

## **New Three-Generation Families in Rural China**

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中国农村新“三代家庭”研究

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### **Abstract**

With the migration and urbanization of China's rural population, married members of the Post-1980 and Post-1990 generation, together with their parents, have formed a new type of three-generation family which in some respects is similar to the earlier three-generation families but quite different in substance. In the new three-generation families, even though the offspring and the parents constitute separate accounting units, they have not undergone formal household division. The parents have come to be incorporated into their offspring's families, forming a new three-generation family with each of their offspring. The structure of the new three-generation families allows the offspring to cope with the pressures from village competition, labor migration, and urbanization by fully using the resources and labor power of the parents, thereby driving the development of these new peasant families. Such families have in fact overemphasized instrumentalist rationality, resulting in the overuse and exploitation of middle-aged labor. The

elderly who are unable to work are excluded from the household and their living space has been narrowed. The formation of these new families runs counter to the expectation that rural families will become entirely nuclear families after China's industrialization, showing that rural family formation has a distinctive cultural basis.

### **Keywords**

family structure, new three-generation families, intergenerational relations, migrant workers, urbanization

摘要：伴随着农村人口流动和农民城市化，婚后的“八零后”、“九零后”农民与父代组成了类似三代直系家庭但却有实质差别的新“三代家庭”。在该类家庭中，父代与子代、子代家庭之间的会计单位是相互独立的，但是子代与父代在形式上又没有明确分家，这就使得父代被分别纳入到子代家庭，成为子代家庭的成员，从而分别与子代家庭构成三代直系家庭。新“三代家庭”结构有利于子代对父代资源和劳动力的充分调配，以应对村庄竞争、人口流动和城市化所带来的问题和压力，推动农民家庭发展。新“三代家庭”过于强调家庭关系的工具理性，从而使得农村中年人的劳动力被过度使用和剥削。没有劳动能力的老年人不被纳入进新“三代家庭”，他们的生存空间被挤压。新“三代家庭”的出现有力地驳斥了中国工业化后农民家庭将彻底核心化的论断，说明农村家庭的延续和变化皆有其独特的文化基础。

关键词：家庭结构；新“三代家庭”；代际关系；农民工；城市化

### **Problem Awareness and Research**

The tremendous and profound changes that China's rural areas have undergone can be seen in

many important facets of rural society, particularly in family structure. Scholars generally believe that the direction of the reform of the rural family structure should be from the clan-based or extended-family-based family to the nuclear family, which will be the basic unit, consistent with the trend in Western society. The trend in Western countries has been that, after industrialization and social modernization, the traditional family as a unit of production was replaced by individual industrial workers, causing a rapid growth in the proportion of nuclear families. Social science scholars have therefore suggested that the Chinese family organization based on the small-scale peasant economy would be replaced by the industrial workers of a capitalist economy, and two-generation nuclear families would take the place of the traditional three-generation extended family (Huang, 2011).

But what has in fact happened is not what theory has presupposed. From the perspective of economic history and legal history, Philip Huang (Huang, 2011) argues that three-generation families have doggedly persisted in today's China. In the countryside, supporting one's parents is not only something that society expects but it is also enshrined in the national legal system. This distinguishes the trend in the development of Chinese families and the trend in the West. Wang Yuesheng (2014) in his research has found that the number of rural three-generation immediate families remained relatively stable between 1982 and 1990, gradually increased after 1990, and then substantially increased—by 26.92 percent—between 1990 and 2010. The main reason is that a large number of only-child families had their children work in non-farming jobs. These children, when they marry or have a child, benefit a great deal from living together with their parents. It is this that has led to the increase in the number of three-generation families. Gong Weigang (2013) had to admit that the proportion of three-generation families had risen since 1990, although he had once estimated that the proportion would shrink. The conclusion that rural

three-generation families were growing in the past three decades is based on “household division” records in rural household registrations, but in reality there is a widespread phenomenon that parents live and eat, or just eat, together with their married children who are supposedly in divided families. This family formation is quite different from traditional extended families in that the offspring families are economically independent and the parents do not interfere with their finances. On the other hand, as these offspring families are not formally divided from the parents’ family, there still exists strong ties of rights and obligations between them. This family form is a brand new type. As it consists of the generation of the parents, their offspring, and their grandchildren, quite similar to the structure of traditional three-generation families, it can be called a new three-generation family.

The new type of three-generation families is becoming increasingly common in rural areas, drawing the attention of researchers. The form of the family constituted by the parents and the family of their single offspring, studied by Wang Yuesheng, which consists of separate accounting units in reality, is just one type of new three-generation family. Philip Huang has pointed out that families of those who run mom-and-pop stores in urban areas should also be included in the category of new three-generation families, since the family consists of the parents, their married children, and their grandchildren. This kind of family is quite different from traditional three-generation families in that economic power is mainly in the hands of the second generation, and the grandparents only help by looking after their grandchildren or keeping an eye on the shop. He Lanping and Yang Linqing (2017) have noted that the proportion of new three-generation families in rural areas is larger than three-generation extended families. A considerable proportion of elderly people still live together with their married children who have nominally divided out, especially when these children have no siblings. According to a survey by

Yao Jun (2013), the large-scale and continuous flow of two generations of migrant workers from rural areas to cities have changed the household-division rules and resource flow in rural areas, making it easier for the new generation of migrant workers, from the perspective of economic benefits and the prospect of their own family, to rationally take a “not divided from home” strategy. Gong Jihong et al. (2015) found that in the rural household-division process, the offspring gradually became dominant, resulting in increasingly simplified forms and substance of division. After division, the family’s intergenerational relationship is “divided but not separated,” a situation from which the offspring generation can derive many benefits. In Yin Zi’s (2016) view, “divided but not separated” is the result of “unreal division.” Due to the pressure of family development brought about by social transformation, real household division of rural families in the past now has turned into “unreal division.” The offspring pass some of their life pressure onto the parent family, leading to closer intergenerational relations and interaction. Some scholars also refer to the families composed of left-behind elders and children as “skip-generation families,” which come into being when the young adults leave for migrant work (Li, 2004). Such families have the typical characteristics of the new three-generation families. In recent years, sociologists have also analyzed “intergenerational exploitation” in rural areas, which is an outgrowth of new three-generation families and their intergenerational relations. The basic logic is that by adopting the pricing tactics of the marriage market, children extract resources from their parents for the bride price or housing so that they can keep a foothold in urban areas, and further, reproduce their families by using their parents to raise their children as well as extracting other forms of material assistance (Liu, 2012; Yang and Ouyang, 2013; Chen, 2014; Wang Defu, 2014). Some recent studies have focused on “old drifters,” people of the parents’ generation who migrate to cities and towns to help their migrant-worker or urban-based offspring with housework and

childcare, forming a version of new three-generation families with their children and grandchildren (Liu, 2015; Chen, 2017).

Scholars have done a good job in exploring the new family forms that have emerged in the context of population migration and peasant urbanization, touching on the implications of new three-generation families from different angles, and providing an empirical and theoretical basis for our discussion of new three-generation families. Below, we systematically elaborate on new three-generation families in terms of their structure, mechanism, type, characteristics, and functions, to develop a schematized system for understanding these families.

## **Basic Structure of the New Three-Generation Families**

### ***Family Formation***

What is similar but opposite to the concept of new three-generation families is the traditional three-generation family, which is the immediate household formed by the parents, the married sons, and unmarried grandchildren. A traditional three-generation family comes into being under two circumstances. One is that the only married son is not divided from his father's family as traditional rural ethics prescribe, so a three-generation family is naturally formed. Another situation is that one of several sons is left to live with his parents. This situation was very common in the past. In families with several sons, the parents often eventually formed a nuclear family with their unmarried youngest child after they had all the married children divided from the household. When the youngest son got married, the young couple would stay with the parents, hence making a three-generation family. Those divided sons consequently had nuclear families that consisted of two generations. In a multiple-child family, parents did not have a strong jural relation with their divided sons, since they had no institutional obligation to provide the offspring's nuclear families with labor and resources. Parents could help offspring families out of

affection, but they had to give balanced support to each offspring's family, or conflicts could occur. In order to avoid such problems, the parents generally refused to help any of their offspring. The parents' labor and other resources belonged to the three-generation family of their youngest son, and there was a strong right-obligation relationship as well as affective ties between them. Offspring living apart were not obliged to support their parents, but they were expected to visit them during important festivals or on the parents' birthdays in accordance with village ethics. Only if the property of the father (mainly land) was divided more or less equally among the offspring, which means the parents withdrew from the three-generation family of the youngest son, did they have the obligation of supporting their parents (Du and He, 2017). During the years 1990–2000, nuclear families still accounted for the largest proportion of households in China, though the percentage of three-generation families was steadily increasing, from 18 percent to 25 percent.

