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After Quake, China's Elderly Long for Family

By Maureen Fan
Washington Post Foreign Service
Tuesday, June 3, 2008

LEIGU, [China](#), June 2 -- A lone blue tent stands out among its neighbors in this dusty refugee camp, not for its outward appearance but because of who is inside.

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Picking Up the Pieces

China continues recovery efforts after a devastating 7.9-magnitude earthquake hit central China on May 12, 2008, and rendered millions of people homeless.

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Seven senior citizens sit on dirty quilts, surrounded by buzzing flies and boxes of instant noodles and bottled water provided by the army. Two were abandoned by their relatives or are unable to find them; the rest are resigned to the fact that their children will rebuild their own lives before helping their aging parents. All were strangers thrown together by disaster.

China reveres its elderly, particularly in rural areas such as those most affected by last month's massive earthquake. But now many of those elderly -- separated from their families, with their longtime homes and belongings lost forever -- will face the future without the traditional support provided by their children.

Nearly 32,000 elderly Chinese lost their relatives in the May 12 quake, according to state media reports quoting Sanlang Mugun, deputy director of Sichuan province's civil affairs office.

"Right now my only hope is to find my grandson, so that when I die, my grandson will prepare my coffin

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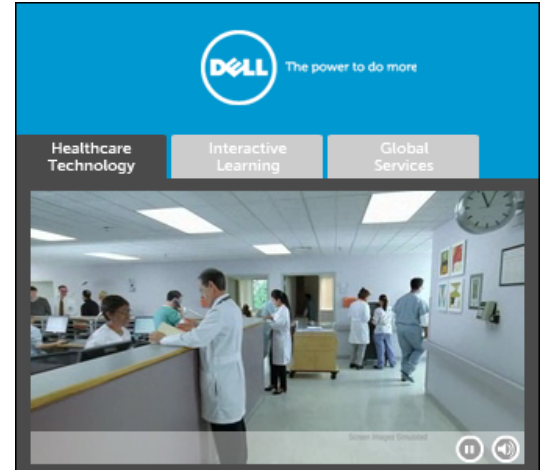
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and send it to the graveyard," said Chen Yugui, 88, whose only daughter was killed in the quake. But he has no idea where to look.

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▶ His daughter was working at a construction site, digging a hole, when she "was buried" in the quake, he said. The grandson "left home long ago."

Chen is the oldest resident of Tent No. 50, sandwiched between tents full of families four miles from one of the hardest-hit towns near the epicenter. He is eager to return to his home village of Wuxing, but because his house was destroyed and there is no longer anyone to care for him, it would be meaningless, he said.

Three decades of aggressive economic modernization in China have altered traditional patterns between parents and their adult children as young people concentrate on making a living. The trend of migrant workers laboring far from home has put additional pressure on long-standing ideals of family life.

But the plight of older Chinese has not received nearly the sympathy shown to the 8,000 children orphaned by the quake, most of whom have now been reunited with relatives.

"After the earthquake, our adoption hotline rang day and night. People called from all over the country to ask about adopting children orphaned by the disaster," said Yang Changyou, a section chief of the Mianyang Civil Affairs Bureau who works with orphans and seniors who have lost contact with their families. "Up till now, we have received only one call from Beijing asking about adopting an elderly person."

Most people place all their hopes in their children, Yang said. But the elderly just become older. "They will be the burden of one family finally and, when they are ill, the medical costs will be very high. Children, on the other hand, grow up and probably make achievements. As a result, everyone wants to adopt children rather than old people."

Part of the problem may also be supply and demand.

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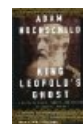
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After Quake, China's Elderly Long for Family

"The whole cultural tradition of Confucianism is being hit by an old-age tsunami," said Nicholas Eberstadt, a demographer and scholar with the American Enterprise Institute in Washington. "It was easy enough to imagine filial piety and veneration of older people when they were a scarce commodity, but they're becoming really plentiful, and in the eyes of many, perhaps even a burden."

