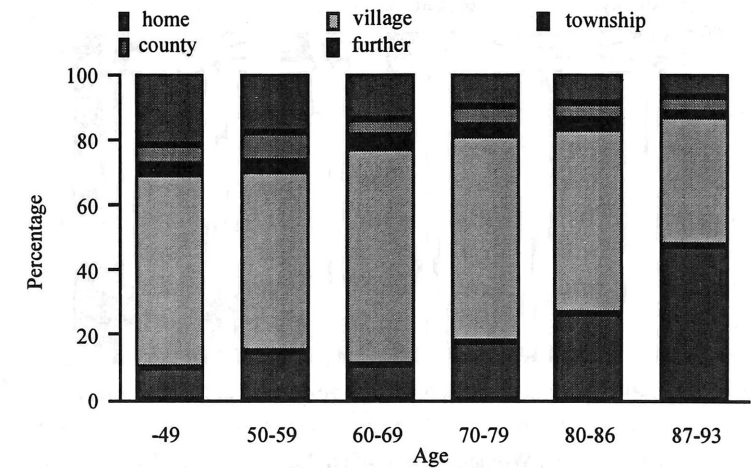
**Figure 3** Immigration (Continued)

C. Women by year of adulthood

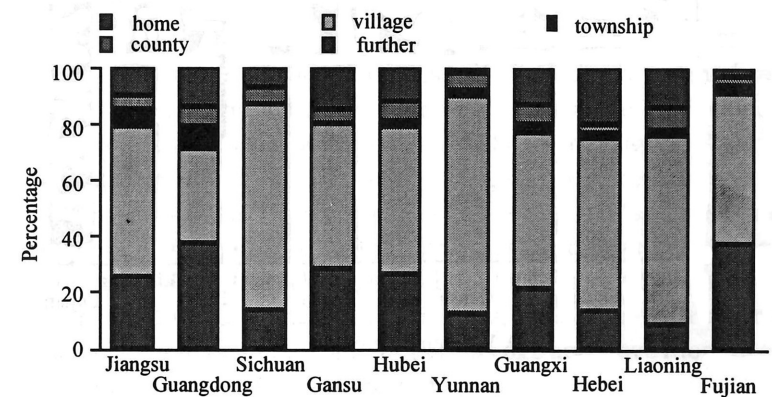


D. Women by province

Notes: Place of birth of ever-married people (respondent, parents, grandparents) who currently reside in the village.  
 "Year of adulthood" = year when reached age 20.

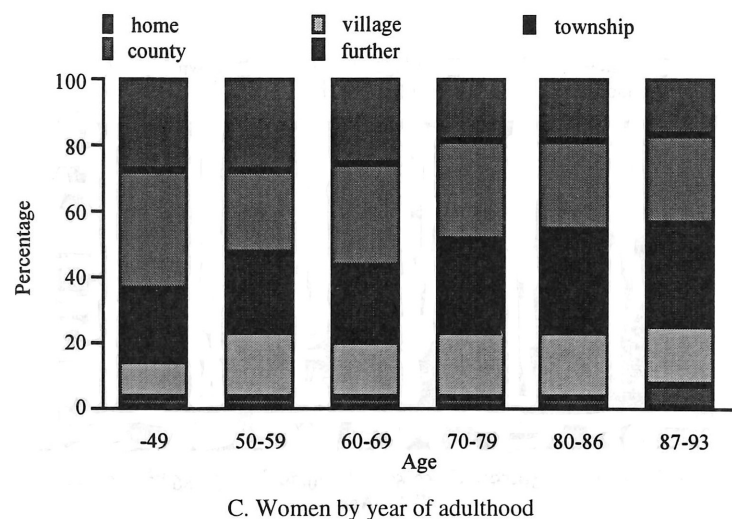
**Figure 4** Outmigration

A. Men by year of adulthood

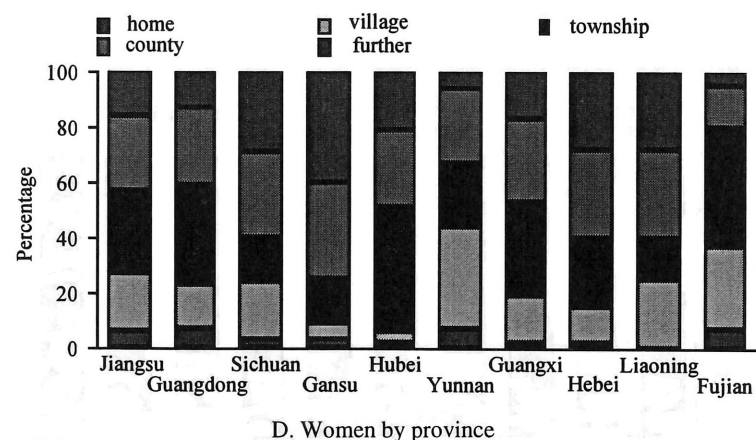


B. Men by province



**Figure 4** Outmigration (Continued)

C. Women by year of adulthood



D. Women by province

Notes: Current residence of ever-married children and grandchildren who were born in the village.  
 "Year of adulthood" = year when reached age 20.

