

Old Age in Ch'ing Society

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This paper attempts to present a preliminary study on institutional aspects regarding old age during the Ch'ing period (1644-1911), the last dynasty in imperial China. The ideas of giving pensions to the aged (*yang-lao* 養老) and respecting the aged (*ching-lao* 敬老) are deeply rooted in Chinese tradition. These ideas and ideal institutions can be found in Chinese classics such as *The Book of Odes* and *The Book of Rites*. Moreover, these ideas are closely related to the concept and behavior of filial piety. The tradition has been followed throughout Chinese history, although institutional arrangements modified slightly in consecutive dynasties and are certainly undergoing changes in modern times. This short paper makes no attempt to trace all these changes over time and will focus only on the last imperial period. Discussion below will begin with a sketch of the elderly from a demographic point of view. Regulations of pensioning and practices of complimenting the elderly will then be discussed based on materials gathered from official records.

I. Demographic Profiles of the Elderly

There are no systematic statistics of population with breakdown by age groups during the Ch'ing period. Thus, the proportion of elderly can be guessed only with fragment and partial data.

1.1 A Very Rough Estimation

In 1713, Emperor K'ang-hsi 康熙 (born 1654, reigned 1662-1722) ordered an investigation all over the country for the number of people aged over 65 years and invited them to attend a banquet on the occasion of celebrating his sixtieth birthday.¹ Transportation was provided to those who could not afford to come from far away to Peking. The number of old men who were able to attend the banquet is shown in Table 1. Because it is not clear how many invited old men did not attend the banquet,

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¹ The traditional Chinese way of counting age is to take everyone as one year old after he or she was born, and two years old after surviving the first new-year day. This paper quotes Chinese age directly from records without converting into western standards.

it is hard to ascertain that the statistics shown in Table 1 are good representations of the age composition of old men in 1713. It is also not clear to what extent that these old men were represented geographically. It is indeed rather difficult to use this set of data for meaningful demographic analysis, however, it reveals that seventy-year olds were not so rare, but eight-year olds were indeed much rarer. Moreover, it seems that the proportion of those aged over 80 was larger among Han Chinese than among Banner-men (including Manchu, Mongol and Han Banners).

Table 1: The Number of Old Men Attending the 1713 Palace Banquet

Age Groups	Han Officials and Commoners		Banner Officials and Commoners	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
65-69	1,864	43.54	1,012	38.85
70-79	1,823	43.00	1,394	53.51
80-89	538	12.68	192	7.37
90+	33	0.78	7	0.27
Total	4,240	100.00	2,605	100.00

Source: *Ch'ing-ch'ao wen-hsien t'ung-k'ao* 清朝文獻通考, 76/5555-5556.

In 1726, an edict of Emperor Yung-cheng 雍正 (born 1678, reigned 1723-1735) stated that according to the Board of Revenue, there were 1,421,625 men and women aged over 70 in the country. To pay respects to these old people, an amount of silk cloth valued more than 890,000 taels of silver and rice more than 165,000 *shih* 石 (1 *shih* = 100 liters) was given to them. The emperor noticed that the above number of the elderly included only commoners and no officials, gentries, merchants, Buddhist monks and Taoist priests. He continued to say that in ancient times, to be seventy years old was regarded as rare and thus very precious and honorable. However, now there were many old people as a result of nourishment under the benevolent rule of his father, Emperor K'ang-hsi, for more than sixty years. He then reiterated the importance of promoting agriculture and exhorting frugality as basic principles for the people to make a livelihood under the pressure of an increasing population.²

According to Emperor Yung-cheng, the number of old people receiving official pensions was enormous. His impression was, however, based on an absolute term. When the number 1,421,625 is compared with a total population estimated at 127,125,000 in 1726,³ we derive 1.12 per cent for commoners over 70 years old. In the same year, the revenue collected was 29,546,418 taels in silver and 4,929,303 *shih* in rice, bean and wheat, aside from taxes on tea, salt and other items.⁴ Thus, the silver

² *Ch'in-ting ts-ch'ing hui-tien shih-li* 欽定大清會典事例 (hereafter, CHTSL), 397/32b-33a; *Ch'ing-ch'ao wen-hsien t'ung-k'ao* 清朝文獻通考 (hereafter, CWHTK), 39/5218).

³ Chao Wen-lin 趙文林 and Hsieh Shu-chun 謝淑君, *Chung-kuo jen-k'ou shih* 中國人口史 (Peking: People's Press, 1988), p. 541.

⁴ *Ta-Ch'ing Shih-tsung Hsien huang-ti shih-lu* 大清世宗憲皇帝實錄, 51/36b.

and rice provided as elderly pensions made up less than 3 per cent of the revenue. It is quite possible that the proportion of people above age 70 could be larger among officials, gentry, merchants, monks and priests than among commoners. However, this may not change the proportion of elderly to a great extent as commoners consisted of the great majority of the population.⁵ It may thus be acceptable to take 1.12 per cent as a lower estimate for the population of those aged over 70 in the early eighteenth century.

