

U-M researcher studies 'grey tide' in China (w/ Video)

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Deborah Lowry has always liked older people. "They tend to be more comfortable with themselves than younger people are," she said, "and I've always enjoyed hearing about history from someone who's lived through it."

A postdoctoral fellow at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research's Population Studies Center, Lowry's other long-time interest is China, where a grey tide is now sweeping the land. More than 100 million Chinese people are 65 and older, and the proportion is expected to increase rapidly, reaching 20 percent of the population by 2025 and more than 30 percent by 2050.

In the future, experts predict with foreboding, one Chinese child may have to care for two parents and four grandparents.

For her doctoral dissertation, Lowry examined the experience of growing old in a rural village where most Chinese elders still live. "It's important to have the elders' subjective perspectives of their needs and expectations as well as objective information about economic development and dependency ratios," she said.

As a sociologist, Lowry is keenly aware of concerns that China's traditional Confucian system of xiao (filial piety) is falling victim to the demands of industrialization and massive rural to urban migration. She also worries that demographic changes resulting from China's rapid fertility decline are placing China's elders in a potentially precarious

situation.

But using a mix of focus group interviews and quantitative survey data, Lowry has found that most elders remain confident that their families would be willing and able to care for them in old age. "Tradition and social change aren't necessarily opposed to one another," Lowry said.

She also found that elders felt like they were doing quite well compared to what their lives had been like in previous times.

"Life before was really bitter," a 69-year-old woman told her. "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."

But when they looked around at more fortunate neighbors, their sense of relative deprivation could be sharp. "There was a striking mixture of traditional mud homes and brand new shining tile houses," Lowry said. "And the older people who did not have new homes felt deprived. Refrigerators were also a source of great pride. Many families who owned one showcased them but didn't really use them, storing food in cupboards in the traditional way instead."

An analysis Lowry conducted of 2005 data on more than 1 million mainland China adults in 31 provinces, with ISR sociologist Yu Xie, suggests that socioeconomic status has a growing impact on health differences as age increases. Lowry will present findings from a new analysis of more than 6,000 Chinese men and women ages 65 and older at the annual meeting of the Population Association of American in April. The men and women were interviewed at two different points in time, examining how their experience of being disabled may change

depending on external factors such as income and family support as well as personal health limitations.

Later this spring, Lowry will head back to [China](#), this time to Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province, near Shanghai, in the southeast. With support from the ISR Population Studies Center, she will conduct a feasibility study for upcoming research on how family, household, and community factors affect how elders cope with late-life chronic illnesses. This feasibility study will lay the groundwork for a pilot project later this fall.

She hopes that insights from the pilot study will improve the content of long-term mixed-methods research that she will eventually conduct in the area. "Of course I want to contribute to general knowledge of aging and health, but I also want to do something that can be helpful in developing interventions of practical value to Chinese families," Lowry said.

Provided by University of Michigan

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