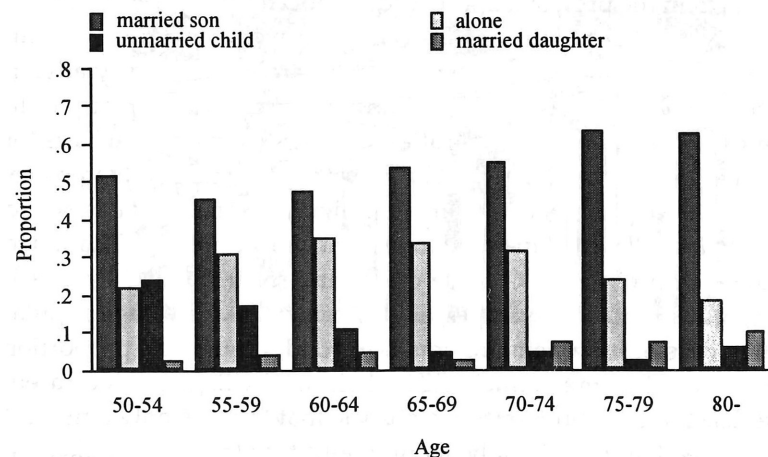
observed cohort trend may really be an age trend, with the young groups who have recently married not yet getting the chance to migrate that older people had. Second, the results are not completely consistent with the stability in village immigration patterns shown in the previous figure. We are not completely clear why.

Nevertheless, the results suggest several tentative conclusions. First, much as in the past, males are tremendously advantaged over females in maintaining contacts with parents. With most males staying at home after marriage, the structural basis for maintaining traditional patrilineal patterns is still firmly in place. Even among the youngest males, migration among villages and from the village to cities and towns remains minuscule. Though to the casual observer Chinese cities may seem flooded by quasi-legal migrants from villages, as a percentage of the village population, this outflow remains small.<sup>5</sup> Second, though the proportion of married women remaining in their natal village has increased, at least in the outmigration statistics, that trend is only a modest one (see Figure 4C). Only about one-fifth of females are likely to find it easy to maintain contact with their parents, and that proportion is only modestly larger today than in the past.

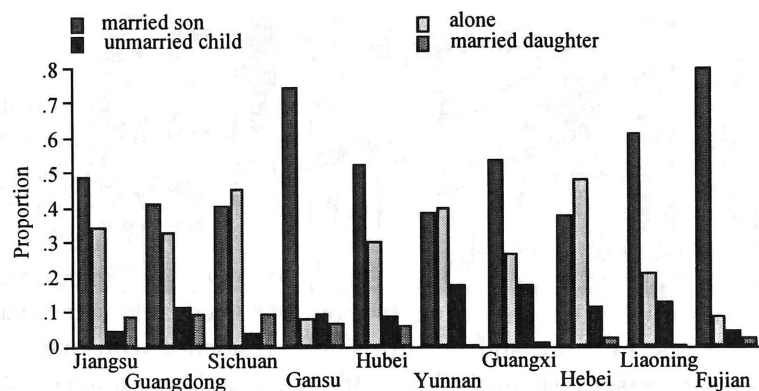
### Shared Residence and Visiting

Much as in the migration statistics, information on parental residence shows that patrilocal living rules continue to dominate. Very few parents live with a married daughter (Figure 5). Many parents live with a married son. Living with married sons varies systematically with age. Residence alone with one's spouse or on one's own reaches a maximum of about 30 percent among those in their early 60s. It then declines to about 20 percent among those in their 80s. In short, and unsurprisingly, residence with married sons increases systematically as parents age and have more needs that only their children can provide for.

There are also distinct regional patterns. Residence with married sons is most common in our county from Gansu (Hui minority) and from Fujian (Hakka subethnic group). Residence with a

**Figure 5** With Whom Parent Lives

A. Age of mother



B. Province

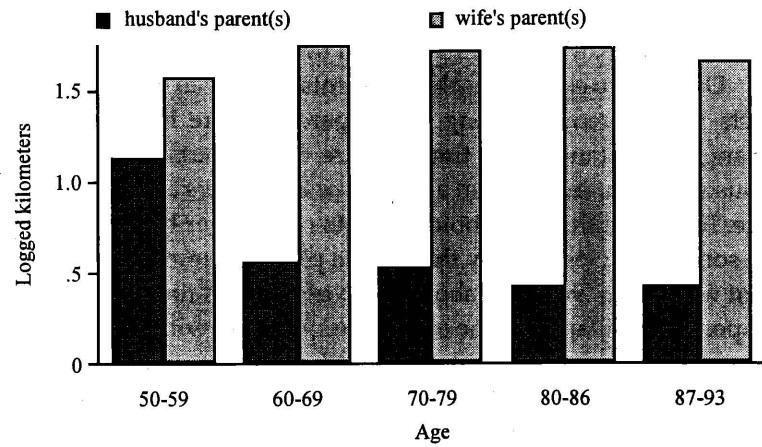
Note: Parents age 50 and above.

married daughter is common nowhere. Though there is a potential story here about ethnic and regional variation — with coresidence more common among the Hui and Hakka — the major story is one simply of how residence patterns respond to traditional norms about patrilocal residence and to changing parental need.