Although new three-generation families are also composed of the parents, their offspring, and their unmarried grandchildren, they are essentially different from the traditional type. These new types of families include not only those consisting of the parents and a married only-child or the youngest son, but also those formed by parents with every married offspring. In other words, the nuclear families of married offspring coming from multiple-child families may become new three-generation families when their parents join them. Traditionally, a three-generation family means that the parents live with their married offspring without household division. Otherwise, the parents stay alone, with all their children living apart. However, in the new type of three-generation families, the parents neither stay alone nor form a three-generation family with only one child. They may join the families of all of their offspring. There are as many offspring families as there are three-generation families. However, offspring families are independent of

each other (see Figure 1). In other words, parents may become members of the families of all their children while these families are not subordinated one to the other.

Figure 1 about here

In new three-generation families there is a strong jural relationship between parents and sons. It is the responsibility of the parents to provide resources to the family of each of the offspring, and the offspring have the right to tap into their parents' labor and resources. The right-obligation relation among offspring families is weak. Since the parents are the common "property" of all the offspring families, when it comes to this "property," the offspring are more in a competitive than a cooperative relationship.

Structurally speaking, the members of new three-generation families can be divided into two categories: the first consists of able-bodied adults; the second, of young members who have not yet reached working age. The former contains the parents and their offspring, the latter the grandchildren. New three-generation families exclude the elderly who do not have the ability to work. Once the elderly for any reason lose their ability to work, they will voluntarily withdraw from the household or be forced to leave. Therefore, the parents in this kind of family are generally middle-aged or elderly people who are still able to work. New three-generation families thus integrate labor power while in traditional three-generation families the working ability of parents is irrelevant. For this reason, it is safe to say that traditional three-generation families are formed naturally according to local customs, while the formation of new three-generation families is related to the rational choice of the offspring. Also for this reason, the proportion of traditional three-generation families in the countryside have remained stable. The growth of such families after 1990 is related to the increase in the number of only-children

(Wang Yuesheng, 2014). With parents providing support for their offspring, new three-generation families will continue to grow as members of the Post-1980 and Post-1990 generations marry in the context of population migration and urbanization. In the past, a multiple-child family was divided into several nuclear families. Now these supposedly nuclear families, with the parents living together, are developing into new three-generation families. The phenomenon of nuclear families consequently changing into new three-generation families will become common in rural areas.

### *Accounting Units*

Offspring families separating financially from the parent family is a sign of independence. So-called “household division” is to a large extent financial division. Once divided from the parent household, the offspring household should be an independent accounting unit, just as the parent family is. In traditional three-generation families, since the offspring are not divided from their parents’ household, they lack independent financial power. The three generations compose one accounting unit, with the financial power of the family firmly under the control of the parents. On the other hand, the accounting unit is also a unit of interpersonal relationships. The parents and the offspring have a common, affective interpersonal relationship, even if relatives and friends are part of the offspring’s family. Therefore, giving cash gifts is a crucial way of exercising control. Only divided nuclear families have both public and private interpersonal activities. In many regions, parents end some interpersonal relations because of a “division of favors” (so-called “division of relatives”), which synchronizes with household division. Of course, the parents still need to maintain their relationships if no division occurs. The advantage of having the parents in charge of financial resources is that this can cut expenses, control unnecessary expenditures by the young people, and preserve the family’s wealth. The downside

is that the young people have to ask their parents for money, which can be humiliating. This is an important reason why young people clamor for dividing the household.

In a new three-generation family, the offspring are financially independent. They make up their own accounting unit, as do the parents. Therefore, there are three accounting units in a new three-generation family. Before getting married, the offspring give their income to the parents, who save the money for expenses the offspring will incur once they marry. After marriage, however, the offspring's income is no longer handed over to the parents, whether the household is divided or not. The offspring control their own income and form an independent accounting unit. As for interpersonal relations, the parents still have their own since no division occurs. The offspring are supposed to be in charge of themselves. However, in practice, parents often have to manage these interpersonal relations since the offspring are migrant workers living away from home. Parents have to bear the financial costs involved in interpersonal relations for the families of all their offspring. This money usually comes from the parents' accounting unit, and as a rule they do not care whether the offspring repay them or not.

Without division, the parents' accounting unit does not become independent. In new three-generation families, the resources owned by the parents' generation also can be shared by all the offspring, who can extract resources in different ways. Aside from accepting cash gifts from the parents, the offspring also dine "free" in the parents' family, which is called "eating publicly" 吃公家的, and they can turn over the job of raising their children to their parents, who not only take care of the grandchildren but can even pay for their schooling and living expenses. In some new three-generation families, the parents are even expected to pay off their offspring's mortgages and provide for heating expenses in winter. Some offspring may symbolically return their children's tuition fees as well as their own living expenses to their parents to compensate

the parents' accounting unit. However, most offspring pay nothing back as long as their parents still have the ability to work. When a parent accounting unit runs a deficit or falls into debt—and large debts are, for example, incurred when the offspring marry—the offspring will refuse to help. The parents have to work elsewhere to earn money so that they can get out of debt. The offspring's accounting unit is also not responsible for the wedding costs of unmarried brothers.

In traditional three-generation families, the parents share an accounting unit only with the family of only one offspring, while in the new three-generation family, as we have noted, they have to share it with the families of all their offspring. Thus the parents are under great financial pressure to deliver equal amounts of labor and resources to each offspring family. The offspring often take it for granted that they can draw on the resources of their parents' accounting unit. However, in some new three-generation families, the parents' wealth remains in their hands because their property and other resources (including land) are not equally divided out after household division. In other words, the parents remain an independent accounting unit.

### ***The Right-Obligation Relationship***

In the traditional study of demography, it was household division recorded in household registration that had statistical significance. However, in the practice, formal division of rural households has become increasingly simplified. There is not even a division ceremony nor any other rigmarole. As long they are married, the offspring have their own families which are naturally economically and socially independent from the families of their parents and siblings. These new families can either be in one household with the parents (demographically “extended families”) or in a new household (demographically “nuclear families”), but these cases do not meet the traditional concept of household division due to the absence of the ritual of division. However, the offspring are indeed separated from each other and from the mother family. These

families are far from being nuclear, because the offspring still live or have their meals in the parents' household when they return to the village. This can be described as a "non-separated division" or a family form that is virtually divided but closely linked. This mechanism of "no division in form" is a prerequisite for the formation of a new three-generation family.

Traditionally, with a strong sense of dignity, the ritual involved in the division of family property requires the participation of the clan leader and the wife's uncle instead of the wife herself. In addition to determining the ownership of houses, land, and other property (including debt), the division mainly entails formally defining the rights and obligations of the family members. People who are grouped into the same family share a strong right-obligation relationship. Those who are in two different families lack this institutional link despite the affective connection, and their rights and obligations are not clear. For example, in traditional three-generation families, where the parents and their offspring are in the same household, there exists strong jural relations between them, unlike with offspring who have undergone a "separation of the household." In these circumstances, if the parents provide resources to a divided family, the offspring in the three-generation family may complain about it because they believe that their parents' labor and other resources belong only to their own family.

