# In aging China, old woman sues children for care
October 13, 2013

FUSHENG, China (AP) - The daughter-in-law smashes the cockroach under her foot and rolls open the rusted metal doors to the garage. Light spills onto a small figure huddled on a straw mattress in a dank room. A curious face peers out.

The face is the most infamous in this village tucked away in the lush green mountains of southwest China. It's the face of Kuang Shiying's 94-year-old mother-in-law – better known as the little old lady who sued her own children for not taking care of her.

The drama that is playing out inside this ramshackle house reflects a wider and increasingly urgent dilemma. The world's population is aging fast, due to longer life spans and lower birth rates, and there will soon be more old people than young for the first time in history. This demographic about-turn has left families and governments struggling to decide: Who is responsible for the care of the elderly?

A handful of countries, such as India, France and Ukraine, require adult children to financially support their parents, mandating what was once a cultural given. Similar laws are in place in 29 U.S. states, Puerto Rico and most of Canada, though they are little known and rarely enforced because government funds help support the old. In Singapore, parents can sue their adult children for an allowance; those who fail to comply can face six months in jail.

In China, where aid is scarce and family loyalty is a cornerstone of society, more than 1,000 parents have already sued their children for financial support over the last 15 years. But in December, the government went further, and amended its elder care law to require that children also support their parents emotionally. Children who don't visit their parents can be taken to court – by mom and dad.

The law pits the expectations of society against the complexities of family and puts courts in the position of regulating the relationship between parent and child.

Which then begs the question: How do you legislate love?

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Zhang Zefang hardly looks like the vindictive matriarch many assume she must be. A tiny woman with blotchy skin, she stares at visitors through half-blinded eyes.

Zhang is one of about 3,800 people who live in the village of Fusheng, where life seems frozen in a long-ago era. Mothers trudge up steep roads with babies in bamboo baskets strapped to their backs. Farmers balance poles across their shoulders to lug crops over hills and past orange groves. The pace is slow and the atmosphere placid.

But inside Kuang and Zhang's home, there is war.

Resentment hangs in the air, acrid and sharp like the stench from the urine-filled bucket next to Zhang's bed. The cluttered storage space she calls home is as loveless as it is lightless. This is the epicenter of a family feud that erupted amid accusations of lying, of ungratefulness, of abuse and neglect and broken promises.

Zhang wants you to know this: She never wanted to take her children to court. She never wanted any of this.

"I never thought about whether my kids would take care of me when I was old," she says. "I just focused on taking care of them."

Her eyes begin to water. Inside her room, there is no heat to ward off the damp chill, no window to the outside world. Zhang spends her days alone in the dark, accompanied only by the roaches, the mess and the memories of a life that started out tough and seems destined to end the same way.

She has all the time in the world to tell her side of the story. From the shadows, she begins to speak.

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It used to be in China that growing old meant earning the respect of the young, and the idea of filial piety, or honoring your parents, was instilled from birth. Parents cared for their children, and their children later cared for them. Neither side had a choice.

A Chinese proverb calls filial piety "the first among 100 virtues," and the ancient philosopher Confucius credited it as the bedrock of social harmony. Examples of family loyalty abound: A popular song urges grown children to visit their parents often. Communities celebrate Seniors' Day and hold "best children" contests, complete with cash prizes. One county even made filial piety a condition for the promotion of local officials.

Generations of Chinese read the classic morality guide, "The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars," where sons strangle tigers, let mosquitoes feast on their blood and proudly scrub bedpans for the sake of their parents. (A modern, somewhat more practical version of the guide advises children to call their parents regularly and spend holidays with them.)

As a 2008 bulletin from the U.S. aging advocacy group AARP put it: "For thousands of years, filial piety was China's Medicare, Social Security and long-term care, all woven into a single family virtue."

This is the world Zhang was born into, on Aug. 15, 1919.

She was of little use to a family of poor farmers, so her parents married her off at 14. Her husband died of dysentery, and she found herself a widow with two little girls and her husband's mother to support.

But her mother-in-law set her free. You don't have to take care of me, she told Zhang.

Zhang quickly remarried. Her new husband, a furniture maker, was too poor to support her, so they moved in with his parents.

Her new in-laws expected her to look after them. And that's when her nightmare truly began.