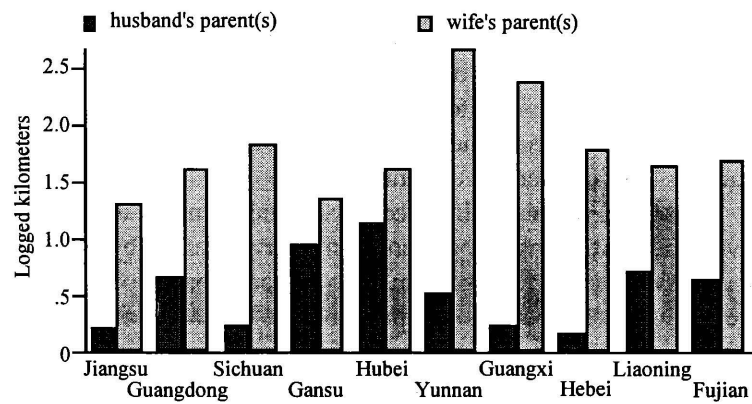
Distance to extra-household parents is likely to constrain contacts with parents. Among wife's parents there has been little change in distance over time (Figure 6A). If outside the wife's household, parents remain almost five kilometers away, on average. If outside the household, parents of younger husbands may be somewhat closer today than in the past. The trends are consistent with what we know about the extreme migration restrictions imposed on villagers at the end of the 1950s and with the statistics on outmigration presented above. While among the oldest husbands and parents, who had more chances to migrate in the past, extra-household parents are as much as three kilometers away (antilog of 1.1 = 3). Among younger husbands and parents, extra-household parents are only half that distance, at 1.5 kilometers distance (antilog of .4 = 1.5). Thus, husband's parents, particularly younger husband's parents, are likely to be visited more frequently than wife's parents simply because they are closer, often in the same village or town.

The pattern of greater proximity of husband's parents is repeated across counties in different provinces (Figure 6B). The gap between husband and wife parent's proximity is most extreme in places such as Yunnan and Guangxi, where wife's parents are as much as 12 kilometers away (antilog of 2.5 = 12).

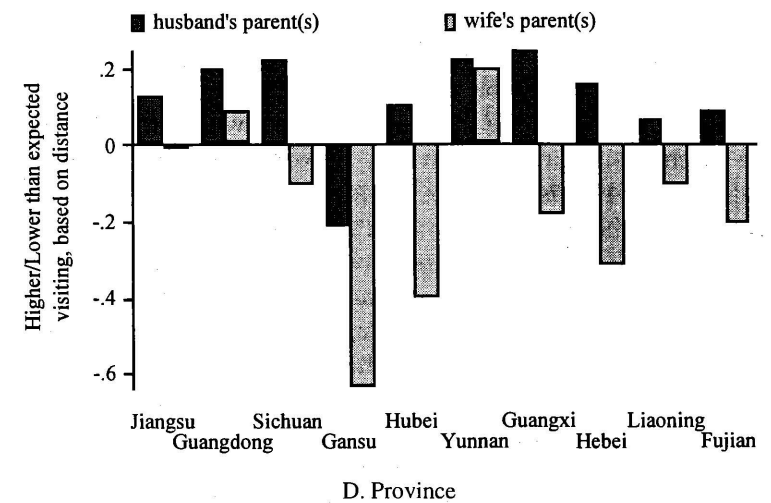
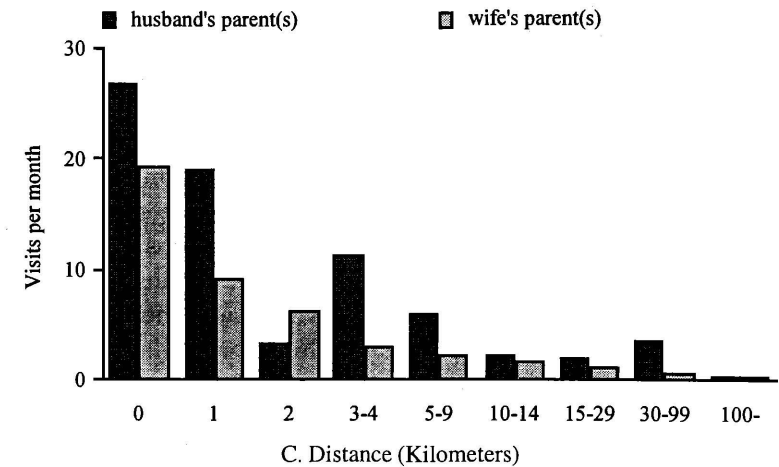
These differences in distance have a major impact on visiting. Given the continuing dependence on transportation by foot and bicycle over sometimes problematic paths and roads, a distance of a few kilometers is a major impediment to frequent contact (Figure 6C).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the effects of distance are gender specific. Husband's parents are favored in visiting at the same distances. Even when both husband's and wife's parents live less than a kilometer away, his parents get visited more frequently than her parents, often one suspects for shared meals and other similar

**Figure 6** Distance to and Visiting with Parents

A. Year of adulthood



B. Province

**Figure 6** Distance to and Visiting with Parents (Continued)

Notes: "Year of adulthood" = year when reached age 20.  
 Logged/Unlogged kilometer equivalents: 0.5 = 1.6, 1 = 2.7, 1.5 = 4.5,  
 2 = 7.4, 2.5 = 12.2.

occasions. The same pattern of contact preference for husband's parents is repeated at most other distances, particularly for the shorter distances. Thus, husband's parents are doubly favored. Not only do they tend to live much closer, but also at the same distance, his parents get visited much more frequently.

