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"If he doesn't farm, we won't have enough food to eat," said Hou, 71, her hair in pigtails and her hands shaking as she spoke. "When we run out of money for our medical bills, we just stop treating ourselves."

"We can live like this, it's okay. But please, don't let us become really ill."

Decades of societal turmoil — radical communism followed by rampant capitalism — have frayed the ties that once bound China's families together extremely closely. In a country famous for its Confucian traditions of filial obedience, tens of millions of elderly Chinese are being left behind by the country's transformation, suffering poverty, illness and depression. It has become such a serious problem that the Chinese government put into effect a law in July allowing parents to sue their children if they failed to visit and support them.

"Many rural children don't treat their parents that well," said Zhao Yaohui of Peking University, co-author of a recent study of the problems facing China's oldest people. For centuries, patriarchs controlled their families' limited resources in the countryside. But

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