It is hard to ascertain, however, whether the percentage of the elderly changed along with population growth. Elsewhere I have analyzed vital statistics organized from 50 genealogies that recorded lineage members from about the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The findings about the characteristics of these lineage male populations may be summarized here. On average, the gross reproductive rate was 2.88 per person, the mortality rate was close to model West levels 5 to 7, the length of a generation was 32.78 years, and the intrinsic growth rate was 0.7 per cent.⁶ If we take values of a model stable population as a reference, then under West level 6 with a growth rate of 0.5 per cent, males aged over 70 years count for 1.86 per cent.⁷

In addition, estimates for the male population of 15 lineages are listed in Table 2. It is shown that, on average, the males aged over 65 accounted for 2.91 per cent when the lineage male populations reached a peak. James Lee and his colleagues had analyzed household registers for 1792-1867 regarding the Eight Banner Han Chinese at Daoyi 道義 village, Liaoning province, and found that the male mortality at age 65 and above was most likely corresponding to model North level 5. This implies that under a model stable population North level 5 with a growth rate of 0.5 per cent, the proportions of males aged over 65 and 70 are respectively 3.55 and 1.75 per cent.⁸ With these references, it seems reasonable to say that the percentage derived from the

⁵ In the first half of the nineteenth century, the number of gentry was approximately 1.1 million; including their family members, the gentry population would amount to 5.5 million, or about 1.3 per cent of the total population. There were approximately 27,000 of the gentry who entered the officialdom (20,000 civil officials and 7,000 military officers). There was also a special quota of Shen-yuan 生員 degree for salt merchants. In the Ch'ing period, there were 822 Chu-jen 舉人 and 426 Chin-shih 進士 degree holders from the salt merchant families. The average age at death of gentry was estimated as 57 or 58. See Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), pp. 82, 96-07, 116, 137-139; Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*, (New York: Science Edition, 1964), p. 83. My estimates of the lineage populations showed that for the males born between 1550 and 1750, the life expectancy at age 15 was about 35-38 years and the average age at death was about 50-53. Only 1.95 per cent of the 147,956 lineage males under observation were degree holders and some lineages even did not have any degree holder. See Liu Ts'ui-jung 劉翠溶, *Ming-Ch'ing shih-ch'i chia-tsu jen-k'ou yu she-hui ching-chi pien-ch'ien* 明清時期家族人口與社會經濟變遷, (Taipei: The Institute of Economics, Academia Sinica, 1992), pp. 38, 139, 142-144.

⁶ See Liu Ts'ui-jung, (1992), pp. 139-140, 247, 255.

⁷ See Ansley Coale and Paul Demeny, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 132.

⁸ James Lee and Cameron Campbell, *Fate and Fortune in Rural China: social organization and population behavior in Liaoning, 1774-1873*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

1726 figures reported to Emperor Yung-cheng is quite plausibly a lower estimate.

Table 2: Percentage of Males Aged over 65 in 15 Lineages

Province	Lineage	Start Year*	Peak Year*	No. of Males at Peak	Age 65+ at Peak (%)
Kiangsu	Chu	1485	1875	1,276	1.07
Chekiang	Shen	1415	1885	2,458	3.30
	Hsu	1505	1850	1,294	2.40
	Ts'ao	1355	1845	2,813	3.57
Anhwei	Chu	1300	1700	1,142	2.90
	Chao	1455	1850	1,438	2.62
	Wang	1310	1825	1,338	2.86
Kiangsi	Huang	1320	1845	965	3.58
Hupeh	Hsu	1590	1915	1,313	3.20
	Pi	1480	1855	1,445	2.54
Hunan	Wei**	1310	1910	4,231	3.98
	Li(1)	1360	1855	1,443	4.87
	Li(2)**	1320	1900	2,113	4.02
Kwangtung	Yi	1310	1870	3,498	3.23
	Mai	1425	1850	1,319	2.49
Average					2.91

* Each time point indicates the first year of a five-year period.

** Each lineage started with one person, but these two lineages started with two.

Source: Liu Ts'ui-jung, (1992), pp. 239-240, Table 6.3; Appendix G.

Some survey data of the rural Chinese population in the early twentieth century revealed that the percentage of those aged over 70 years was 1.62 (1.2 for males and 2.08 for females). Demographers have reassessed these data and concluded that traditional rural Chinese population had a stable age distribution.⁹ Before better data are available for examining changes over time, it may be reasonable to assume that the age structure of the Chinese population changed rather little before a modern demographic transition took place in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰

1.2 Examples of the Elite

Some data related to degree holders may provide us with clues to conjecture the possibility of being aged 70 and above. One set of the data concerns those provincial degree holders (Chu-jen) who were able to attend the banquet for celebrating their

⁹ George Barclay et al., "A Reassessment of the Demography of Traditional Rural China," *Population Index*, 42.4 (1976): 605-635.

¹⁰ Before a demographic transition took place in France in the mid-nineteenth century, the characteristics of the French population were found to be 'stands still'. See David G. Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime: Image and Experience in Eighteenth-Century France*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 8-9. The French case may be helpful for understanding the case of traditional Chinese population. See Paul K. C. Liu, "A Comparative Study on Fertility Transitions in China and Taiwan in Historical Perspective," paper delivered at the IUSSP Conference on Asian Population History, (Taipei, January 4-6, 1996), p. 6.

success in examination once again after sixty years. Table 3 shows the years of the banquet and the number of attendants. For instance, in 1774 only one Chu-jen was earned his degree in 1714 attended the banquet one again.

Table 3: Provincial Degree Holders Attending the Banquet Once Again after Sixty Years of Succeeding in the Examination

Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number
1774	1	1831	7	1865	1
1783	1	1834	4	1866	3
1789	2	1837	5	1870	7
1792	6	1839	6	1872	1
1795	4	1840	6	1873	1
1798	2	1846	1	1876	4
1807	3	1849	1	1878	6
1810	8	1852	2	1879	10
1813	2	1854	2	1881	2
1816	7	1858	4	1884	1
1822	5	1859	6	1885	2
1825	6	1862	2	1886	1
1828	4	1863	2	Total	138

Source: CHTSL, 362/10a-23a.

It has been estimated that in 1834 and 1851, the average age of admission to Chu-jen was approximately 31, and the life expectancy at that age was approximately 27 years. The same study showed that those who earned a Chu-jen degree at age 14-25 accounted for 19.2 per cent (263/1,371) in 1834 and 22.7 per cent (402/1,770) in 1851.¹¹ It is quite clear that only about one fifth succeeded in earning their Chu-jen degree at a very young age. If they survived sixty years after earning the degree they would be aged 74-85. The data of these two classes provide some ideas about how difficult it was to become a Chu-jen below age 25, not to say survive sixty years after earning the degree.