However, in new three-generation families, the parents are members of every offspring's family since the household has not been formally divided. In this situation, the jural relation between parents and the family of each offspring is completely institutional. According to village ethics and mores, parents still have the duty to support the family of each offspring, and each offspring, in return, has an obligation to support their parents. In the context of migrant work and urbanization, which blurs the form of household division, parents have to deliver benefits and make a contribution to the family of each offspring, which typically would include looking after

the young children. Every offspring family has the right to ask the parents for money, resources, and labor because they are not divided from their parent family. For example, offspring have the right to make their parents come to the city as “old drifters” to do the housework and raise their children for them. These old drifters are also expected to go to help their other sons, who may be in another city.

New three-generation families consider the wedding ceremony as the occasion for household division among brothers. As long as the son in question gets married, his family has separated from the other brothers’ and there are no longer any right-obligation relations. Therefore, new three-generation families only undergo household division among the brothers’ families but not between the father and sons’ families. As long as the father and son have not divided into separate households, the pressure of each offspring family will be passed onto the parents through the institution of right-obligation relations. Parents will make every effort to reduce the burden on each child and thus multiply the stress and anxiety that they themselves bear. Conversely, if the parents’ family is separated from the offspring’s, the parents will not have as great a duty to take care of the offspring, and hence the pressure will be more on the offspring and less on the parents.

### ***The Structure of Family Relations***

In rural families two kinds of relations are particularly important. One is the vertical intergenerational relationship, and the other is the horizontal relationship between husband and wife. However, the two relations sometimes clash. If intergenerational relations take precedence, then the conjugal relationship is weakened. Any sign that a young wife is building her own small family at the expense of undermining the big family is something that is particularly frowned upon. If the relationship between the couple is considered central, then the intergenerational

relationship is weakened and conflicts between generations may occur. In traditional rural areas, a system of mores and ethics fix the vertical relationship as primary and the horizontal as complementary. The horizontal one submits to and serves the vertical. The nature of the dominance of vertical relationships defines the leading role in intergenerational relations, especially the father-son relationship. The axial role of the father-son relationship means that the family is primarily concerned about the vertical kinship tie, favoring the interests of extended families and clans. This tends to restrain the interests of the small families and resist the tendency for division. Therefore, in traditional families, the relationship between father and son is relatively close, while the relationship between husband and wife is relatively loose or unimportant, which can even be an issue leading to conflict within the clan. Therefore, in rural areas in earlier times, the members of both the traditional type of three-generation family and the nuclear family, especially the men, under the influence of father-son axis, had a strong sense of identity with the patriarchal clan lineage.

However, with the disintegration of the bloodline during the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century, its influence on the individual weakened, and the trend of small families separating from the big families intensified. In the extended family, the offspring competed for power with their parents and the daughter-in-law constantly challenged the authority of her mother-in-law. Young women wanted to pull their husbands out of the clan or the big family and into their own small families. The interests of small families became increasingly independent and it was more and more common that the offspring proposed household division, and the interval between division and wedding was constantly getting shorter. As a result, in the 1980s and 1990s, persistent conflicts between parents and children, between husband and wife, and between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law emerged. Eventually young women were successful

in drawn their men into small families. After the mid-1990s, the relationship between husband and wife became progressively more important and indeed it become the center of the family. Intergenerational relations accordingly became relatively insignificant. The husband-wife relationship as the center of the family means that promoting the interests of the small family, going beyond that of the clan or the extended family, is the goal of all family members. Therefore, in the three-generation families during this period, young couples dominated family decision-making and economic power. Their parents had no say in resource allocation. Some offspring even refused to support the old, or beat and abused their parents. The center had decisively moved toward the offspring generation (Yan, 1998).

Relations in new three-generation families neither focus on the father and son as in the past, which left no room for the husband and wife, nor do they devote much attention to the interests of the nuclear families, which has resulted in a serious imbalance in intergenerational relations. In the new three-generation families, although family relations are centered on the husband-wife relationship, intergenerational relations are becoming increasingly important, leading to fewer conflicts and contradictions. Both the parents and the couple are aware of this and both view the new type of three-generation family as something that will benefit everyone. This can be seen in the following aspects. First, the parents are indispensable in caring for their grandchildren. Without the help of the parents, the husband and wife in offspring families, whether they are migrant workers or city residents, have to bear the extra cost of childcare. Second, the parents can productively participate in decision-making in new three-generation families, while at the same time respect the autonomy of the offspring family as an accounting unit. Third, the parents do not rely on their children for a living. They enter the family as supporters rather than as claimants, and thus their role in the family is as volunteers and hosts. Fourth, because there is no

division causing the property of the father to be equally divided among the offspring, the parents are still in charge of the big family as an accounting unit, with the power to determine financial and family affairs. Therefore, it can be said that family relations in new three-generation families are characterized by equal rights. The roles and status of family members are relatively equal, and the relationship between the young couple and the parents is relatively balanced.

### ***Patterns of Intergenerational Division of Labor***

Since both parents and offspring in new three-generation families are capable of working, there is necessarily a division of labor in the process of running the family, according to age, ability, effectiveness, and the family's circumstances. The division is mainly between generations.<sup>1</sup> For example, if the parents are young enough to be able to work in the city, both the father and son may stay in city to work. If the parents are too old or infirm to get work in the city, they have little choice but to return to their village and resume farming while their offspring remain in the city. The premise of an intergenerational division of labor is to rationally allocate family labor so as to maximize the interests of the family. It is on that basis that the pattern of the division of labor is formed: viz., with the offspring as the mainstay and the parents as the supplement. The generational division of labor must fully use the labor power of the offspring in order to create more family wealth, while reasonably handling the parents' labor power for some auxiliary work so that extra wealth can be acquired or the burden on the offspring can be lessened.

There are mainly three types of labor division in new three-generation families. The first involves dividing farming from migrant work. Since young people constitute an effective source

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<sup>1</sup> In traditional three-generation families of 1980s–1990s, there was a division of labor division only between husband and wife or between male and female rather than between the generations.

of labor in all circumstances, while middle-aged and elderly people can be described as a semi-effective or inefficient labor force in urban areas but effective in rural areas, the offspring often leave to work outside and their parents remain in the village to do the farming. It is in order to maximize their income that the young couple in each of the offspring families migrates to the city to work. The parents, remaining in the village and farming, not only earn an income from the farming, but they also can take care of the children of the offspring families, thus making it much easier for the young couple to leave the village and work outside. The second type involves a division between inside and outside. If the offspring and the parents live together, there is a division of labor both inside and outside the family, usually with the offspring working away from home and the parents staying home and taking care of the housework. The third involves a division of labor for tending to the young children. There also exists an intergenerational division of labor in caring for the grandchildren if the parents migrate to the city. Generally, the parents are responsible for material care while the offspring are responsible for social care (Xiao, 2014).

### **Factors Shaping New Three-Generation Families**

The emergence of new three-generation families in rural areas has its own unique historical background. At a macro level, it is a product of rural migration and urbanization. At the micro level, the intense competition in villages, the widespread phenomenon of only-child families, and the shared values between father and son are all conditions for the formation of new three-generation families.

#### ***Fierce Village Competition***

Increasing competition in villages is the result of the disintegration of relations among peasants. In traditional rural areas, with their strong sense of identity within the bloodline, peasants have

more awareness of the benefits of mutual assistance and cooperation. With the sense of identity through the bloodline fading away, and the independent interests of nuclear families politically recognized, there is no longer a feeling of being an in-group among nuclear families. Instead, comparisons and competition are highlighted. As the village is an acquaintance society, once a gap opens up between different nuclear families, it will soon be perceived. Those lagging behind may feel ashamed and strive to catch up, while the leaders, who are applauded and set up as examples, also cannot afford to rest on their laurels, but redouble their efforts to continue leading the village in terms of the standard of living. In this situation, the drawing of comparisons between families and competition in the village become intensified.

