

By MELINDA LIU

ALTHOUGH THEY LIVE IN A NATION of 1.3 billion people, Wu Shaoqiu and his wife are lonely. Their son now lives in Canada, their daughter in France. “We need to have someone stay and talk with us from time to time,” says Wu, 75, a retired bureaucrat from China’s Hubei province. In 2006 he spotted an ad in the local paper, offering to introduce empty-nesters to adult women willing to be “adopted.” Wu liked an executive named Fang Fang and brought her home to meet his wife. “She brought a bunch of flowers ... she called me ‘Papa’ and my wife ‘Mummy,’” Wu says. Fang Fang soon joined the family—and introduced two other women whom the eld-

China’s New Empty Nest

An aging population is transforming the family.

erly couple took in as well. On weekends and holidays all three women, who are in their 40s and married, visit the couple to cook and clean, and maybe play cards or surf the Web. “I consider them my real daughters now,” Wu says.

Family is the bedrock of Chinese society, at least in theory. But three decades of gut-wrenching change are testing those old bonds. More kids than ever are leaving their hometowns—even the country—in search of jobs. This generation is the first to grow up under the one-child policy, rolled out in 1979. They are “more likely to be spoiled and self-centered,” says demographics expert Cai Feng. “As adults, children of this generation lack the inclination to support their parents.” Forty-two percent of Chinese families in 2005 consisted of an old couple living alone, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

That’s causing even young parents to rethink the meaning of family in China. For centuries a healthy brood of boys was considered the best form of social security. That’s still generally true in the countryside; farmers prefer sons who can work in the fields over a daughter whose earning potential—if any—is transferred to her

husband’s family. But in China’s cities, many young couples now say they prize daughters over sons for their loyalty. “Urban couples all think girls are much better than boys. Girls are more thoughtful, especially towards their parents,” says Feng Xiaotian, a sociology professor at Nanjing University who has conducted surveys of Chinese families. In a recent China Youth Daily poll, respondents who preferred a daughter (29 percent) edged out those who wanted a son (28.4 percent).

Others are hoping to increase the odds against abandonment in creative (and sometimes illegal) ways. Some wealthier urbanites simply ignore the one-child policy and pay a fine for having an extra kid. Others give birth abroad, or pretend their first child was born handicapped (a loop-

built no real social safety net. Going into a nursing home is still considered vaguely shameful. The China National Committee on Aging recently unveiled a plan to establish a nationwide home-care system by 2010, but simply finding enough facilities and trained nurses will be hard.

Authorities are trying to educate young Chinese about the need to care for their parents. The Education Ministry has supported a resurgence of Confucian studies, which promote respect for elders. “It’s important to have family education, school education and social education [on this issue],” says Wu Changping, an expert on population and aging at Renmin University. Some government agencies now even grade employees on filial piety when considering promotions.



LITTLE EMPEROR: Today’s Chinese kids ‘lack the inclination to support their parents’

hole that allows them to have another legally). Some cases have become public scandals, like that of the Communist Party apparatchik who kept six mistresses and had a child with each one, or the entrepreneur in Liaoning province who married, bore a child with and then divorced three successive “wives” in order to have more children. Last week senior family-planning official Zhao Baige said Beijing may phase out the one-child policy, although she couldn’t say “at what time, or how.”

The regime knows official efforts alone cannot support the aging population. Since workers used to be covered by pensions from their state-owned companies—the “iron rice bowl”—the government has

Wu Shaoqiu admits his solution isn’t for everyone. Another Hubei couple tried something similar. Former construction expert Tian Zhendong and his wife felt “lonely and lost” after their only son immigrated to Canada. They visited him there but couldn’t adapt to life in the West. Back home, Tian put out an ad titled “Elderly couple desperately seeking daughter.” “We’re not looking for a maid, but someone to be with us until we’re dead,” Tian said. To his surprise, 100 applications poured in. But the couple had to call off their talent search when their son objected. Apparently, not everyone is ready for the new Chinese family.

With bureau reports

Read Melinda Liu’s Web column on China, Asia Rising, at xtra.Newsweek.com