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"She's not making sense!" Kuang snaps.

Zhang, the target of Kuang's ire, is hunched on her bed, mouth set in a grim line. She barely acknowledges her daughter-in-law's insult. In fact, she barely acknowledges her at all.

Both women are fighting for their audience, though Kuang's ear-splitting staccato often drowns out Zhang's hushed monotone. Kuang hovers over her mother-in-law, interjecting constant critiques: Zhang is messing up the story, Zhang cannot remember a detail, even if she is in the midst of delivering it.

At the moment, they are arguing about Zhang's age when her first husband died. Zhang is struggling ... Was she 24? Or was it 21?

"Don't make up nonsense!" a frustrated Kuang says, voice rising. "It was 22! IT WAS 22!"

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Zhang is crying. It's hard to tell if the tears are linked to the miseries of her past or her present.

Her father-in-law, she says, was a gambling addict with a violent temper. Still, she never considered leaving – that would have made her a social outcast.

Kuang, in a rare moment of agreement, jumps in: "That's just the way it was at the time."

Zhang's growing brood survived mainly on a thin broth of boiled corn stalks. Yet when her hated father-in-law died in 1959, she had to give her food to the guests at his funeral.

Three decades later, her husband died, leaving her to the mercy of her offspring.

But the world had changed, and the bickering and bartering soon began. Once again, her very existence seemed to inconvenience everyone.

Zhang murmurs that she wants to say something, but is afraid to talk in front of her daughter-in-law. A reluctant Kuang steps outside and Zhang pleads: "Don't let her know that I told you this..."

Her family locks her in this room all day. She dares not scream for help for fear she will be beaten.

She pinches her cheek hard, slaps a visitor's arm. That's what they do to me, she says.

Her bones ache. Her feet ache. She hasn't moved her bowels in at least 10 days. The stench from the toilet bucket sickens her. Her children force her to drag it outside to empty it, but she is too weak and it is too heavy.

When her lawsuit hit the local news, she says, a furious Kuang asked her: "Why don't you go hang yourself?"

All she wants is to go to a nursing home, she says. But the few nursing homes in China supply only 22 beds for every 1,000 seniors, and most are too expensive for the average family.

Zhang has no money. She says her children took it all.

She is weeping now, pressing a filthy rag to her eyes.

"I'm too old to go through this."

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The village this family calls home lies within the district of Changshou, which means "long life." But living long has transformed from a dream achieved by few into a nightmare endured by many.

China is projected to have 636 million people over age 50 – nearly 49 percent of the population – by 2050, up from 25 percent of the population in 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. So who will care for them?

Across the world, rapidly increasing life spans have left many adults scrambling to look after their parents, their children and themselves. And in China, one-child urban policies over three decades mean there are even fewer working youngsters to support their elders.

Meanwhile, social and economic changes have chipped away at traditional family values. A lack of jobs means rural youth must leave their parents to find work in distant cities. And even children who can afford nursing homes fear sending their parents away will mark them as "unfilial," says sociologist Jenny Zhan, who has studied the impact of China's changing demographics on family relations.

The result is an emotional and generational tug-of-war.

Kuang stands in the kitchen, frustration etched into every line of her face. She knows what Zhang has been saying about her. And it's all, she says, a lie.

Kuang has become the true matriarch of this clan. Ask to speak to her husband, and she'll insist he won't know what to say. She knows best, so just ask her. It's not an offer – it's an order.

But it is also Kuang who looks after her mother-in-law, because in China, as in many other places, women shoulder most of the responsibility of elder care.

Kuang lives upstairs: She says her frail mother-in-law lives on the grim ground floor because she can't climb the steep steps. Up here, the tiled floors shine, and the bathroom has a traditional squat toilet. While it's hardly a palace, at least it's not the garage.

Still, her mother-in-law is no victim, Kuang says. If anyone is suffering, it is everyone in the family who has thanklessly cared for Zhang decade after decade, even as they grow older and more desperate themselves.

"I'm doing all the laundry! I'm making the bed for her!" she says, exasperated.

When Zhang claims the lawsuit was her sons' idea, her daughter-in-law explodes.

"She doesn't know the whole story!" Kuang barks. "Let me tell you what really happened..."

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China is going grey faster than it is growing rich, and state support for the elderly is not keeping pace.