In the collective economy, the financial situation of peasant families was similar, so there was no obvious basis for comparison and competition. By the 1980s, however, the system of “parceling out village land to individual households,” which strengthened the independent interests of nuclear families, as well as market-oriented reforms, which further disrupted the clan’s bloodline, created the conditions for the emergence of comparison and competition among nuclear families. In addition, increasing employment channels for peasants and the diversification of sources of family income gradually changed the economic situation of peasant families, which, again, provided the conditions for the emergence of comparison and competition among nuclear families. Over time, the comparison and competition among peasant families intensified as the gap between them widened. By the year 2000, nuclear families had become the main subject of interest in the village. Since then the gap between nuclear families has widened, causing increasingly fierce competition among village acquaintances. This has brought tremendous pressure and anxiety to nuclear families. The targets that nuclear families are competing for are mainly as follows. The first concerns interpersonal relations. With peasant

families doling out a quarter or a third of their income as cash gifts, this ever-increasing amount of the money has become a heavy burden. However, the rise of cash gifting is related to peasants' ideas about rivalry. The second is competition over housing. Peasants built bigger and more luxurious houses, and buy an apartment in an urban area. The better the city, the more pride they feel. The third competition is over consumption including daily necessities, banquets, cars, tobacco, and alcohol. Peasants gain face when they buy high-quality products. The fourth is competition related to marriage. In order for a man to find a wife, his parents need to constantly raise their bargaining chips such that that the cost of getting married continues to rise, forcing peasants to begin preparing for marriage as soon as their son is born. The fifth is competition over children's education. If children are to avoid failing at the very beginning, they have to go to good schools and have high-quality tutoring. More and more young peasants have sent their children to cities or towns for elementary and junior high school, and more and more young children have family members' accompany them when they leave their hometown. Winning in any of these forms of competition will boost a family's prestige, but victory requires a pile of money and other resources.

Young peasants in nuclear families are under tremendous pressure to win out in the competition. Apart from making full use of their own labor power, they also need to utilize all the resources and labor that can be mobilized. Whose resources and labor can be utilized? The resources and labor of fraternal families cannot be mobilized because they are in competition. Nuclear families in the same village are also in a competitive position, and no mutual support can be expected. Relatives are non-competitive and their resources and labor are available, but such resources can only be mobilized occasionally. Therefore, only the parents' resources and labor can be used because of the noncompetitive nature of intergenerational relations and the

parents' willingness to support their offspring. However, the problem is that the emotional support of the parents cannot be sustained. Only when they are brought into the nuclear family of the offspring can the offspring rationally and systematically allocate their resources and labor. "No division in form" is an important strategy for confirming the institutional jural relationship between parents and offspring. For offspring participating in the village competition, this strategy can ensure an optimal allocation of family resources and labor power, and lead to the multiplication of family resources so as to win out in the competition. On the contrary, if the "division in form" strategy is adopted, the cost of participating in the competition will increase if parents' labor power is not mobilized. For example, if there are no grandparents to accompany the offspring's children to the city for schooling, one or the other of the offspring couple will have to pull out of the labor market or in some way reduce the time they work. This high opportunity cost may drag down the family in the village competition. It can be said that new three-generation families are the result of the rational choice of offspring participating in the village competition. The more intense the competition, the more the resources and labor of the parents need to be mobilized, thus the greater the drive to create new three-generation families.

### ***Rural Population Movement***

The migration of rural people to cities is an inevitable result of industrialization and urbanization. Most peasant families find it is necessary to combine farming with migrant work to cope with life's pressures and village competition. For young or middle-aged peasants, being a migrant worker is a necessary condition that shapes three-generation families. This is mainly reflected in the five following ways.

- 1) Long-term employment of young people in cities eliminates the necessity of household

division. In an uneasily changed situation where rural resources flow out and cities draw them in, most migrant workers, on the one hand, are unable to establish a decent home in cities, and thus need to maintain roots in the countryside in the form of dwellings, land, and families. On the other hand, migrant workers may work in cities for several years or over a decade (or even decades). They live in the village for a short time each year, usually from several days (festivals and holidays) to two or three months (busy season). Migrant work takes up most of their time. If they are divided from their parents, they will have to find another person to care for their land, houses, and tools and other property in the village, all at an additional cost. The high depreciation rate of houses, tools, and daily makes it virtually impossible for migrant workers to benefit from these assets. Therefore, the rational choice is not to divide from the parent family. Left with the parents, these assets are watched over and used by the parents, and may likely remain valuable or even increase in value (such as through the rental of agricultural machinery). The offspring can also use these assets themselves when they return home. In other cases, where both the parents and offspring are good workers and all of them leave the village to work, there is no need to divide their households.

2) Migrant work produces most of the income that makes property division no longer necessary. As mentioned above, the key to traditional rural household division lies in property division, where property mainly refers to land. Because there are many people but little land in China's rural areas, migrant work has become the main channel for families to obtain a monetary income. According to statistics, the income ratio of migrant work and farming in rural families is 8 to 2. In some families, it is higher than 9 to 1, and in still others all their income comes from migrant work. Thus, in view of the income from migrant work, farming income can almost be ignored. However, for elderly peasants who would be considered "semi-laborers" or incapable of getting

a job in urban areas, although the income from farming is small, it is still sufficient for them to earn their own living, enjoy themselves, and support themselves in their own old age. They also can do odd jobs to increase their cash income. As a result, migrant workers do not need to divide their household but can leave the land to their parents, so that they can increase their parents' income and reduce the burden on the offspring by dint of supporting the parents after they retire.

3) The flow of population has reduced intergenerational conflicts so that household division is no longer necessary. One important reason for parents or offspring to suggest household division is that, as we have noted, intergenerational conflicts can easily arise between offspring and their parents, including contradictions between the mother-in-law (or father-in-law) and daughter-in-law, or between the parents and their offspring. The direct cause of intergenerational conflicts is family trivialities. The reason behind this is the struggle over power and the values of different generations. Some family conflicts may even lead to the tragic suicide of young daughters-in-law or mothers-in-law (Yang, 2013). In order to reduce intergenerational conflicts, two generations tend to divide from each other. Of course, there are also young women who intentionally create a family conflict in order to force their parents to propose a division. However, when young people work for years in urban areas, they spend very little time with their parents. Both the offspring and their parents have their own living space and power, and no longer interfere in each other's affairs, thus lowering the possibility of clashes. The distance of time and space can bring about good feelings between the two generations (especially between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law) and enhance the intimacy of family life. As a result, rural migration has reduced the need for household division.

4) Household division which leads to a family sharing the burden makes "property division"

unnecessary. In rural areas in the past, household division meant not only the division of property and labor, but also of debts and interpersonal relations. The reason for the former is that the small families have to share some debts left by extended family, and the latter is that the burden of interpersonal relations are partly transferred to offspring families. As for land and other property that is given to the offspring, parents bear no responsibility for any family or personal debts. This actually adds to the burden on the offspring but reduces the pressure on the parents. Thus, from a rational perspective, young men working outside the village will not voluntarily suggest household division now that they have no conflicts with their parents. Without the offspring's approval, parents generally keep silent about this issue because they are afraid of displeasing their sons and daughters-in-law.

5) Since working families need the parents to take care of the children, division is no longer necessary. To maximize their income, both the young husband and the wife have to work outside the village. The prerequisite for this is that the children should remain in the village. If a child is taken to wherever the young couple are employed, either one of them (usually the mother) has to look after the child, thus forgoing the income the parent otherwise would have earned, or the couple will have to pay someone to provide childcare. At the same time, raising children in the city may bring with it the cost of renting accommodations, purchasing children's daily necessities, and paying school fees, and so on. All this adds to the pressure on young people. Such a situation will eat up their income. But if they leave childcare to their parents, they will have additional labor power and the cost of child raising will be reduced. This is very simple economics. Every young peasant knows this. Therefore they do not propose household division since they want the parents to bring up their grandchildren.

In short, migrant workers will eventually need to include their parents in their nuclear

families to form a new three-generation family if they want to fully mobilize their parents' labor and resources so that the family will enjoy a more effective allocation of labor and greater resources. And couples who remain in the village and managed to win out in the village competition, will work a medium-sized farm or engage in some business nearby. In this scenario, they will not need to mobilize their parents' labor resources and thus they will tend to divide from their parents instead of forming a new three-generation family with them.