As expected, the numbers listed in Table 3 are very small and fluctuate in a narrow range. In the Ch'ing dynasty, the quota of provincial graduates was set according to literary spirit, population, and the quota of ting (adult male) tax of each province; it changed from time to time. For instance, the total quota was 1,428 in 1645; 736 in 1660; 988 in 1696; 1,223 in 1711; 1,143 in 1744; 1,493 in 1820; 1,566 in 1862; and 1,505 in 1870.¹² With these eight classes, an average of 1,260 can be derived. The provincial examination was normally held one year before the metropolitan one. Both provincial and metropolitan examinations took place once every three years with some special classes held by imperial grace in the interim.

¹¹ Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry*.

¹² Wang Te-chao 王德昭, *Ch'ing-tai k'o-chu chih-lu yen-chiu* 清代科舉制度研究 (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982), p. 61, p. 63.

Altogether 112 classes graduated in the Ch'ing period.¹³ A very rough estimate of the total number of provincial graduates could be 141,120 (1,260 x 112). Thus, Table 3 indicates that only 38 classes had produced a total of 138 Chu- jen degree holders who were able to attend the banquet once again. The chance for each individual Chu- jen was only 0.098 per cent (138/141120).

Another set of data concerns those metropolitan degree holders (Chin-shih) who were able to attend the banquet once again after sixty years. Here, some estimates concerning demographic characteristics of chin-shih can also be given for a reference. On average, the age of admission to Chin-shih was approximately 36 in 1835, 34 in 1868, and 33 in 1894; life expectancy at the age of admission was approximately 22 years. Those who earned a chin-shih degree at age 16-25 accounted for 7.2 per cent (20/279) in 1835, 14.6 per cent (33/227) in 1868, and 11 per cent (27/245) in 1894.¹⁴ Throughout the Ch'ing period, the total number of Chin-shih was estimated for 26,391 persons; 26,474 persons; or 27,446 persons.¹⁵ Of the 112 classes, only 17 had produced 18 Chin-shih who were able to rejoin the banquet; they were all nearly ninety years old or over.¹⁶ In other words, only 0.068 per cent (18/26391) of metropolitan degree holders had this chance of rejoining the banquet.

A third set of data is the number of aged provincial graduates who participated in metropolitan examinations and thus were bestowed with honorary titles. The practice of bestowing honorary titles on the aged metropolitan candidates began in 1736. In that year, Emperor Ch'ien-lung 乾隆 (1711-1799, reigned 1736-1795) noticed that there were more than forty metropolitan candidates aged over 70. The Emperor ordered to recheck their papers and thus, five of them were selected as qualified for the metropolitan degree. As for the rest, appropriate honorary titles were bestowed on them. The Emperor added that his intention was to pay respect to these aged scholars and his grace of conferring upon some of them a degree should not set a precedent in misguiding future candidates to have improper incentives for participating in the examination.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the practice of bestowing honorary titles to the aged candidates carried on. Table 4 shows the number of the cases reported during 1745-1886.

Before extracting any meaningful information from Table 4, it may be necessary to note briefly the nature of these numbers. According to the practice, those who already received a title were not bestowed again with the same title at the same age

¹³ Shang Yen-liu 商衍鑾, *Ch'ing-tai k'o-chu k'ao-shih shu-lu* 清代科舉考試述錄 (Peking: San-lien Bookstore, 1958), pp. 97-100, 148-152.

¹⁴ Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁵ See respectively, Shang Yen-liu (1958), p. 153; Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*, p. 189; and Wang Te-chao (1982), p. 65.

¹⁶ CHTSL, 362/23a-25b.

¹⁷ CHTSL, 353/3a-b.

group, thus, there is no double counting. Systematic statistics concerning the number of Chu- jen who participated in metropolitan examinations are not available. Some studies on the subject have tried to estimate a number and suggested that, on the average, including new and old candidates, there could have been 7,000-8,000 participants in the metropolitan examination each time.¹⁸ With these considerations in mind, we may compare the number listed for year in Table 4 with a more or less constant number of participants. In this way, it is quite apparent that, in terms of ratio, there is an increasing trend reaching a peak in 1809 before it turns downward.

Table 4: Metropolitan Candidates Aged over 70*

Year	Age				Total	Year	Age				Total
	70	80	90	100			70	80	90	100	
1745	3	3	0	0	6	1832	--	7	9	1	17
1752	10	4	0	0	14	1835	--	1	13	0	14
1754	4a	0	0	0	4	1836	--	2	8	0	10
1761	18	7	0	0	25	1838	--	3	9	0	12
1771	16	18b	0	1	35	1841	--	2	12	1	15
1778	5	2	0	1	8	1844	--	3	14	1	18
1780	25	5	0	0	30	1845	--	3	9	0	12
1784	5	20	1	0	26	1847	--	1	18	0	19
1790	23	73	4	0	100	1850	--	5	20	0	25
1793	12	52	0	0	64	1852	--	4	10	1	15
1796	14	104	0	3	121	1853	--	2	6	0	8
1799	24	95	0	3	122	1856	--	1	10	0	11
1802	62	110	5	1	178	1859	--	4	14	1	19
1805	101	148	9	1	259	1860	--	5	11	0	16
1808	119	99	9	2	229	1862	--	0	1	0	1
1809	235	117	12	8	372	1863	--	0	4	1	5
1811	203	68	17	0	288	1865	--	2	32	2	36
1814	55	4	0	0	59	1868	--	2	17	2	21
1817	4	1	0	0	5	1871	--	4	57	2	63
1819	13	1	0	0	17	1874	--	4	61	1	66
1820c	--	4	3	0	7	1876	--	0	38	2	40
1822	--	4	2	0	6	1877	--	4	33	0	37
1823	--	4	1	0	5	1880	--	2	26	1	29
1826	--	1	7	1	9	1883	--	5	27	0	32
1829	--	3	8	0	11	1886	--	4	26	2	32

* This list is incomplete as there is no number for years 1787, 1789, 1795, and 1801.

a Exclude 2 bestowed in 1752.

b Include 2 aged 70+ in 1761.

c From this year on, only those aged over 80 were bestowed.