GALLERY



Picking Up the Pieces

China continues recovery efforts after a devastating 7.9-magnitude earthquake hit central China on May 12, 2008, and rendered millions of people homeless.

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The quake disaster has highlighted one of China's biggest demographic challenges. The country's three-decade-long family planning policies have helped reduce poverty, but also have contributed to a shrinking pool of children able to support their parents. There are more than 100 million Chinese over 65 today, a number that will approach a quarter of a billion by 2030, Eberstadt said, citing official data. In addition, the number of women over 60 with no sons, now about 10 to 15 percent of the population, is expected to grow to 30 percent of the population by 2025.

"China is going to be the poorest old society we've ever seen," Eberstadt said. "It's two bad forces coming together -- it's like a perfect storm."

Provincial and central government officials have promised that all elderly left homeless by the quake will be given food and shelter. Many have been moved to nearby rest homes. And officials say they plan to build more old-age homes over the next two years in Sichuan. But for the seniors who have banded together in the Leigu camp, nothing

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quite makes up for family.

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Liu Tingjin, 82, who is blind, was left on a mountaintop near her home village of Xuanping by her 56-year-old son. Now, the youngest resident of Tent No. 50, vegetable farmer Jin Tongfen, 64, helps guide the older woman each day to an outdoor toilet several hundred yards away.

"Two or three days after the earthquake, my son carried me on his back to the peak of a hill near our village. The other villagers had set up tents there and most of our village was there," Liu said, swatting away flies as helicopters roared overhead. "Then he left

me there, without saying a word. No goodbye, no explanation. He didn't even leave me a cent."

Villagers told her later that her son had taken his wife, partially paralyzed from before the earthquake, to a hospital in the city of Mianyang. But he never returned. "I can't find him. How can I not be worried? I miss him so much but he doesn't seem to miss me," Liu said. "Is there any use for me to miss him?"

Liu also has a daughter in nearby Anxian county. Both her children are farmers who are often away doing migrant work to supplement their incomes. They have cellphones, but Liu didn't have their numbers.

"Parents always think of their children, but children don't think of you," said Jin's husband, Chen Futing, 68, who cannot walk because of severe arthritis and who was carried out of his village by a soldier after the quake.

"Our situation is not easy," Chen said. "If you want to die, you can't. But if you want to live, it's so hard to carry on."

Liu said she spent three or four days on the mountain. When other villagers cooked, they shared their meals with her. One afternoon, a helicopter arrived to evacuate her to Leigu because a river blocked by a landslide was in danger of overflowing. Helicopters had come twice before, but no one told Liu that they were evacuating seniors.

"The soldiers looked after me. They carried me on their backs, but the other villagers and even my own children didn't look after me like that," Liu said.

In the camp, government officials asked for her family information. But so far, Liu's son and daughter haven't been located.

"Before the earthquake, my son didn't treat me well, but he didn't treat me badly. I had to do housework, for example, such as feeding the pigs, feeding the cows, mopping the floor," she said. "Right now, in this tent, when I'm hungry, I eat; when I feel sleepy, I lie down."

Liu's tent mates are hard-pressed to help because of their own illnesses.

"We're strangers, all of us in this tent. Although she would like to find other people from her village, she can't see anything, so it's really difficult," Chen said. "Since we don't know anyone from Xuanping, how can we help?"

His own son and four daughters are looking after themselves and their own young children in a makeshift tent in another county.

"In fact most old people have children, but many of the children go out to work. So in the end, it's the same for people who have children or don't have children," Chen said.

None of the people in the tent are bitter. They understand that their children don't have the means now to help them.

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"Right now we can only depend on the government because children are unreliable," said Jin, Chen's wife. "My children said, 'We can barely take care of our own families, how can we take care of you?' But I'm not afraid. We are old enough. If I die, I won't have too many regrets."

Three weeks after the quake, Liu said, "my only complaint is I don't have clothes to change into. When I escaped from the earthquake, I was wearing this. I'm still wearing it."

Researcher Zhang Jie contributed to this report.

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