### ***Urbanization of Migrant Workers***

The urbanization of migrant workers refers to the process in which migrant workers buy a house and live reasonably well in cities. For migrant workers, the city is a symbol of modernization. The city has plenty of job opportunities, education resources, and modern lifestyles—all this makes a foothold in the city the goal of migrant workers. Apart from a few peasants doing business in cities, the majority of migrant workers can be classified into two categories. The first is general workers 普工. These people mainly work in the service industry, on construction sites, or on factory assembly lines. These jobs have few technical barriers, and thus workers can be easily being replaced and their wages can be lowered. The second category consists of skilled workers and managers, in other words staff with expertise, professional skills, or management (sales) experience. In some specialized fields, the supply of competent personnel is relatively limited and so wages are comparatively high. The vast majority of migrant workers are general workers and only a small number are skilled workers and managers. In general, migrant workers in technical and managerial positions are more likely to gain a foothold in cities due to their more stable jobs, higher wages, and social security. These peasants have higher rates of urbanization. However, workers in the first category, who fail to find a stable job with a high level of social security, find it more difficult to stay permanently in cities. Nonetheless, for

peasants in either category, their parents' support is indispensable for their city life. General workers need more support, so there is a greater incentive for them to establish a new three-generation family with their parents.

Parents' support for their offspring who work in the city consists mainly of the following three items. First, buying a house. Migrant workers usually buy a house in a county town first, and then later in a prefectural-level city or town. The down payment is generally shared by the offspring and their parents. If the parents have several sons, they typically provide each with the same amount of money for the down payment. Parents may help pay off the mortgage if they have only one son. Second, looking after the children. Offspring buy a house in cities and towns not merely to enjoy modern urban life, but mainly to gain access to the quality educational resources in cities. If the offspring want to maintain a basic standard of living, both husband and wife must work, but that means they cannot properly take care of their young children. In small and medium-sized towns in central and western China there are few job opportunities. Thus young couples who seek urban employment tend to go cities in developed coastal areas. In that case, at least one of their parents is needed to take care of the children there. If their village is relatively close to the town, the parents may send their grandchildren off to school in the morning and then drive back to the village to work on the farm. In the afternoon, they return to the town to pick up the children, and thus the children and farming are both taken care of. Third, other supports. This includes parents providing material and financial support for their offspring and as well as help with housework.

### ***Family Planning Policy***

China's family planning policy in the 1970s and 1980s has greatly reduced the number of offspring in a family. People in rural areas, if the first child was a son, were not allowed to have

another child. If the first child was a daughter, then having another child was possible. Despite the prevalence of births in rural areas in violation of the “one child” policy, most families have two to four children. For this reason, most of today’s young people in the Post-1980 and Post-1990 generation have few brothers or are the only son in their family. The sharp drop in the number of children and the prevalence of “families with few children” have exerted a great impact on the formation and maintenance of new three-generation families.

First, because families have few children, the parents are generally young even when their offspring get married. They are effective workers not only strong in rural areas but also in urban areas. They can also create labor value and accumulate wealth after their children wed. This enables them to support the offspring, whether in the form of providing labor or other resources.

Second, having few children or only one child, the parents are able to take care of the offspring family without being accused of being partial to anyone. For example, parents can take care of children from two offspring families at the same time, or provide the same amount of money to help their several offspring buy a house purchasing.

Third, with few children, parents can take better care of them and devote more attention to them as they grow up. It is rare to see parents being partial to one or another of their children. When the offspring get married, this affection is continued by parents providing more resources to the families of their offspring.

Fourth, the fact of having few brothers makes the offspring less like to fight over their parents’ labor and resources. The provision of resources to each offspring family seldom creates problems, which encourages the parents to give more help to their children.

### ***The Isomorphism of Intergenerational Views***

The adults in new three-generation families usually consist of parents born in the 1950s, 1960s,

or 1970s, with their offspring, born in the 1980s or 1990s. The parents' generation is generally between 45 and 65 years old, and the children between 20 and 40 years old. The two generations share the same view on both intergenerational affiliation and intergenerational relations. The reason the parents are willing to enter new three-generation families and provide resources, while the offspring can also take their resources for granted, is related to the isomorphism of the views of the two generations.

Growing up in new China, both generations accept the concept of equality, and are little influenced by traditional notions of family hierarchy. In the parents' view, family members are equal. They are equal in power and each has an equal say and equal decision-making authority. Therefore, both parents and children respect each other's rights without interfering in their respective accounting units, thus enabling both generations to work independently but cooperatively to promote the interests of the family. If, however, the father's generation believes in the traditional hierarchy and the son and daughter believe in the modern concept of equal rights, the result is likely to be either many intergenerational conflicts that lead to division when the two generations work together in a family, or the parents will ask their offspring's for support rather than provide help for them according to the ethical and customary requirements after the offspring get married.

Traditional intergenerational relations in the countryside are feedback-based. That is to say, since the parents raised the children, the children are obligated to support them when they are old. However, with the change of rural social and family relations, exchange-based intergenerational relations have gradually become dominant after 1980s and 1990s. How much the offspring pay back in terms of supporting the parents after they retire is related to the size of the contribution the parents' generation made to the offspring families. If the parents just bring up their offspring

and do not do more—such as building them a house, looking after their children, or doing household chores and providing resources—the offspring will consider them unworthy and will greatly reduce the amount they provide after they retire, or may even give them no support at all. Most of the parents' generation are now 70 to 80 years old and seldom gave their offspring support and resources after they were married. Now that they have lost their ability to work, their offspring start counterattacking, saying that they did not make a contribution to the nuclear families so now they should not be given much support. These offspring, 40 to 50 years old, have played down the notion that “I raise you, and now you have to show filial obedience,” but most accept exchange-based intergenerational relations. They learned the lessons of the previous generation, and so when they become the father generation themselves, they believe that as long as they are now more considerate of their offspring and given them more, their offspring will be kind to them in the future. Therefore, this generation of parents began to “learn to be the elderly” and “learn to be a mother-in-law.” A mother-in-law may try her best to please her daughter-in-law and really treat her as a daughter. As for the offspring, they are also aware that their parents have been generous and they understanding the hardship of their parents, so they are more considerate of them, and are expected to provide more for the parents after they retire.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The relationship between our two generations is also becoming more and more like that of city people. We can see that the parents work very hard in helping us to look after the house and the children. This is something we will keep in mind and will treat them well when they are old. The relationship between parents and sons also should be one of exchange. We shouldn't think that only because you raised me and helped me get married, I should consider that a big favor” (32-year-old Anhui vegetable stall keeper, migrant worker with her husband for nearly ten years, children left in the village for schooling). From Yao Jun, 2013.

## **Major Types of New Three-Generation Families**

According to their division of labor and way of life, new three-generation families can be divided into four variants: “half-employed and half-farming,” “half-urban and half-rural,” “living apart in urban areas,” and “the whole family in the city.” The situation where parents and offspring all live in the village is not common enough to form a type.

### ***Half-Employed and Half-Farming***

The term “half-employed and half-farming” refers to new three-generation families formed through a generational division of labor between the parents who remain in the village and farm and their offspring who work in urban areas. It is the major form of peasant family among the Post-1980 and the Post-1990 generation, and sometimes the Post-1970 generation as well. There are two sources of income for this sort of family: from the parents’ farming and the offspring’s employment.

Although the two parts are not combined into one accounting unit, a lack of either part may put the family in such a difficult situation that it may not be able to have a decent life in the village. Relying solely on the parents’ income from farming and without the employment income of the offspring, such families find it hard to complete when it comes to the reproduction of labor power and the family. Even if the offspring’s families make do through a gendered division of labor, with the men employed as migrant workers and the women working at home, the family income still cannot reach the middle level in rural areas (Yang, 2017). Although the parents’ farmwork produces little cash income, it has many hidden benefits, such as making it possible for the parents to support themselves, or work as part-time laborers, or do odd jobs. The cost of living in rural areas and of raising children also is relatively low. In the absence of these benefits,

offspring in the city will not only have to support themselves, but will also need to pay the high cost of childcare or provide childcare themselves as well as support the elderly who live with them. In that case, it is very difficult for offspring families to have a decent life. The expectation of most migrant workers in this half-employed and half-farming arrangement is not to gain a foothold in the city, but to complete the reproduction of labor power and their rural families. They plan to eventually return to farming in their old age when they are no longer capable of finding work in the city. At that point, they will form another new three-generation family with their own children to achieve reproduction.