Source: CHTSL, chuan 354-356.

The large number of aged metropolitan candidates in 1809 was well noticed by Emperor Chia-ch'ing 嘉慶 (born 1760, reigned 1796-1820). In an edit the Emperor

¹⁸ Wang Te-chao (1982), p. 65.

commented on this matter and said that the practice of bestowing an honorary title should not be too loose. He decreed that those who had already received an honorary title of Han-lin Academy (the title bestowed to those aged over 80) should not participate again in the examination.¹⁹ In 1836, Emperor Tao-kuang 道光 (born 1782, reigned 1821-1850) repeated the same decree.²⁰ Moreover, in 1820 a revision was made on the category of bestowing titles and thus, the title originally bestowed on the age group of 70 was given to those people 80 years old, and the Han-lin Academy was limited to those people those aged over 90.²¹

As shown in Table 4, from 1820 onwards, the numbers were much smaller than before and most of them concentrated at age group 90. This phenomenon is hard to explain demographically. One reason for this concentration may be the practice of rounding off the number of years, so that those aged nearly 90 were taken for that age in order to obtain the more prestigious title. An example may be given here to show the possibility of this practice. In 1770, a certain Li Wei 李煒, aged 93, participated in the provincial examination in Kiangsi. He was conferred a degree of Chu-jen after he finished all three sessions of the examination. In the next year when he completed the examination in Peking he was bestowed a title of Tutor in the Imperial Academy, a prestigious honor for those aged over 100.²²

1.3 Centenarian and the Five-generation Family

In Ch'ing society, people 100 years old and over were highly complimented by the ruler. Moreover, those who were able to have members of five generations living together in the family were also very much honored. Regulations regarding imperial gifts bestowed on these people will be discussed later. Here, the cases recorded in official publications are summarized in Table 5a and 5b.

Table 5a shows that during the period between 1736 and 1910, there were 120 (=44+29+26+21) persons reported as centenarians. Of them, 70 were males and 50 females. That the female had a smaller number may be because of underreporting about this sex in the traditional society. It is notable however that sometimes there were more females than males. For instance, of the nine cases reported in 1790 as centenarian cum five-generation family, five were females; of the eight cases reported in 1910, seven were females.²³ When the data are grouped into two broad periods, it is found that for both the cases of centenarian and five-generation family, there were

¹⁹ CHTSL, 355/13b-14a.

²⁰ CHTSL, 356/7a.

²¹ CHTSL, 355/20b.

²² CWHTK, 76/5561.

²³ See respectively, CHTSL 405/14a-21b and *Ch'ing-ch'ao hsu wen-hsien t'ung-k'ao* 清朝續文獻通考 (hereafter, CHWHTK), 99/8586.

more males in 1736-1799, but the opposite was true in 1800-1910. With information related to localities shown in Table 5b, it is notable that almost all provinces had reported cases of centenarian, but not five-generation families. The total number show that Kwangtung (14), Szechwan (12), and Shantung (9) provinces ranked at the top. A simple dichotomy of social status reveals that there were more commoners than non-commoners; and among non-commoners, there were more females than males.

Table 5a: The Cases of Centenarian and Five-generation Family
(Summarized by period, sex and age)

Period	Centenarian		Five-generation Family		
			Age above 100		Age below 100
	Male	Female	Male	Female	All*
1736-1799	29	12	15	6	269
1800-1910	15	17	11	15	42
Total	44	29	26**	21**	311***

* There were too many cases with no information about sex to make a distinction.

** Of the 47 persons there were 3 couples, thus the number of families was 44.

*** Of the 311 persons there was 1 couple, thus the number of families was 310.

Source: CHTSL, 405/1b032b; CHWHTK, 99/8584-8587.

Table 5b: The Cases of Centenarian and Five-generation Family
(Summarized by province, status and sex)

Province	Centenarian				Five-generation Family				Total
	Commoner		Non-commoner		Commoner		Non-commoner		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Manchuria	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	1	7
7Mongolia	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Chihli	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	0	6
Shantung	5	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	9
Honan	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	3
Shansi	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Shensi	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Kansu	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Kiangsu	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Chekiang	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Anhwei	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
Kiangsi	0	0	1	0	2	2	0	0	5
Hupei	3	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	7
Hunan	1	0	0	0	2	4	0	0	7
Fukian	0	2	1	0	1	2	0	0	6
Kwangtung	5	4	1	0	1	2	0	1	14
Kwangsi	3	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Kwuichow	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	4
Szechwan	2	3	0	1	4	2	0	0	12
Yunnan	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Unknown	2	0	0	0	7	1	0	0	10
Total	37	23	7	6	26	17	0	4	120

Source: See Table 5a.

During the same period of 175 years, 358 persons (26+21+311, including 4 couples, thus, 354 families) were reported as having five generations living together. Of these families, 273 were reported during 1785-1790, reflecting an enthusiasm called forth by Emperor Ch'ien-lung who ordered to investigate such cases because a great-grandson was born to him in 1784. Moreover, only 47 persons (including 3 couples) were centenarian cum five-generation family. These cases demonstrate that five-generation families did exist and were very much praised in traditional Chinese society.

