
Growing Older and...Lonelier

A look at China's aging population

By placing an advertisement for a “daughter” on WeChat, 63-year-old Li Yanling became an overnight Internet sensation. The 63-year-old grandma took to WeChat to find a female travel companion to join her in travelling to Sanya.



Li Yanling did not want to see the striking sea of Sanya alone; she wanted someone to share the memory. In return for companionship, Ms. Yanling offered the lucky travel mate an iPhone 7.

Surely a woman of a vital age could travel on her own, so what is stopping Ms. Yanling? The answer is simple and points to grander problems growing within Chinese society: loneliness.

Li is just one of the millions of elderly Chinese that live in childless households, Li and others are considered “empty nesters.” Previously an extended family with three or four generations under one roof used to be the norm in China, the recent decades’ rapid economic and social changes have disintegrated the traditional family structure. It is becoming increasingly popular for grown-up children to live away from their aging parents.

Li’s children are a part of the generation that is moving away from their aging parents. Yi would have called her daughters but her daughters work far away from Yi’s home and she did not want to burden them. Fortunately, many young women came to the call of Ms. Li and volunteered to join without accepting the iPhone 7.

“I don’t need the phone but can come with you, auntie, and will pay my own bills, as long as it relieves your loneliness,” Sina weibo user @shanjigedexiaomimei said. Other replies pinpointed the problem with not spending time with your elders and the growing prevalence of loneliness with their elders. This is not a trend, this is a problem that China’s elders will continue to face as their children move far away.

Statistics from National Health and Family Planning Commission shows the population of senior Chinese aged over 60 stood at 220 million last year, 50 percent of whom are empty nesters, according to a study by Renmin University. In addition, China National Committee on Aging expects the number to shoot up to 200 million by 2030.

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Last year, a 77-year-old grandpa from Changzhou, east China's Jiangsu Province posted ads on local newspapers, in the hope of finding a family that will "adopt" him, after leading a solitary existence for years. He adds, "I don't have anyone to talk to," Xun told Xinhua. "I talk to myself every day and often spend one or two hours murmuring while looking at old photo albums."

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