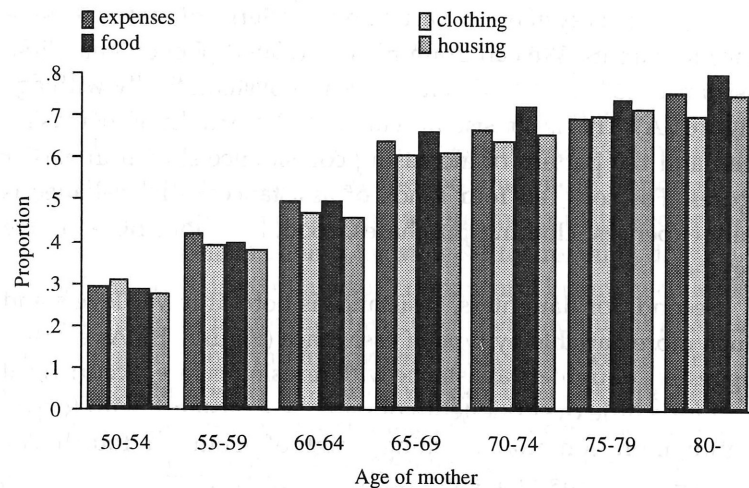
Given reported patterns in other Chinese settings, we had expected that some of the gap in frequency of visiting might soften as extended social networks became more important in more highly marketized regions where the private sector was dominant. The collective and/or state sector remains dominant for nonfarm work in our Jiangsu, Yunnan, and Liaoning counties. The private sector is moving ahead elsewhere, accounting for just over half of all nonfarm employment. This is particularly true in our Guangdong county of Xinhui. We can, thus, ask whether our more thoroughly privatized and marketized provincial locations have more contacts with the wife's parents. To do this we need to first control for distance to parents and then to observe whether visiting is more or less frequent than one would expect from distance alone. As in the previous panel, visiting is uniformly more common with husband's parents than wife's parents once distance is controlled (Figure 6D). The gap between husband and wife parent visiting narrows in only a few places. One of those is Guangdong, which is precisely where we would expect a narrowing, based on the assumption that in a privately organized market setting a widely dispersed social network is needed for economic success. However, the gap is even narrower in Yunnan, which has a much smaller private sector. And among the other locations, it is hard to detect a consistent relationship between degree of private marketization and husband vs wife parent visiting. Moreover, we also examined the effects of having a self-employed person in the household, and those effects were non-existent (details not shown). Thus, we conclude these data provide little evidence of a growing role for affinal kinship ties based on strengthening private market forces.

### *Material Assistance to Parents*

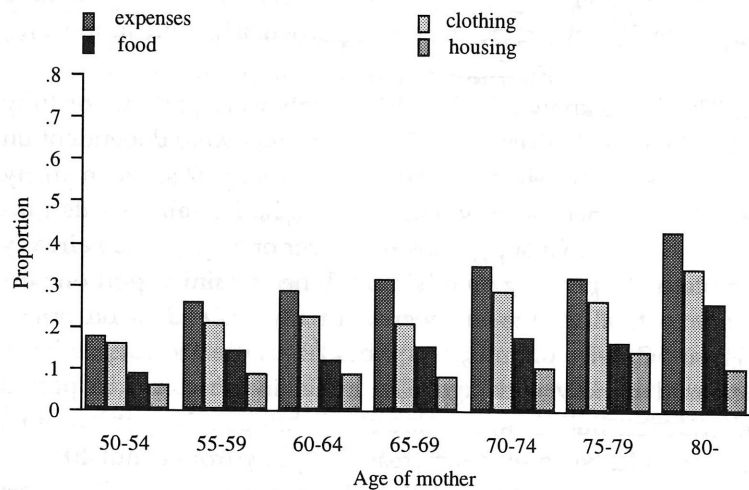
Finally, there is systematic variation in patterns of material assistance to parents. We can examine four related phenomena. First, assistance from sons to parents increases systematically with age (Figure 7A). This is consistent with both the pattern of increasing need and the pattern of increasing coresidence shown in earlier figures. For sons, all four kinds of assistance — miscellaneous daily expenses, clothing purchases, food, and housing — move together.

Second, for daughters, assistance is both at lower levels and much more variable by type of assistance (Figure 7B). As already suggested, daughters assistance with housing is rare, occurring at most for a little over one-tenth of parents. Assistance with food is slightly more common, reaching a high of about one-fourth. Assistance with miscellaneous daily expenses, is more common, reaching a high of about two-fifths among the oldest parents. Though at lower levels, much of daughter's assistance mimics that of sons. As parents age and have more needs, sons provide more assistance. Daughters do the same, particularly with support for things other than housing.

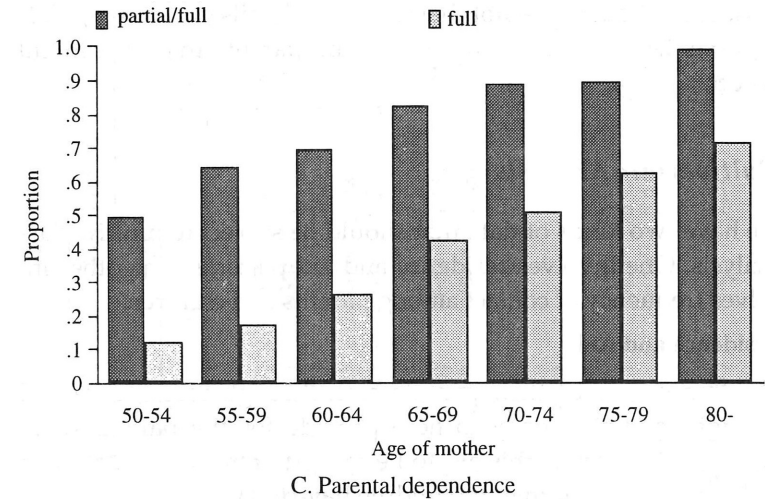
Third, we know whether the parents were partially or fully dependent on children and others (very few were dependent on anyone besides their children). In their early 50s, when many parents remained healthy and at work, half of all parents provided all their own support. A little over one-tenth were already completely depending on others, and the remaining portion necessary to total to one-half were partially dependent on others (Figure 7C, left columns). As would be expected, dependence increased rapidly with age. The initial increase was in partial dependence. But, then, as more and more people quit working, full dependence on others increased rapidly from about 40 to 70 percent of the parent population. Thus, again, parental support from and dependence on children appear to closely parallel increasing parental need. Declining labor force participation, loss of

**Figure 7** Source and Degree of Parental Support

A. Sons



B. Daughters

**Figure 7** Source and Degree of Parental Support (Continued)

Notes: Parents age 50 and above.  
 Results weighted to provide equal numbers of male and female respondents.  
 "Full dependence" = parent provides none of their own expenses, clothing, food, or housing. "Partial/full dependence" = parents provide part or all of some of these items while depending on others to provide part or all of some items. Note that part/full dependence is the sum of partial and full dependence.

spouse, and increasingly poor health are closely related to increasing support from children, particularly from sons.