In a previous study, I analyzed five sets of genealogical data by tracing vital dates of male family members throughout ten generations and found that no five-generation family was formed in these lineages. Instead, 19 four-generation families were found; on average, the overlapping years between the first and the fourth generations were 7.47, and the average age at death was 80.95 for the first generation.²⁴ These findings from genealogical data may be helpful in understanding the fact that a five-generation family could not last very long after it was formed because of demographic constraints, unless the eldest of the family lived to be 100 years old.

In short, fragment data presented above tend to reveal that people aged over 70 did not make up a large proportion in the population of Ch'ing society.

II. Institutional Aspects Concerning Old Age

In Ch'ing statutes there are certain regulations concerning securities of old age. These can be seen from several aspects, such as tax exemption, punishment mitigation, evaluation of officials and their retirement, imperial gifts, as well as ceremonial occasions.

2.1 Tax Exemption

According to Ch'ing statutes, adult males aged 16 to 60 were subjected to labor services in terms of a ting 丁 (adult male) tax. This regulation inferred that age 60 was a benchmark of retirement for commoners. It was also regulated that each civilian and soldier aged 70 and above could have one adult son exempted from labor services.²⁵ This implies that a government pension was given to those aged 70 and above in terms of exempting one adult son from labor services. In 1712, Emperor K'ang-hsi decreed to exempt forever the ting tax from those newly-becoming adults

²⁴ Liu Ts'ui-jung, "Demographic Constraint and Family Structure in Traditional Chinese Lineage, ca. 1200-1900," in Steven Harrell (ed.), *Chinese Historical Microdemography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 121-140.

²⁵ See *Ch'ing-ch'ao t'ung-tien* 清朝通典 (hereafter CTT), 9/2069; *Ch'ing-ch'ao t'ung-chih* 清朝通志 (hereafter CTC), 85/7251; CWHTK, 19/5024, 19/5072.

after 1711. From then on, the quota of ting tax was fixed permanently. Moreover, from 1716 to 1745, the quota of ting tax was gradually allotted into a land tax in every province. Thus, there emerged a category of ti-ting 地丁 tax, which was simply known as land tax and its burden was comparatively low.²⁶ Concerning the tax burden, the poll tax was actually very little and the land tax was rather light under Ch'ing rule. This was a great advantage that the people of many previous dynasties did not enjoy.

In addition to the above regulations concerning tax exemption and old age pension, a rule of pensioning the elderly (*yu-lao-chih-ling* 優老之令) was established in 1723.²⁷ It is quite possible that this rule could be based on some previous practices, although no earlier rule was found on record. In that year, Emperor Yung-cheng noted in an edict that each county usually spent several thousand taels of silver in pensioning the elderly. However, local officials and clerks often embezzled the money; what the old people actually obtained was no more than one tenth. He ordered that governors and governor-generals to look carefully into the situation in their jurisdictions to prevent any extortion.²⁸ It seems that the number of elderly receiving pensions in 1726, as mentioned above, was a result of carrying out this rule rigorously. However, there are no more systematic reports on pensioning the elderly in published records. What is mostly found are reports related to imperial gifts bestowed on the elderly and this will be discussed later.

2.2 Punishment Mitigation

In Ch'ing criminal law, there were several items related to mitigation of punishment for the old (and the young). Here it is suffice to mention a few regulations as an illustration. For instance, for the criminal aged above 70 (below 15), it was forbidden to elicit evidence by flogging. For the criminal who committed a capital punishment at age above 80 (below 10), a memorial should be sent to the throne. For people who aged above 90 (below 7), no punishment could be applied to them even if they committed a capital crime.²⁹ In the case in which a family committed a crime together, only the eldest would be punished. If the eldest in the family was over 80 years old, or he was ill seriously, then the next eldest would be punished. The

²⁶ For the changes in ting tax and land tax burden in Ch'ing period see, Ping-ti Ho, *Studies on the Population of China, 1368-1953* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 25; Liu Ts'ui-jung, *Shun-chih K'ang-hsi nien-chien te ts'ai-cheng p'ing-heng wen-ti* 順治康熙年間的財政平衡問題 (Taipei: Chia-hsin Cultural Foundation, 1969), pp. 22-26; Yeh-chien Wang, *Land Taxation in Imperial China, 1750-1911* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 10-131-132; Ts'ui-jung Liu and John C. H. Fei, "An Analysis of the Land Tax Burden in China, 1650-1865," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 32. No. 2 (1977), pp. 121-140.

²⁷ CWHTK, 39/5218.

²⁸ CWHTK, 76/5556.

²⁹ See *Ch'in-ting ta-ch'ing hui-tien* 欽定大清會典 (hereafter CHT), 53/18a-b.

youngest would be punished only when there was no longer an eldest that existed in the family.³⁰

In regard to redeemable punishments, regulations were published in 1646. One regulation stated that the punishment of banishment for those aged above 70 (below 15) was redeemable by money.³¹ Another regulation stated that for the criminal condemned to penal servitude, if one became 70 years old within the appointment period, the punishment was redeemable.³² In 1736, it was regulated that if the wife of a banished criminal was too old or sick to go along, she was allowed not to be banished together with her husband.³³ In 1740, it was added that when a capital punishment was mitigated to banishment, it was allowable for the criminal aged above 70 (below 15) to appeal for a redemption.³⁴

As for capital punishment, if one's age was above 80 (below 10) a memorial should be sent to the throne to appeal for redemption.³⁵ If a capital criminal's grandfather or father was over 70 years old and there was no other adult male in his family, a memorial could be sent to the throne to retain his life. This was meant for him to take care of the aging parents.³⁶ Emperor Yung-cheng modified this regulation in 1723. He decreed that it was also required to report whether or not there were aging parents and other adult males in the injured family. Otherwise, to spare the life of the criminal could be rather unfair to the injured family. In 1728, the regulation was further tightened. If a criminal was sentenced to death by beheading or by strangling and his parents were not yet 70 years old, the rule of retaining his life was not applicable.³⁷

In short, there were special treatments for the aged criminals. Moreover, the rule of retaining the life of the criminal who was the only son and committed a capital crime reflects the importance of the family as a unit of taking care of the aged parents.

