CARE OF THE AGED
in the People’s Republic of China

In the society of Communist China today, every adult man and woman works. In the countryside, they work in the People’s Communes. In the cities, they work in factories or government offices. In schools, elementary and secondary, and institutions at the college level, there are teachers, staff members, and workers such as janitors. The plan for the new society is that all workers retire at a certain age, women at the age of 56 and men at 60. The retired receive 70% of their pay together with all the privileges enjoyed by a worker such as free medical care and housing at a nominal rent for the rest of his or her life.

This plan is implemented today in the cities and in educational institutions but not entirely in the countryside. In the People’s Communes, each person pays two yuan* per year for medical care and hospitalization. Free medical care includes visit to clinic, hospitalization, and medicine. During hospitalization, the patient pays for his meals, which are at cost, usually about 50 fen a day (about 25 cents US money). The size of the housing varies with the size of the family; in general, two or three rooms with a small kitchen and toilet for a family of four. Rent is low, 2 to 3% of one’s pay. As children grow up and become workers, they are assigned to their own housing. This is the ideal. Often actual conditions do not allow the realization of the ideal. This has been so during the past one or two decades when the increase in housing facilities has not kept pace with the increase in population, and so two generations of workers may be crowded into the rooms originally intended for one generation.

Workers in a People’s Commune are not paid a definite wage. They are paid according to work points in kind. The number of work points earned vary from individual to individual. A young man gets higher work points because of his physical strength. Payment is made in grain (rice or wheat) and oil, cotton and cloth. Usually the aged live with the younger generation and can help with the care of the grandchildren and with the cultivation of the private plot of land, the products of which go to the individual family. As a result, the old are part of a larger family and can even make a small contribution to it and live in a relation of love and respect, with few exceptions.

Over the past decades, in general, medical care has not been as good in the country as in the city. But, measures have been taken to improve rural medical care. The so-called barefoot doctors have been trained to give simple medical treatment right in the fields or in the

*One yuan = 100 Fen; One US dollar = approximately 1.60 yuan.

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homes. Clinics take care of simple cases and serious cases are sent to the county hospitals or even to city hospitals.

An elderly person who has no relative to depend upon may go to a Home for the Elderly, called a Happy Home, where the elderly are well taken care of and, of course, given free medical care.

Today, there is a small number of elderly people, especially women, who have not worked outside the home since the founding of the People's Republic of China and so do not receive any retirement pay or do not enjoy free medical care. However, such a person may go to the clinic at her husband's or child's place of work for treatment and pay a fee of five fen. Medicine must be paid for, but medicine produced by the state with no profit is low in cost.

In a case I know of, the cost of a mastectomy operation and hospitalization was 300 yuan. The institution where the husband worked paid the bill and deducted the sum from the husband's salary over a period of a year.

In the event of death, cremation is the rule. The undertaking and cremation service is provided by the government at a cost of 30 yuan. After cremation, the family of the deceased may purchase at the crematory an urn to hold the ashes at a reasonable price. The cost of the cremation is paid by the organization where the deceased worked. In the city that I came from, the municipal government has a cemetery in a hilly region in the suburbs where a small plot may be bought for burial of the urn. When my father died in 1961, the university where he taught paid for all these expenses, including a car to send the family to the burial grounds. Only the cost of the urn was paid for by the family.

Elderly people are always included in a group of people living in a neighborhood that is responsible for looking out for the welfare of the people in the neighborhood. If anyone in the neighborhood is sick with no one to care for him or if anyone should commit a misdemeanor, the group would take suitable action and notify the proper authorities. The group meets regularly to study and discuss matters of local and national importance. The group is made up of young, middle-aged, and old people. Thus, the old are an integral part of the social unit. The social unit arranges recreational activities, such as the showing of movies, tickets to which are very reasonable (5 fen), and the old people attend together with the young.

In general, workers retire. But people holding high positions in the government or the army do not retire. Note, for instance, Mao Tse-tung who held his position, even in spite of failing health, up to his death at the age of 84 and Vice-Chairman Chou En-lai until his death at the age of 77. Today professors in institutions of higher learning do not retire. They are treasured for their learning and experience. They draw their full salaries but are asked to make whatever contribution they can in view of their health. My mother, who at the age of 80 is still actively teaching English at a university, is an example.