Finally, we know whether parents maintain control of housing. Compared to the image of places such as Taiwan, where some parents purportedly anguish about giving up control of housing lest it causes them to lose bargaining power vis-à-vis their children, the parents in this sample seem to lose control of housing very early. Most of the housing in our sample was built quite recently, well over half of it since 1980. In this recent rebuilding, sons must have provided much of the financing. The result is that

by the time parents are in their late 60s, children are providing most of the housing — not their parents (details not shown). This suggests less bargaining power among parents than one might expect.

### Multivariate Analysis

We have two kinds of data that should be subject to multivariate analysis. One involves residence and aid patterns. The other involves frequency of contact among parents and children.

#### Residence and Aid

Children can assist their parents both through coresidence and through sending money to help provide for the parents daily expenses. We expect this aid to be related both to parental need and to the resources that the children have to give. In our analysis, we index parental need by parents' age, education, prior or current job as a farmer, the absence of current income or pension, health condition, and loss of spouse (Table 2). For residence, children's resources are indexed simply by the number of sons and daughters available to share the residence. For financial aid, we note the total earnings of sons and daughters.<sup>7</sup> We also consider whether our respondent was a male, because males tend to overreport male and underreport female assistance. Finally, we consider the effect of region, with our Fujian county being the place against which other locations are compared.

As expected, parental need is quite important. The relationships are stronger for the giving of financial aid than coresidence, and stronger for factors other than health. However, in most instances, assistance to parents increases systematically with the parents' age, reduced education, farm origin, absence of income, and loss of a spouse.

Children's resources are also important. When there is no son or few sons, then daughters often step in to provide housing for parents. In financial giving as well, the number of children is important (right columns of Table 2). Parents are more likely to

**Table 2** Parent Residence and Financial Assistance

	Lives with married				Gets financial aid from			
	Son(s)		Daughter(s)		Son(s)		Daughter(s)	
	dF/dX	z	dF/dX	z	dF/dX	z	dF/dX	z
<b>Parents' need</b>								
1. Mother's age	.002	(0.82)	.001**	(2.60)	.012**	(5.76)	.007**	(4.34)
2. Father's education (logged)	-.040**	(-2.48)	-.002	(-0.91)	-.030#	(-1.73)	.011	(0.80)
3. Father is/was farmer	-.029	(-0.84)	-.008#	(-1.82)	.187**	(5.26)	.066*	(2.27)
4. Parents have no income or pension	.033	(1.00)	-.002	(-0.45)	.184**	(5.42)	.052#	(1.78)
5. Health condition of parents	-.007	(-0.35)	-.001	(-0.39)	-.005	(-0.23)	.016	(0.88)
Parents' marital status:								
6. Only father alive	.163**	(3.93)	.022**	(2.75)	.075#	(1.67)	.099*	(2.53)
7. Only mother alive	.172**	(4.90)	.014*	(2.40)	.108**	(2.88)	.072*	(2.28)
8. Both alive (cf.)								
<b>Children's resources</b>								
9. Sons of parent (logged number)	.058	(1.70)	-.028**	(-8.34)				
10. Daughters of parent (logged number)	-.024	(-0.79)	.006	(1.59)				
11. Income of sons (logged)					.047**	(6.17)	.000	(0.06)
12. Income of daughters (logged)					-.012*	(-2.35)	.043**	(8.21)
<b>Other</b>								
13. Respondent is male	.014	(0.44)	-.009*	(-2.07)	.085*	(2.51)	-.089**	(-3.29)



**Table 2** Parent Residence and Financial Assistance (Continued)

Region									
14. Jiangsu	-.360**	(-5.65)	.037#	(1.89)	-.409**	(-6.18)	.237**	(2.70)	
15. Guangdong	-.383**	(-5.76)	.038#	(1.72)	-.055	(-0.72)	.539**	(5.84)	
16. Sichuan	-.442**	(-7.23)	.027	(1.51)	-.011	(-0.16)	.586**	(6.71)	
17. Gansu	-.117	(-1.61)	.026	(1.49)	-.022	(-0.30)	.364**	(3.96)	
18. Hubei	-.341**	(-5.18)	.029	(1.53)	-.175*	(-2.44)	.467**	(5.09)	
19. Yunnan	-.430**	(-6.95)	.006	(0.41)	-.180*	(-2.51)	.381**	(4.00)	
20. Guangxi	-.312**	(-4.68)	-.002	(-0.16)	-.148*	(-2.06)	.381**	(4.11)	
21. Hebei	-.444**	(-7.29)	.006	(0.47)	-.105	(-1.49)	.328**	(3.63)	
22. Liaoning	-.219**	(-3.18)	.003	(0.25)	.050	(0.70)	.475**	(5.23)	
23. Fujian (cf.)									
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.097		.367		.225		.157		
Number of observations	1,509		1,509		1,502		1,502		
Observed probability	.521		.043		.546		.296		
Predicted probability	.527		.008		.546		.251		

Notes: Probit analysis. dF/dX = percentage point effect of each independent variable, evaluated at the probability predicted by the means of the independent variables. z = z score indication of statistical significance. Analysis weighted to equalize number of male and female respondents. Mother's age based on current age or age she would be if alive. Includes only mothers age 50 and above. (cf.) = comparison group for other elements in set of determinants. "Estimated income" = total estimated income of all sons or daughters based on age, occupation, and residence of each child.