2.3 Evaluation of Officials and Their Retirement

The evaluation of officials in the Ch'ing period was, in general, taken once every three years in Peking for court officials and in the provinces for local officials. There were four rules and six standards for evaluating the merits of officials in these two groups, and 'age' was a common factor of consideration in the two sets of rules. With merits being assessed, officials eligible for a presentation at court were divided

³⁰ CTC, 76/7206.

³¹ CTT, 89/2701.

³² CHT, 56/11b.

³³ CTT, 87/2638.

³⁴ CWHTK, 197/6731.

³⁵ CTT, 89/2701; CHT, 56/11b; CWHTK, 197/6727-6728.

³⁶ CHT, 56/12b-13a.

³⁷ CTT, 81/2617; CWHTK, 197/6614, 6618.

into groups with age 65 taken as one criterion aside from the grades of merit.³⁸

As for the evaluation of military officials, it was taken once every five years. They were evaluated according to four rules and eight standards. Similarly, 'age' was a common factor in these evaluations.³⁹ In practice, the standard of age could be rather flexible. For instance, in 1728 a deputy captain named Liang Yu was reported as being 68 years old and offended the law of eight standards, but he was still very energetic and his integrity was held firmly. In an edict Emperor Yung-cheng commended that Liang should be retained at his position as it was rather hard to get one who was old but still very skillful for his task.⁴⁰ This flexible attitude towards age was usually taken by Ch'ing rulers as will be mentioned again below.

In regard to retirement, it is stated succinctly in Ch'ing statutes: "When an official is old and petitions to retire; then let him retire."⁴¹ The exact age for the 'old' is left undefined in the above regulation. This can be considered from various aspects. First, *The Book of Rites* (chapter 1) suggested that it was appropriate for an official to retire at age 70. Thus, it is quite possible that age 70 was also well taken as a benchmark of retirement by Ch'ing officials as they were well versed in the classics. Second, there is flexibility in practice for the emperor to permit an official's petition for retirement according to merit and not just the age. This idea was clearly expressed by Emperor Ch'ien-lung in 1745. In an edict concerning the selection of educational officials, the Emperor said that he had ordered in the year before to let those aged over 70 to retire. He commented that there were quite a number of decrepit, ordinary, and careless scholars occupying positions of education. However, he also thought that whether or not one was still useful for his position should not be judged merely by his age. He asked, for example, if one was aged above 70 but still very energetic, should he not be selected? If one was not yet 70 years old but sick and weak, should he be tolerated to keep his position? Finally, he concluded that one should be selected according to his capabilities and not just his age. He then decreed that this edict should be published in all provinces and let governors in charge of making the selection understand his intention of getting the right people.⁴²

In order to give some evidences for illustration, the data for the retired grand secretary (the highest position in Ch'ing officialdom) are summarized in Table 6. In the Ch'ing period, there were altogether 204 grand secretaries and the ending of their careers was quite different. Among them, 71 died in incumbency, 80 retired or resigned because of age or health, and 53 were degraded, dismissed, punished to death,

³⁸ CHT, 11/1a, 8b-14b.

³⁹ CTT, 76/2585.

⁴⁰ CTC, 74/7193.

⁴¹ CHT, 11/15a.

⁴² CHTSL, 369/17b-18b.

or survived after the fall the dynasty.

Table 6: Age Distribution of Retired Grand Secretaries

Age	Born 1593-1830			Born 1593-1696			Born 1701-1830		
	Entry	Retire	Death	Entry	Retire	Death	Entry	Retire	Death
Below 50	5	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0
50-59	12	8	3	8	7	3	4	1	0
60-69	21	10	4	13	7	3	8	3	1
70-79	9	24	21	3	12	13	6	12	8
80-89	1	6	18	0	3	10	1	3	8
90+	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Total	48	48	48	29	29	29	19	19	19
Ave. Age	61.75	70.75	76.65	58.59	68.10	74.48	66.58	74.79	79.95
Standard Deviation	9.18	8.97	8.80	8.92	9.33	8.95	7.26	6.57	7.42
Average Years in Retirement		5.90			6.38			5.16	

Source: Chao Erh-sun 趙爾巽 et al., *Ch'ing-shih-kao* 清史稿 (Taipei: Hsin-wen-feng Publisher, 1981), Tables 14-15, and related biographies; also see biographies in Arthur W. Hummel, (ed.), *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644-1912)*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943).

For deriving the data of Table 6, only 48 cases with available years of birth, death, entry and retirement are taken into consideration. These grand secretaries were born between 1593 and 1830. On the average, they were appointed at age 61.75 and retired at age 70.75. After retirement, they lived 5.90 years and died at age 76.85.⁴³ The observation can also be done by dividing into two groups with the year 1700 as a division. The results seem to suggest that the first group entered, retired and died at an age slightly less than the second group, but the latter lived slightly fewer years after retirement. More data concerning other positions in Ch'ing officialdom should be investigated in the future to have a better understanding on this subject.

In addition to retiring according to the norm when one was old, an official could also petition to resign in order to take care of his aged parents or grandparents. The age of parents or grandparents was regulated separately for the Banner and the Han officials. For the Bannerman, age 75 was for requirement. For the Han officials, the regulation was more complicated. Several conditions were acceptable. (1) One was an adopted son and his adopted parents had died, but his natal parents were alive and aged over 80. (2) One's parents were over 70 years old and there was no other adult male in the family. (3) One had brothers but they were sick, or all in the civil services.

⁴³ For comparison, in England the highest post in the Tudor administration was Treasurer. During 1485-1558, on the average, 4 holders of this post entered at aged 53m retired at age 71 and died at age 74. See Georges Minois, *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 296-297.