### ***Half-Urban and Half-Rural***

New three-generation families of this type consist of offspring who have settled in a city or town and parents who remain in the village. One difference between the half-urban and half-rural type and the half-employed and half-farming type is that the offspring of the former are already urbanized while the latter take moving to the city as a means instead of an end. A second difference is that the grandchildren of the former live and study in a town or city, while the latter's do so in the village. A third difference is that the offspring families of the former feel a need to keep pace with city's general standard of living, and do what they can to live a reasonably comfortable life in the towns and cities, while the latter live at a subsistence level regardless of the standard of living in the city in which they work. The similarities between the two are that the family income of both comes from a combination of migrant work and farming, and their income level is not much different. Therefore, with higher living costs but a similar income as the half-employed and half-farming type, the half-urban and half-rural families have to do more to mobilize and rationally allocate family labor to support their urban living. As a result, families of this type not only have the offspring who do migrant work in urban areas but

also have at least one of the parents go to the city to take care of the young children and the household. The parents also have to provide additional resources such as paying off the mortgage, giving cash support, or buying daily necessities. In this way, the parents must over-exploit their labor power to boost their income, which could involve cultivating more land, working at odd jobs, and even doing migrant work. Since buying a house in a city or town has increasingly become a necessary condition for a marriage in rural areas, one should expect to see more and more this type of new three-generation family.

### ***“The Whole Family in the City”***

The situation for this third type of new three-generation families is that both the parents and the offspring constitute an effective labor force in urban areas and that they transfer out (or abandon) their land in order to free up all their labor for urban employment. In this way they can maximize their cash income and better support their family in the cities. There are several situations in which this type of family can find itself. The first is that the parents and offspring work together and live on the urban worksite in rented housing. The offspring all work outside the village and the father may do so as well while their mother takes care of the family back in the village (or vice versa). The advantages here are that wielding the labor power of three people can as lead to a greater cash income, the grandchildren can be educated in urban areas, and the family life of the two generations remains intact. The second situation is that the parents and offspring work in different places. Both parents have a job, but as for the offspring, only the men work outside. The women usually take care of the children at home or have a part-time job. In this case, the offspring often rent a house, while the parents may or may not do so as well. In any case, the cost of living of this type is higher than in the previous case. In both cases, the income of the parents and offspring goes to their respective accounting units. The third situation is that the family owns

a mom-and-pop shop in a town or city, which could include operating a restaurant, hardware store, print shop, general goods store, clothing store, small supermarket, small workshop, etc. The young couple is often responsible for running the shop. The parents help look after the shop, take care of the grandchildren, and do chores. The income in this type of family belongs to the offspring, but have to deal with the expenses of the medical care, food, and shelter for the parents. Because having more family members who can make money by working or doing business, this type of family has a better income and is more likely to buy a house in the city. They can turn into a half-urban and half-rural family after the parents return to the village. With a higher income than migrant worker families, mom-and pop shop families are likely to become urbanized and live where they work.

### ***“Living Apart in Urban Areas”***

This kind of new three-generation family is found mainly in two regions: developed rural areas along the southeast coast, where the integration of urban and rural areas has already occurred; and in urban and suburban villages in the central and western regions, where the villages have been urbanized. In other words, this type refers to the rural families in urbanized areas. In these families, the parents and the offspring each have their own house. Although the offspring live in their own home, they have meals in their parents’ house, and leave their children in the care of the parents (i.e., the children’s grandparents). The income of the parents generally falls into of four categories: paid employment, dividends from the village collective, renting out housing, and social security pensions for those 60 years old and above. Some villagers may not receive dividends from the collective or are unable to work when they are old, but at least they can have an income from renting out housing and social security. This income can be sufficient to support them in towns or cities without troubling their offspring. The income of the offspring family

mainly consists of the couple's wages. In such families, the parents support the offspring families in two ways. One is that they look after the children, so that offspring are free to devote themselves entirely to paid employment. The second is that the parents cook and provide dinner for the offspring, thus reducing the latter's daily expenses. More importantly, the offspring neither need to send or pick up their children nor make dinner themselves after work, which saves them a great deal of time and energy, allowing them to focus more on their work than on family trifles. In addition, although the offspring and the parents in this type of arrangement live in the same village and eat together, they do not live in the same home and nor do they work at the same worksite. They have their own separate incomes. Therefore, they will tend not to clash over life's friction or financial problems, but, in terms of affect, will rely more on each other instead.

### **Major Characteristics of New Three-Generation Families**

As a new family type, the new three-generation family has both similarities and unique characteristics compared to the traditional three-generation family. By looking at its main features, we can get a better and more complete picture of this new type.

#### ***Tight Integration of Family Resources and Labor Power***

If a three-generation family wants to win out in the fierce village competition and get a foothold in the city, it is imperative that it strengthen the integration of family resources and labor power as well as guide their flow. First of all, it is necessary to rationally allocate the offspring's labor. Being young adults, the offspring are in demand as workers in the city, and therefore a young couple going to an urban area for employment or business means that the labor power of the offspring generation has been optimally configured to maximize the family's income. Doing

other work, such as farming, taking care of the children, and doing housework is, in this sense, a waste of good labor power and reduces the family's income by half. Secondly, resources and the labor of parents must be fully utilized. When the parents' labor power is devoted to work that is not the optimal for the offspring, it is possible to make arrangements so that the parents' labor power can be more effectively utilized. At the same time, other parental resources are also transferred into the offspring's family. In comparison with traditional three-generation families, in which the parents' resources and labor can only be used by the family of one offspring, new three-generation families treat parental resources as the common property of all the offspring families and can be used by each of them. In contrast, the labor power of parents in traditional three-generation families is not fully mobilized, because in the traditional hierarchy and filial ethics, the offspring have the obligation to support their parents and should direct resources to the parents after the offspring get married. The parents' responsibility for the younger generation is weakened after their marriage, and they can decide to retire early and leave their offspring to take care of themselves. However, in the new three-generation families, the concept of "parents should be kind and children should be filial" has been diluted and "lightening the burden on the offspring" has become a new ethic for more fully mobilizing the parents' labor power. So long as they are able to work, they should work on behalf of their offspring. Otherwise they may be accused of ignoring their offspring but enjoying themselves. Lastly, family resources have to be preserved and the flow of resources needs to be controlled so that those resources can be mobilized for the village competition over prestige or urbanization rather than being devoted to anything else, including supporting the elderly.

***Combining the Development of the Offspring Family with the Life Tasks of the Parents' Generation***

So-called life tasks are fundamental missions that society prescribes for an adult. Only after completing these missions can one be recognized as an adult by the community, and can one believe one has acquired the meaning and value of life and one's life is successful. Traditionally, a peasant has three tasks in life: namely, giving birth to a son, building a house, and having a daughter-in-law. The most important two are having a son and seeing to his marriage. These are the most basic requirements for a peasant as a social person. If a peasant fails in these tasks, he/she will incur fellow villagers' disapproval, something that will cause regret for the rest of one's life. After completing these life missions, a peasant will enter the life stage of enjoyment, being supported by the offspring. However, with the increase of village competition and peasant urbanization, peasants' life tasks are also tied to the village competition and urbanization. This is manifested in several ways. First, village competition and urbanization complicate the peasant's life tasks. The increasingly intense competition in villages is reflected in the competition in fulfilling life's tasks, with the standard becoming more and more difficult to reach. Building a house and getting one's sons married are life tasks that complement one another, because one must have a house in order to find a wife for one's sons. The requisite quality and location of the house are constantly changing with the competition. Once the standard was a tile-roofed house, and later a two-story house, and still later a house along a road, until finally, today, it is an apartment in a town or city. This means that urbanization is a prerequisite for peasants to get married. During the process of preparing the way for the marriage of their sons, peasants find that in addition to the rising standard of housing, other costs, such as bride price, have been continuously climbing. In many areas, the bride price has reached over 100,000 or even 200,000 RMB, which is a heavy burden for peasant families. Second, village competition and urbanization have expanded peasants' life tasks. According to traditional thinking, peasants

completed their tasks when they helped their sons get married. But now, with the intensification of village competition and urbanization, peasants are unable to stop providing assistance for their children. They have to repay the debts incurred as part of the cost of marriage, look after the grandchildren, do housework for the offspring, and provide resources. These have become peasants' new life tasks, which are also highlighted by new ethics and mechanisms. "No division in form" is an important mechanism for strengthening parents' responsibility toward the offspring.