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, # p < .1.

get financial assistance from both sons and daughters when the total earnings of either are higher.<sup>8</sup> The other little tidbit in the results is that sons with many sisters relax in their giving (row 10). Daughters' giving, perhaps in part because it is already at more modest levels, is less affected by the number of sons available to provide support.

Regionally, the strongest effect is for our county in Fujian. When compared to Fujian, all our other locations have far less coresidence with married sons. The only other location that comes close to Fujian in son coresidence is Gansu, which is again consistent with the pictorial description of coresidence that we gave earlier. The other realm in which Fujian is extreme is in giving from daughters (final column of Table 2). All places other than Fujian are more likely to have financial giving from daughters. The places that are most likely to have gifts from daughters are in Guangdong and Sichuan. The Guangdong pattern is what we would expect from an area where traditional values may have relaxed somewhat and where more resources are available for married daughters to use on their own families. However, in general, the regional pattern does not fit closely to a readily available line of interpretation.

Lest the point be missed, we should emphasize that daughters are responding to parental need in many of the same ways as sons. Daughter's residence with parents is rare, but giving of financial assistance is much more common. And that giving responds to parental needs. Parents are more likely to get assistance from daughters when the parents are older, in farming, and widowed. This is much the same as with sons.

### Contact Frequency

Frequency of contact between extra-household parents and children repeats some, but not all of the patterns observed so far. We will present two sets of results. One for a full set of background characteristics (Table 3, right columns), and the other for a trimmed model showing only the most significant results (left columns).

Table 3 Respondent's Frequency of Contact with Extra-household Parents

	Son		Daughter		Son		Daughter	
	b	t	b	t	b	t	b	t
<b>Parents' need</b>								
1. Parent's age	-.009**	(-2.96)	-.003	(-0.62)	-.006#	(-0.83)	.002	(0.31)
2. Parent's education (logged)	-.078*	(-2.35)	.066	(1.61)	-.067*	(-1.63)	.056#	(1.40)
3. Father is/was farmer					.077	(0.97)	-.181#	(-1.91)
4. Parents have no income or pension					-.020	(-0.30)	-.141	(-1.64)
5. Health condition of parents					.022	(0.59)	-.079	(-1.73)
Parents' marital status:								
6. Only father alive					-.045	(-0.40)	-.142	(-0.98)
7. Only mother alive					-.063	(-0.76)	.069	(0.62)
8. Both alive (cf.)								
<b>Children's resources</b>								
9. Respondent's income (logged)	.004	(0.10)	.133*	(2.40)	-.012	(-0.28)	.180**	(2.93)
10. Respondent's income unknown	.105	(1.18)	-.326*	(-2.37)				
11. Sons of parent (logged number)	.148	(1.43)	-.221**	(-2.71)	.036	(0.38)	-.251**	(-2.86)
12. Daughters of parent (logged number)					.061	(1.21)	-.107	(-1.06)
13. Parent lives with married son	-.131*	(-2.22)	-.145#	(-1.88)				

Table 3 Respondent's Frequency of Contact with Extra-household Parents (Continued)

<b>Other</b>								
14. Mother	-.108**	(-3.22)	.020	(0.44)	-.063*	(-0.61)	-.009	(-0.12)
15. Respondent lives in town	-.564**	(-4.94)	.125	(1.24)	-.452**	(-4.41)	.114	(1.18)
16. Respondent currently married					.821	(3.41)	.277	(1.26)
<b>Distance</b>								
17. Parent lives within 0.5 Km	.685#	(1.83)	.616**	(2.96)	.556*	(1.97)	.950**	(4.78)
18. Parent lives within 1.5 Km	.620*	(2.19)	.244	(1.36)	.487*	(2.40)	.386**	(2.65)
19. Kilometers to parent (logged)	-.573**	(-2.81)	-.611**	(-5.74)	-.543**	(-3.06)	-.452**	(-3.52)
20. Kilometers to parent (squared)	.041	(1.77)	.052**	(4.11)	.034	(1.54)	.029	(1.67)
<b>Region</b>								
21. Jiangsu	-.022	(-0.22)	.267*	(2.18)	.231	(1.53)	.264	(1.39)
22. Guangdong	.061	(0.33)	.396**	(2.96)	.221	(1.34)	.540**	(2.61)
23. Sichuan	.130#	(1.95)	.089	(0.75)	.264	(1.91)	.281	(1.44)
24. Gansu					.077	(0.45)	-.192	(-0.93)
25. Hubei					.087	(0.61)	-.256	(-1.30)
26. Yunnan	.040	(0.66)	.375**	(2.83)	.190	(1.37)	.534*	(2.26)
27. Guangxi					.148	(1.04)	.096	(0.44)
28. Hebei					.138	(0.98)	.226	(1.16)
29. Liaoning					.126	(0.99)	.148	(0.74)
30. Fujian (cf.)								



**Table 3** Respondent's Frequency of Contact with Extra-household Parents (Continued)

Intercept	3.143**	(5.74)	1.626*	(2.52)	1.890**	(3.28)	.774	(1.13)
R <sup>2</sup>	.613		.545		.623		.569	
Number of observations	978		716		930		680	

Notes: Regression analysis using Huber standard errors to correct for including mother and father from the same household as separate observations. *b* = metric regression coefficients. *t* = *t* statistics. Frequency = logged contacts with parent per month, which implies that the regression coefficients can be read as percent change coefficients. Most contacts are face-to-face visits. (cf.) = comparison group for set of coefficients, except that all the omitted provinces are the comparison in the left columns. Never-married respondents excluded.