(4) One's mother was old and his brothers were of a different mother. Additional conditions were also acceptable for special considerations, such as one could not manage to have his parents living together at his residence of office. These included (1) parents who were over 60 years old, (2) uncles and brothers who were all sick, and (3) there was no other adult male at home. However, when the conditions were not in accordance with the regulations, county magistrates and higher officials could make a petition.⁴⁴ In 1785, a decree commanded officials to apply themselves for retirement when one was the only son and whose parents were over 70 years old and living at their native place.⁴⁵

When one retired with the rank he kept, the Board of Revenue based on his age, merit and voluntaries assessed his payment after retirement. The throne then made the final decision. There were four categories of payment: (1) full amount of the salary, (2) half amount of the salary, (3) one-fourth of the salary, and (4) no salary. Details were regulated for officials and officers of different ranks; and it is not necessary to go into details here.⁴⁶

2.4 Imperial Gifts

Ch'ing official publications recorded a lot of regulations and practices concerning special gifts bestowed on the old people by the throne. These bestowments can be classified into three categories. The first category was regulations concerning gifts bestowed on the occasion of imperial travels. For example, Emperor Ch'ien-lung was well known for giving generously whenever he traveled. He usually gave special gifts to the aged people who gathered along the route to welcome him. In addition, those residents aged over 70 in the counties located along the way of imperial travels also received gifts generally.⁴⁷

The second category was regulations regarding imperial gifts for compliments of centenarians. As early as 1670, it was regulated to reward the official's widow who was 100 years old with a tablet and 30 taels of silver to build an honorary arch. In 1730, a regulation was set up to compliment centenarians among the common man with a tablet and 30 taels of silver for building an arch. At the same time, the 1670 rule was made applicable generally to the common woman. In 1726, Emperor Yung-cheng decided to reward a man who was reported to be 118 years old with 90 taels of silver instead of 30. As a consequence, it was regulated to double the amount of silver for those aged 110, triple for those aged 120, and to add accordingly as the

⁴⁴ CHT, 11/17a-b.

⁴⁵ CTC, 74/7195.

⁴⁶ *Hu-pu tse-li* 戶部則例 (hereafter HPTL, 1865 edition), (Taipei: Ch'eng-wen Publisher, 1968), 73/4545-4556.

⁴⁷ CWHTK, 76/5558-5564; CHTSL, 105/2b..

age increased. In 1809, it was regulated to reward 40 taels of silver and one roll of satin to those officials of the third rank and above, if their parents or wives were centenarians. This was to show a distinction from commoners.⁴⁸

The third category was regulations related to compliments given to those who were able to have five generations living together in one family. In 1740 the first case was reported concerning a widow belonging to Plain Yellow Banner. She was rewarded 60 taels of silver and two tablets; the one for being a widow and centenarian and the other for living in a five-generation family. In 1784, a great-great-grandson was born to the 74-year old Emperor Ch'ien-lung. He was very happy to witness personally a family with five generations coexisting. He therefore ordered governors and governor-generals of the provinces to investigate, and they reported altogether 192 cases in the next year. Four of these families had their elders aged over 100. The emperor composed poems to compliment these four cases and endorsed tablets with his own calligraphy.⁴⁹

An extension of complimenting a five-generation family was to bestow a gift on those who had been able to see personally seven generations of their family members in their lifetime. Emperor Ch'ien-lung was born when his grandfather, Emperor K'ang-hsi, was in reign and now he himself had become a great-great-grandfather. He considered that being able to see seven generations in one's lifetime was a rare event, therefore, he ordered in 1790 the commandants of Eight Banners and the governors and governor-generals to investigate in their jurisdictions and submit a memorial for the cases they found. Thus, seven cases were reported in 1792. Afterwards, eleven cases were reported during 1801-1883.⁵⁰

Apparently, the above three categories tend to demonstrate the grace of the imperial ruler in complimenting seniority rather than to establish a welfare system for supporting the aged. As shown in Table 5a, there were reported between 1736 and 1910 altogether 73 centenarians, 47 centenarians cum five-generation families, and 311 aged-below 100 but five-generation families. Altogether, the expenditure on complimenting these 430 people (Ch'ien-lung emperor excluded) could be calculated approximately. The amount of expenditure could be from 12,900 taels (30 x 430) to 17,200 taels (40 x 430) of silver; in addition there were 430-860 rolls (1 or 2 rolls per person) of satin. An average over 175 years makes the amount appear even smaller. In short, the expenditure on these categories of imperial gifts does not appear to cause a great burden on government revenue.

⁴⁸ CHTSL, 405/1a-b, 8b-9a.

⁴⁹ CHTSL, 405/12b; CWHTK, 14/5566.

⁵⁰ CHTSL, 405/25b-27a.

2.5 Ceremonial Occasions

There are some ceremonial occasions in which *seniores priores* is the rule of decorum. For an illustration, the palace banquet for the aged and the country wine-drinking ceremony will be discussed here.

As mentioned above, in 1713 Emperor K'ang-hsi invited 43,240 Han Chinese and 2,606 Banner-men aged over 65 to celebrate his sixtieth birthday at a palace banquet. In order to show his good intention in complimenting the elderly, the Emperor commanded his guests not to stand up at the banquet. He also had those aged over 80 supported by imperial clan's youngsters who served as waiters to come to his presence and offered them wine to drink. In addition, he invited old women aged 70 and above to have a banquet hosted by the empress dowager. The number of these female guests is not clear. It is known that entertainment was provided at different places for three age groups: (1) those aged over 90 were entertained inside the door of the palace of the empress dowager; (2) those aged over 80, at the courtyard; and (3) those aged over 70, outside the door of the palace.⁵¹ In short, even at such a gathering of the old people, seniority still counted for a lot.