### ***Production Unit Separated from Living Unit***

Before population migration and urbanization, the peasant family was both a living unit and a production unit, both an affective community and a unified accounting unit. If family members live together in the same unit, they have close affective ties with one another. If family members are bound together in a production unit, however, they are apt to engage in family politics due friction over production decisions, resource allocation, housework obligations, and responsibilities. Family politics mainly occur between the husband and the wife and between generations. If family politics are not kept under control, the affect exchange within the family will be damaged. Family politics in the countryside in the past were kept in check by the hierarchical system and its attendant ethical norms. By the 1980s and 1990s, this system had died out, but the familial units of production and living units remained unseparated, leading to a burst of family politics, intense intergenerational conflicts, and affective alienation among family members. In new three-generation families, however, the production unit and the living unit are separate. In the half-employed and half-farming type, the offspring as a production unit live in an urban area and their parents in the village, and the common living units are in countryside as well; in the half-urban and half-rural type, both the production unit and living unit of the two

generations are separated, with the offspring's production unit located at the worksite and the living unit in the city, while the parental production and living units remain in the village. But the parental living unit will be in the city if the parents go there to take care of the offspring's family. In the "whole family in the city" type, the living unit is in the city but the production unit is in the factory or the construction site. In the "living apart in urban areas" type the production unit is in factories or enterprises and the living unit is in the city. Thus, in the new three-generation families, family politics, intergenerational relations, and husband-wife relations are more harmonious because the production units are separated from the living units. Families with no migrant workers find it difficult to separate their production units from their living units, and so intergenerational family politics can easily emerge, leading to household division. Consequently, it is difficult people in this situation to form a new three-generation family.

### ***Underlining Responsibility, Affect, and Cooperation***

Traditional rural families put more emphasis on continuing the bloodline and the offspring's reciprocity for the care the parents provided than on affective exchange, and on patriarchal command and control instead of mutual cooperation and assistance between family members. New three-generation families entail an aggregation of duty, affect, and cooperation. First, as in traditional families, the new type also entails the duty of the offspring to support their parents, but it places more emphasis on the parents' unlimited responsibility for their offspring. As long as the parents are able to work, they cannot stop being responsible to their offspring. Second, although in general parents have an innate affection for their offspring—and the offspring can appreciate this affective experience and feel grateful—with the absence of family politics in new three-generation families, parents and offspring in the same living unit can have a better affective relationship and the result can be a better family atmosphere. And, if the offspring compete with

others in the places they work such as construction sites, factories, and other enterprises, production politics inevitably appears, which will put them under pressure and cause anxiety. In that case, they can take the initiative in creating and maintaining harmony within the family and make it a safe harbor. Third, participating in village competition and adapting to urbanization or improving the quality of life require a division of labor and cooperation among family members. It is the mechanism of cooperation, rather than the command mechanism, that is important for mobilizing labor power in new three generation families.

### ***Downward Family Focus and the Younger Generation's Priorities in Resource Allocation***

The traditional family's focus is upward, emphasizing obligations and responsibilities for the parents' generation. In the allocation of resources in these families, priority is given to the older generation and the elderly, followed by the adult men, young children, and, finally, women. The upward focus of resource allocation puts the pressure on young people to create and allocate resources. In new three-generation families, however, the focus is shifted to the offspring and the grandchildren. The order for the distribution of family resources is, first, the grandchildren, followed by the offspring, the parents, and, finally, the parents of the parents. The composition of the new three-generation family shows that the nuclear family of the offspring—which incorporates the parents' family but excludes the elderly—is the main component. Parents are resource providers for the offspring's family, not claimants. In terms of urbanization, many migrant workers buy a house and settle in the city mainly for their children's education.

### **The Functions and Effects of New Three-Generation Families**

As a new form of family shaped by population migration and urbanization, new three-generation families have become important subject of interest and action, which will surely have an

important impact on rural society, families and individuals, both positive and negative.

### ***Promoting the Development of Peasant Families***

Offspring believe it is not necessary to divide from the parents' household and they also are not willing to do this, because "no division in form" helps to reduce their burden and to rationally allocate resources to promote the family's development. Therefore, the forming of new three-generation families indicates the nature of the purpose and function of such families. In fact, new three-generation families do promote the development of the offspring's families, mainly in four ways: 1) Raising the offspring's family into the rural middle-income category. As mentioned above, for a rural family to have a decent life in the village, the young couple must leave and find employment as migrant workers while the middle-aged or older parents do the farming at home. Though the wages of young people make up the bulk of the total household income, the income from farming is indispensable too. Farming at home, as mentioned earlier, entails many hidden benefits, including a pension for the elderly, which can also help defray the cost of raising the young couple's children, and so on. This can bring the offspring's family peace of mind. The combination of income from paid employment and farming can boost the total income of a peasant family into the middle-income level in rural areas. 2) Accelerating the modernization of peasant families, both materially and in family relations. Material modernization means that a new three-generation family is capable of purchasing modern objects for family life and farming. These objects include household appliances, automobiles, motorcycles, and agricultural machinery. The modernization of family relations encompasses equal rights and cooperation in a new three-generation family instead of inequality in intergenerational relations and in gender. 3) Reducing risk. When a new three-generation family has two different kinds of income, risk is reduced since the family is not putting all its eggs in

one basket. The parents can enjoy stability and security by farming, and if the offspring become unemployed in the city, they can return to their hometown for shelter or can help with the farming and avoid the fate of becoming urban vagrants. And new three-generation families have mobility in their workforce and can be configured differently according to the various family burdens in different periods so as to make household income flexible. For example, when the burden on the family is heavy, both the parents and the offspring can go out to work. After this period, the parents can return home and resume farming while the offspring remain in the city. 4) Skip-generation upbringing. As mentioned earlier, when young peasant couples migrate to urban areas to work, they may leave their children behind in the village, but the grandparents in the village are there to take care of them, and in some instances even see to it that they are educated in urban areas. This we describe as skip-generation upbringing in new three-generation families.

### ***Promoting Semi-Urbanization***

The urbanization of peasants means that they have a fixed residence in the city, a stable income, and reliable social security. However, it is impossible for most peasants to achieve these in a short time and it is even less likely that all family members will become urbanized at the same time. Instead, what one sees is semi-urbanization. This phenomenon can take several forms. One is that some family members become urbanized while others continue to live in the countryside. The second is that the offspring become urbanized while their parents remain in the village. The third is that the offspring work as migrant laborers when they are young but become urbanized after middle age. The fourth is “relay-based urbanization.” Here urbanization occurs first among the grandchildren (the third generation), by virtue of being educated urban areas, followed by the urbanization of the offspring (the second generation), and finally the grandparents (the first generation). New three-generation families, for the reasons discussed earlier, are able to play an

important role in promoting this sort of peasant semi-urbanization. These kinds of families have income from two different types of sources, which allows the offspring to become urbanized while their parents remain in the village and farms. Even if they cannot afford an apartment in the city, they can get the grandchildren urbanized first by renting a room. The offspring also get assistance from the parents for buying a house in the city, thus establishing a base for urbanization. Finally, if peasant migrants are doing well, they can bring their parents to the city, and thus urbanize the whole family.