Even in cities, where pensions are comparatively generous, elders say it's a game of dominoes; if one family member falls, they all do.

In rural areas, it's even worse. A new pension scheme for rural seniors does not cover everyone, and monthly payments are meager.

Health care is also inadequate, and a serious illness can bankrupt a family. Although a recent expansion of the medical system now covers most Chinese, reimbursement rates remain low and out-of-pocket costs high. Many rural families cannot afford the hospitals' huge up-front deposits.

Where the government falls short, the kids are left to solve the problems – except that they often can't, and sometimes won't.

Zhang's children have all come up with reasons why they cannot take care of her.

There's the oldest son, Zhou Mingde, who lives about a mile (1.5 kilometers) away from his mother. His pension is $13 a month, so he depends on the $30 each of his three daughters gives him on his birthday and during Chinese New Year. He sells one pig a year to buy medicine for his paraplegic wife. He is still farming corn and millet because he cannot afford to stop.

"I have to take care of my old mother. My wife. Myself," he says. "I am 71 years old already."

Then there's the middle son – the black sheep of the family – Zhou Yinxi. His daughter has schizophrenia, and his wife committed suicide. His current girlfriend once promised the family they would care for Zhang, but it never happened. Yinxi's argument: they're not married, so they're not obligated. Besides, at 68, he is broke and won't receive his pension for two years. "I'm also pretty helpless," he says.

Next up is the youngest, Zhou Gangming, 56, and his wife, Kuang, 58. Their only income will come from selling their two pigs and one cow, and their $16 monthly pension.

Gangming and his mother lived together until, in her eyes, Kuang came along and snatched away her beloved youngest son. Her oldest son confides that in the days when his mother was younger, stronger and meaner, she even beat Kuang.

Gangming says they are now too poor and exhausted to look after Zhang alone, but he knows they shouldn't abandon her.

"She's my mom," he says. "I have to care for her."

Finally, there is the distant daughter, 54-year-old Zhou Yunhua. By all accounts, she would like to care for her mother, but told her siblings she lives too far away.

In the end, the children asked their mother, "What should we do?"

She countered: "If none of you want to take care of me, what should I do?"

No one had an answer. So they went searching for one at the village court.

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In December, after persistent reports of abuse, China amended its elder care law to require that adult children regularly visit and emotionally support their parents. The amendment, which took effect in July, also requires employers to give workers time off to visit their parents, though even proponents say that may be hard to enforce.

As the court officials explained the options to Zhang, she sat silently.

Finally, they offered a solution: Zhang could sue her children. Then the court could force them all to care for her equally.

She didn't even know what "sue" meant. But what other choice did she have?

Suddenly, everyone in the village knew her story and authorities began examining her claims of abuse. A village official, Zhang (no relation), says they aren't sure who to believe. In any event, she says, the children are "probably not beating her now."

The locals mostly consider the children neglectful and are shocked they aired their private battle in court, says Zhang, who only gave her last name, as is customary among Chinese government workers.

"Not being filial," she says, "is certainly not right."

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The settlement was swift: The court ordered Mingde, Gangming and their sister to take care of their mother for four months of the year, and Yinxi to pay her $10 per month. The children must split Zhang's medical bills.

So far, Yinxi has paid nothing.

It is lunch time in Kuang's garage. She hands her mother-in-law a tin cup of noodles. Zhang silently shovels the food into her mouth, saying nothing as Kuang leaves.

"I won't get any appreciation for taking care of her," an exhausted Kuang says. "I also can't abandon her."

Kuang wants to move in with her own daughter in Hong Kong. But she can't.

"I've got to finish taking care of her," Kuang says. "Then I can think about moving to other places."

The meaning behind her words is clear: Her life will begin when her mother-in-law's ends.

She worries about her own future. But she believes her children will be there for her.

"I tell my children, `If you can take care of me like I have taken care of your grandmother, then that is enough.'"

She is, she says, setting the example.

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EPILOGUE: Zhang Zefang now lives temporarily with her eldest son, Mingde, as the court ordered.

Her new home is crowded with clutter and complaints. Mingde frets about the cost of medical care. A frustrated Yinxi cries. Zhang clutches her walking stick and stares vacantly as she talks.

"I just wish I could die."

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Associated Press researcher Flora Ji contributed to this report.