The 1713 banquet was simply known as a 'banquet of the old people' (*lao-jen-hui* 老人會) although it had gathered thousands of elders on the occasion. In 1722, Emperor K'ang-hsi gave another banquet to incumbent and retired officials aged over 65 at the palace. Only 340 old officials were gathered together. This event, however, was known as a 'banquet of thousand elders' (*ch'ien-sou-yen* 千叟宴) and set a precedent for later times.⁵² The second banquet of this genre was held at the palace in 1785 by Emperor Ch'ien-lung. The number of guests is not known, but it is notable that those aged over 90 regardless of their status were allowed to have one descendant accompanying them at the banquet. High-ranking officials and officers aged over 70 were also allowed to do the same if they felt to be unsteady on their feet.⁵³ Along with this banquet, Emperor Ch'ien-lung ordered the Board of Punishment to liberate those capital criminals aged over 70 in order to extend his special grace.⁵⁴

In 1795, Emperor Ch'ien-lung decided to hold another 'banquet of thousand elders' in the beginning of the next year. The emperor was turning 86 years old and was going to resign. He considered that if those aged over 60 were invited to the banquet as before, the difference in age would be too large and this was not very suitable for the occasion. Therefore, he ordered that only those aged over 70 should be

⁵¹ CWHTK, 76/5555-5556.

⁵² CWHTK, 76/5556.

⁵³ CWHTK, 76/5565.

⁵⁴ CTT, 89/2700.

invited this time.⁵⁵ This 1796 banquet was the third and the last one of its genre. Among the imperial guests, there were two centenarian commoners who were awarded a button of the sixth rank to carry on their hat. There were also eight elders, commoners and Banner-men, aged over 90 and they received a button of the seventh rank. Altogether, 8,479 elders were rewarded buttons in 1797.⁵⁶

In regards to the country wine-drinking ceremony (*hsiang-yin-chiu-li* 鄉飲酒禮), a rule was set in 1644. This rule said that each prefecture and county should hold a wine-drinking ceremony twice every year. One should be on the fifteenth day of the first month and the other on the first day of the tenth month using a lunar calendar. The prefect or magistrate should serve as the host, and the country elders should be invited as guests. At the ceremony, the seats were arranged according to the age of guests at different directions relative to the host. As the host was seated at the east, the eldest guests were seated at the northwest; the next eldest at the southwest; the third eldest ones at the west; and the rest all seated according to the age. The purpose of this ceremony was to make the ritual explicit and to enforce the moral order between the old and the young. Apparently, this ceremony was kept usually only on paper and not practiced rigorously by local officials, as Emperors Yung-cheng and Ch'ien-lung had commented on the situation several times.⁵⁷

To sum up, Ch'ing statutes had regulated some important aspects concerning the life of the elderly. In the areas of tax exemption, punishment mitigation, and retirement of officials, some securities were doubt provided for the elderly. In addition, Ch'ing emperors, like other benevolent rulers in Chinese history, were rather generous in bestowing gifts and holding ceremonial occasions for their senior subjects. However, it seems that there was not an institution set up particularly for the relief of the old either by the state or by the society during the Ch'ing period. Early in the dynasty, there was a Hall of General Relief (P'u-chi-t'ang 普濟堂) set up by the gentry in Peking. Emperor K'ang-hsi conferred a tablet in 1706 to praise its charity and Emperor Yung-cheng decreed in 1724 that those able-bodied loafers should not get into the hall with any excuse.⁵⁸ An effort to provide relief for the elderly may be seen by the establishment of an Asylum for Relief (Yang-chi-yuan 養濟院) in 1723. According to a decree of Emperor Yung-cheng, each county should set up an Asylum for Relief to retain helpless widows, widowers, orphans, and the handicapped. However, in 1739 this institution was already found not in good function in some places.⁵⁹ In any case, it *has been pointed out that after 1790 the government actually*

⁵⁵ CHWHTK, 99/8585.

⁵⁶ CHWHTK, 99/8585.

⁵⁷ TCC, 43/7005; CHWHTK, 76/5556, 5559-5560.

⁵⁸ CTT, 17/2125; CWHTK, 46/5295.

⁵⁹ CWHTK, 46/5296.

did not become involved much in charitable activities that were quite flourishing in Ch'ing society.⁶⁰ As the child and the chaste woman were the most distinct objects of relief, the number of poor old people taken care of by public or private charitable organizations must be rather small. It is notable that filial piety was still well practiced even in poor families during the Ch'ing period.⁶¹ Thus, it is quite certain that the family still played the most important role in taking care of the elderly in Ch'ing society.

III. Concluding Remark

Among the total population in Ch'ing society, the people aged over 70 consisted of probably no more than 2 per cent. In contrast, modern societies today usually have more than 7 per cent of people aged over 70. Thus, the problem of elderly may not be as acute in Ch'ing society as it is today. As we have seen, Ch'ing statutes privileged the elderly in taxation and legal aspects. Officials could retire either because of their own age or their parents' age. Moreover, the elderly was very much complimented by imperial gifts and honorary titles on various occasions. A relief program was also provided for the poor and the elderly. However, the family undoubtedly still played the major role in taking care of the elderly in Ch'ing society. Finally, it should be noted that this paper is only a preliminary study using mainly official records. A more detailed study on old age in Chinese history should be done later with materials collected from other sources.

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⁶⁰ Angela Ke-che Leung 梁其姿, "Ch'ing-tai tzu-shan chi-kuo yu kuan-liao-ts'eng te kuan-hsi 清代慈善機構與官僚層的關係," *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica*, 66 (1988): 85-103.

⁶¹ Feng Erh-k'ang 馮爾康 and Ch'ang Chien-hua 常建華, *Ch'ing-jen she-hui sheng-huo* 清人社會生活 (Tientsin: People's Press, 1990), p. 360.

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