\* *p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .01, # *p* < .1.

In these results, need and contact with extra-household kin is not related in any simple way. Much as in similar material for Taiwan, as parents age, contact between parents and children diminishes.<sup>9</sup> With age, parents lose their spouse and move in with a specific son, helping cause other sons and daughters to reduce their contact. Also, contact involves two parties. As one of the parties ages and becomes less mobile, contact has to be initiated on only one side rather than two, which contributes to reduced contact. We see this pattern in two sets of figures (Table 3, row 1). First, contact tends to diminish with age, particularly contact between sons and parents. Second, for both sons and daughters, contact diminishes once the parent moves in with a specific married son (row 12). Thus, need is less related to sociable visiting than it is to coresidence and financial aid. If anything, through the processes we have just outlined, increasing parental need and dependence on a specific child tends to diminish visiting between parent and all other children (also see rows 3-5 for daughters, final column).

There are some additional patterns that one should pay attention to. One of these involves how the number of available sons or daughters and the income of each tends to increase both coresidence between parents and children and financial aid from children (rows 9-12). The patterns are specific to gender, which is a theme to which we will return below. A second set of patterns involves region and resource differences. To some extent, richer regions have more visiting — see the results for Jiangsu and Guangdong (rows 20-21). And, while more educated parents discourage visiting with sons, they encourage visiting with daughters (row 2). Indeed, when one drops region from the analysis, the consequence of parent's education for contact with daughters is statistically quite significant. Several things may be occurring here. One is that the better transportation (roads, vehicles) available to rich individuals in rich regions facilitates contact between parents and absent daughters. The second way is that more educated parents may be more willing to flaunt traditional norms that emphasize contact with sons over daughters. Either way, the rich region/

educated parent effects suggest a possible emerging trend, with daughters gradually becoming more involved with their parents as economic and educational development progresses.

Two final patterns to note are that sons neglect their mothers (row 13) and town-based sons neglect both sets of parents (row 14). The town-based “neglect” is just the sort of urbanization effect that many classical authors point to as an inevitable consequence of economic development.<sup>10</sup> Part of this “neglect” may be simply more fixed work schedules in the town as opposed to the village, leaving less time for visiting with kin. However, because the town effect is strong among sons and non-existent among daughters, more than just time schedules must be involved. It is not a migration effect — for the effect of moving to town and leaving one’s parents in the countryside is already captured in the part of the analysis that takes account of distance between the parent and the child.

### Gender

Though not completely the same as for sons, daughters respond to parental need in many of the same ways as their brothers. One example is how a daughter’s resources increase both her giving and her contact with her own parents. The number of sons is also important for daughters, with parent-daughter contact increasing when there are fewer sons to provide that contact. We can see the consequences of the number of brothers for all kinds of parent-daughter relations in Table 4.<sup>11</sup>

The results are most dramatic for coresidence. Among the 7 percent of parents with no surviving son, residence with a married daughter is common, all of which suggests more flexibility in patrilocal residence rules than one might expect. Though less dramatic, financial aid and frequency of contact also vary systematically with the number of sons. When there are fewer sons to provide aid and fewer sons to share contact with parents, then daughters provide more aid and see their parents more frequently. Again, there is clear flexibility in parent-daughter relations. To some extent, then, sons and daughters substitute for one

**Table 4** Parent-Daughter Relations

Surviving sons (n)	Parents and daughters			Number of observation	
	Coreside (%)	\$ aid (%)	Contacts/ Month	Residence/\$	Contact
0	40.5	39.5	4.8	118	84
1	5.3	33.0	4.4	431	231
2	1.4	26.8	4.2	546	232
3	0.9	27.0	2.7	360	124
4 or more	1.9	19.7	2.9	239	76
Total	5.1	29.7		1,694	747

another, with daughters playing their greatest role when there are few or no sons.

### Conclusion

What is the story that emerges from these data? We think that there are two stories. One of the stories, with an emphasis on what occurs among males, is a story of stability. The other story, with emphasis on what occurs among females, is a story of change, or, more precisely, of potentially rapid change. But before telling these stories, we should note several stories that did not emerge.

Based on earlier research, we expected parent-daughter ties to be linked to mother-daughter affection and increased private market endeavors. Our evidence in these areas is indirect, but what little evidence we have revealed neither tendency. Daughters were no more likely to live with, send money to, or visit their mother than their father. The mother and the father were helped at equal levels when either of them lost a spouse. This is in con-

trast to Taiwan, where the expected pattern of stronger ties to mother appears (see Lee, Parish and Willis 1994). This, then, suggests a possible level of development effect. In poorer areas, sheer economic and physical need among widowed parents may overwhelm feelings of affection and dislike.

Also, relations with the wife's parents were not consistently stronger in regions where private market activities were more developed. The need to broaden one's social network in order to compete more successfully in an expanding market system did not inevitably lead to closer relations with either the wife's parents or the respondent's sisters. Perhaps we have overlooked something. Certainly, if we could use the Guangdong county of Xinhui alone we could construct a convincing case. But many other counties do not fit so neatly, and families with self-employed entrepreneurs (*geti hu*) were not distinctive relative to other families. So, for both mother-daughter relations and the strength of matrilineal network ties in more marketized regions, the jury is still out.