### ***Providing a High-Quality Workforce***

A very important feature of new three-generation families is the full and rational deployment of family labor in order to participate in the competition in the village and urbanization. To accomplish these two tasks, it is necessary to deploy the labor power of two generations, first and foremost the offspring's. The offspring are the mainstay of the family income's and urbanization. Since they can provide the sort of labor that is in demand in cities, these young peasants can be found in all walks of life and in various fields of work: they include skilled workers and general workers as well as managers and service personnel. Instead of seeing employment as a stable job or a career, they take it as a means of making money, and they do their best to maximize their income. Therefore, they are not critical of the conditions, work hours, or types of work. They are eager to work overtime, because of the extra money they can earn. Migrant workers do not shun some types of work that have certain risks as long as they pay well. The parents' labor power is effective for farming and for informal employment in urban and rural areas. These middle-aged or old farmers are not only experts in farming, but more importantly, they have the time and energy to cultivate their crops intensively, with the result that the harvests are high in yield, safe, and secure (Yang, 2016). In terms of informal employment in both urban and rural areas, they

mainly serve as watchmen, cleaners, nannies, and construction workers, providing good and cheap services. In short, in new three-generation families, there is no need for anyone to be idle. These people can and are willing to work hard, dare to risk their lives and are smart, creating enormous wealth for Chinese society and making a great contribution to China's development.

### ***Increasing Pressure on the Middle-aged and the Elderly in Crisis***

Since the parents in new three-generation families are generally middle-aged, their own parents may also be found in some of these families. The middle-aged members of new three-generation families are under tremendous pressure, but the situation for the elderly is even worse since they may be excluded from the household. As discussed earlier, the pressure on the middle-aged comes in part from the competition over prestige in the village. To achieve a constantly rising standard of living and consumption in the villages, they have to work very hard and live a frugal life. The more intense the competition in village, the more pressure on them. There is also pressure on the developing and urbanizing families of the offspring. The parents need to continually do their best to bring resources and labor into these families. The more children they have, the greater the pressure. In some rural areas, there is even a saying: "Crying over having two sons." The greater the pressure on the offspring's families, the greater the likelihood that this pressure will be passed onto the parents. To alleviate these pressures, the parents must mobilize and even exploit their own labor.

As for the elderly, there are four sources of the crisis they face. The first is that resource allocation in new three-generation families is downward, which results in the elderly receiving the fewest resources. The second is that the middle-aged people are under such tremendous pressure that they are too busy to be much concerned about the elderly. The third is while new "three-generation families" are very good at integrating labor, this is the result of instrumental

rationality. The elderly are judged from the perspective of whether they are “useful” or “useless.” Once they cannot create value, they will be disdained by their children. The fourth is that the elderly are fully aware of the pressure on their children. They want to lessen that burden and do not want to become a burden themselves. For these reasons, the material and spiritual life of the elderly is certainly not good. Abnormal deaths among the elderly have increased. Some die of illness, some of starvation, and some, depressed and alone, of suicide.

### ***Intensifying Village Competition and Differentiation among Peasants***

The new type of three-generation family constitutes a powerful unit of competition. The goal of a family in the competition over prestige in the village is not to live worse or better than others. In the process of mobilizing resources and labor power to participate in the competition, all families are in effect continuously raising the bar in the village competition, making the village a site of increasingly fierce competition, but also exacerbating the differentiation among peasant families. This differentiation involves both economic differentiation and social differentiation. Economic differentiation mainly refers to the differences in family income. In the villages of central and western China, labor is a family’s most important resource, and hence the ability of a family to mobilize labor directly affects its income. In the coastal rural areas of southeast China, household resources mainly consist of market, political, and social relations. The extent of these resources determines the amount of wealth of a household. In short, differences in resources and the mobilization of labor lead to differences in peasant incomes. This will change the rural social structure, which originally tended to be marked by equality, and gradually produce economic differentiation. Differentiation of social relations refers to the disintegration of the bloodline and the loss of the feeling of belonging to an in-group. In the past, a clan, a big family, or a village was a community that could act in concert and curb free riding. However, when peasants’ core

identity shifts to new three-generation families, social relations in the village beyond that become competitive. The fiercer the competition in the village, the closer members of new three-generation families will be, and the more they will view other families as competitors rather than sources of mutual aid and partners. Therefore, it is difficult for new three-generation families to act together in the common interest of the village. Accordingly, the greater the differentiation in peasants' economic and social relations, the more violent the competition among them will be, resulting in further differentiation.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

New three-generation families constitute a new type shaped by the interaction among population mobility, urbanization, rural society, and family practice. These families first appeared after the year 2000 and gradually became common among the Post-1980 and Post-1990 generations. New three-generation families are different from both nuclear families and extended families as well as traditional three-generation families, but they do have some things in common. For example, the accounting units of the offspring's families are independent from each other and from the parents', which is similar to nuclear families. However, there is no household division by which the families of the offspring ritually leave the parents' household, but instead they live, or at least eat, together, which is similar to extended families. The offspring's household is closely related to their parents' household, but the two are independent from each other, which is similar to traditional three-generation families. The new three-generation family is a unique type with its own structure, features, and functions. As long as the migration of rural population and urbanization persist, these families will be reproduced. The appearance of new three-generation families strongly refutes the claim that Chinese rural families will completely become nuclear

families after industrialization, showing that the continuation and vicissitudes of rural families have their own unique cultural foundation, including collectivism, parental responsibility, and reciprocity within the family.

Three mechanisms involving new three-generation families are worthy of attention. The first is the mechanism of village competition. Competition among peasants shapes the way families develop and prompts population outflow and urbanization. The worse a family's financial situation, the more pressure the family members feel. The second is the mechanism of "household division in form only." The offspring pass on the pressure of competition to their parents through this mechanism. The more pressure on the offspring, the more on the parents. The third is the life-task mechanism. Parents participate in the competition and the urbanization of the offspring's families in the belief that they are accomplishing their life tasks, which include easing the pressure and reducing the burden on the offspring.

New three-generation families help peasant families cope with the problems and pressures brought by village competition, population flow, and urbanization, and promote the development of peasant families and social progress. The formation of new three-generation families and the practice of their family relations reflect both value rationality, such as intergenerational responsibilities and affect, and instrumental rationality, such as maximizing the mobilization and utilization of family resources and labor. This is very positive in terms of functional and social effects. However, in the rural areas of China's central and western regions, because resources such as markets and social relations are limited, labor has become the most important resource for families participating in village competition and urbanization. Therefore, the family's labor power may be treated and used as a tool, obscuring the value side of intergenerational relations. Overuse or exploitation of middle-aged labor power is the natural result of instrumental

rationality. Instrumental rationality also dominates the way families deal with problems of the elderly. As a result, the elderly have no dignity in new three-generation families and their living space has been narrowed.

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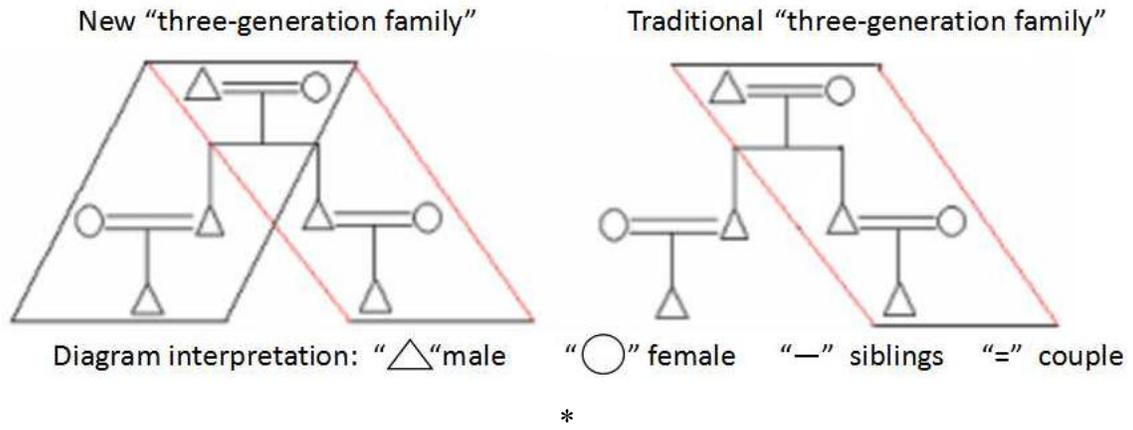


Figure 1. New three-generation families and traditional three-generation families compared