These are stories about expected relations that failed to appear. There are also stories about relationships that did appear. First, the story of stability in parent-son relationships. If anything, this stability was even stronger than we had expected. The rapid economic growth of the last decade or so might have caused considerable change, but at the same time this growth involved a return to family farming and an emphasis on keeping people who left agriculture working in nonfarm jobs near their home villages. Our evidence suggests that for males the emphasis should come down on the latter set of factors. Very few males have left their home village. Parents and children remain close by. Community pressure can be mobilized to ensure that sons live up to their obligations for support of parents in old age, and most sons continue to provide that support. Even in the face of a massive building program that caused half the homes in our sample to have been built after 1983, shared residence predominates, as does sons' financial support to aging parents. Much of the inter-generational contract between generations seems to remain

strong, with children responding very much to the needs of parents. We see little evidence of implicit bargaining between parents and children. Parents seem to relinquish household ownership fairly soon, implying that it is not their hold on valuable assets that guarantees attention from children. Likewise, higher income among sons leads not to decreased coresidence in favor of financial aid, but to more of both coresidence and aid. So, there is little evidence of implicit bargaining over the types of aid that will be given. The only small bit of evidence of change is that sons living in towns maintain less contact with parents. This is not just because they left their parents behind in the village, since we included distance to parents in the analysis. Even at equal distances, for reasons of rigid work schedules or whatever, sons in towns see their parents less. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sons also see their mothers less, though this pattern may be as much traditional as modern. With only a minor exception or two, then, the story for parents and sons is one of patrilocal stability. This is a stability based not on the bargaining power of parents who maintain control of considerable resources, but of continuing community and government norms reinforced by keeping sons in their village of birth so that escape from social pressure to live up to normative obligations is rare.

The story for daughters has some common elements. Whether there is also a story of change, or only potential change, among daughters depends on what one assumes the traditional situation to have been. If the traditional situation was one where marriage created an almost complete break between parents and daughters, then, there is change. If instead, as several scholars have tried to convince us, there was a continuing pattern of contact and assistance — weak but still present — then perhaps less has changed. Certainly, the pattern of increasing village endogamy was not as dramatic as we had been led to believe from previous research on rural China. But regardless of the precise situation in the past, there is a distinctive story to be told here.

One part of that distinctive story is that daughters respond to many of the same parental needs as sons. Though usually at more

modest levels, daughters' patterns of coresidence and giving respond to many of the same signals of parental need — age, farm origin, no current income, and loss of spouse. Responsiveness to parental need extends to absence of sons to care for the parent. Many daughters remain behind with their parent(s) when there is no son, and even a few remain behind when there is only a single son or two. Thus, daughters are the parental insurers of last resort. In areas where birth control programs have been more successful, of course, that "last resort" role may become more common in years to come. Behavior to this point suggests that daughters will be prepared to play that role, the only caution being that when many rather than just a few daughters are required to help support both her own and her husband's parents, the strain on the young couple's resources will be much greater.

Another feature of daughters' relationships with their parents is that the relationship is very responsive to increasing education and income. Daughters increase parental visiting and giving when they have more income, suggesting a type of bargaining between the daughter, her husband, and his parents. Increased income leads to more autonomy. Visiting also intensifies with the increased prosperity of a region, and with the increased education of her own parents. This is in contrast to men, for which increased parental education leads to less visiting. The increased visiting for women suggests, perhaps, a loosening of old patriarchal norms among more educated parents. These are tendencies that should increase in the future. More parents will be educated, more daughters will have higher incomes of their own, and more people will live in regions with more public revenue and a better transport and communication infrastructure to provide easy contact. Combined with a dwindling number of sons, these tendencies will strengthen the ties between parents and daughters.

\* We are grateful to Lu Xueyi, Head, Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and He Bingmeng of the same Academy for their central role in organizing the survey on which this study is

based. The Luce Foundation provided financial support for data gathering and analysis.

## Notes

1. We will ignore the small number of parents who are less than 50 years of age.
2. In farming, women work longer than one would expect from earlier accounts. This may be because, with the switch to family farming, women's economic activities in the home that were once invisible now become visible (cf. Davis-Friedmann 1991, p. 17). Farm men also retire earlier than one might expect from these earlier accounts.
3. The "counting error" is that the roster of siblings provided by respondents omits some sisters who moved away many years ago.
4. The kin record also indicates whether a person was born "here" (*ben zhi*), which was supposed to be the home where the interview was being conducted. In some places, it appears that "here" was interpreted by interviewer and interviewee to be "this village," thus, we downplay the distinction between the bottom two segments ("home" and "village") of each column.
5. There are, of course, significant village to village variations in this pattern. And, of course, the statistics on residence outside the village misses some of the temporary, seasonal migrants that flood cities certain times of the year.
6. The question was for all kinds of contact, including letters, telephone calls, etc., but since visiting far outnumbered all kinds of contact we will refer to all contacts as "visits."
7. Earnings are imputed from the sons' and daughters' education, occupation, age, and region. Note that, for both sons and daughters, number and size of earnings are highly related. We have chosen one or the other, depending on which seemed to capture the essential background condition —

though either could be substituted in the equation to produce similar outcomes.

8. In the right two sets of columns, excluding 0 son and 0 daughter families leaves the results largely unchanged. Thus, the effect of sons' and daughters' earnings is more than the simple result of parents with no daughter or no son being unable to get assistance from that source.
9. For similar results, see Davis-Friedmann (1991).
10. The town effect is just that — a town effect. Visiting patterns are constant across occupation in town vs village (details not shown).
11. Residence and economic aid results are weighted to provide an equal number of male and female respondents. Visiting results are translated from original logged figures. The visiting results are not the result of distance, which is more evenly spread across number of sons.

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