A large amount of research on Chinese households has been undertaken since 1980. However, problems existing in Chinese household registration and their impact on collecting household data have not been fully appreciated. Furthermore, most published studies have concentrated on the composition of households, while kinship relations beyond households have not been adequately investigated. This article starts with a description of China’s household registration and its connection with the census and survey data collection. Then, problems of household registration and their influence on the study of Chinese households are investigated on the basis of field research. Finally, village kinship networks are examined in order to shed further light on micro-social structure in rural China.

Many social demographic surveys have been conducted in China since 1980. New sources of data have now placed China among the best-documented national populations. Based on these materials, a large amount of research on the Chinese family and household has been undertaken. Comparative studies across countries have also been carried out by both Chinese and foreign scholars. However, problems existing in Chinese household registration and their impact on collecting household data have not been fully appreciated. Among hundreds of articles published recently, only a few touch briefly on the issues of the ways in which the household data were obtained and their influence on our understanding of Chinese household structure and its dynamics. Moreover, most of the published studies have concentrated on the composition of households, while kinship relations beyond households have not been adequately investigated. The household, or family, has been frequently seen as the basic building block of a society. But it is not the only component of the social structure, and indeed, it is not necessarily the most important unit in studying a society. Without knowledge of kinship relations between, or beyond, households, what we can learn from the household study is rather limited.

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This article starts with Chinese household registration and its connection to the census and survey data collection. Following that, problems existing in household registration and their influence on the study of Chinese households will be investigated on the basis of field research. To demonstrate such influence and the complexity of actual residential patterns, domestic groups in three Chinese villages will be analyzed according to the registered household and residential unit categories. Finally, village kinship networks will be examined in order to shed further light on micro-social structure in rural China.

**HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION AND REGISTERED HOUSEHOLDS**

We begin with Chinese household registration, its links to the collection of census and survey data, and problems in registering households. This is crucial in illuminating why the study of households might be limited and how the problems existing in Chinese household registration could obstruct our understanding of the real residential pattern.

Population and household registration has existed in China for thousands of years. According to some records, as early as in the Western Zhou period (c. 1100-771 B.C.), the government had already set up an organization to administer population and household registration. Institutions of this kind continued to exist until the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), and they indeed produced a formidable amount of population and household data. During the period of the Republic (1912-1949), household registration, despite the very unstable political situation and frequent warfare, was also carried out in many areas.3

Immediately after the People’s Republic was founded in 1949, the government started to reintroduce the household registration system. The registration was initially carried out only in urban areas. After the 1953 census, the government took further steps to institute routine household registration throughout the country. The State Council issued a directive in 1955 that formulated the basic principles of household registration and unified the household registration system. A nationwide household registration was started thereafter. In 1958, the Regulations on Household Registration in the People’s Republic of China was promulgated by the National People’s Congress. This established the household registration system on a legal basis.4

According to the regulations, the work of household registration is managed by public security offices. The register unit is a household. The head of a household (sometimes the person concerned) is required to report the relevant information of household members, such as births and deaths, to the registration office. As a part of the household registration, each household is also issued a household registration booklet in which personal information of every household member is recorded. The booklet and the items entered also serve as valid proof of the identity of citizens. When there is a need for the contents of registered items to be altered, for example, changing name or marital status, the change must be verified and endorsed by the registration office. When people intend to move into or move out from an administrative area, they equally need to change the registration and get permission from the local registration office. Those who live in cities and towns temporarily are also required to obtain a registration of temporary residence.5 During recent years, the Chinese government has considerably relaxed its control over migration. Some of the rules, those related to
temporary migration in particular, have been modified accordingly. However, the household registration system is still in place, and most of the regulations remain unchanged.6

Household registration has played an extremely important role in the collection of demographic data in China. For this reason, it has been widely seen as the foundation of population statistics.7 This was clearly reflected in how China’s recent censuses were carried out. Before the 1982 census, for example, a nationwide campaign was undertaken to check and update household registers. As an important part of the census preparation, the updated household registers were used to produce a list of household heads, which serves as a major reference for census enumeration. When the census enumeration was completed, the registers were used as evidence to check the accuracy of the census records. If disagreements were found between the two, a further investigation was undertaken until the errors were found and the corrections made.8 Close links similar to this kind can also be found between the household registration and the 1990 census and some sample surveys.

Because of such a close link, detailed and well-maintained household registers generally help to improve the quality of the census and survey data. China’s 1982 and 1990 censuses obviously benefited from the household registers. However, for the same reason, problems existing in household registration could also be introduced into the censuses and some sample surveys. To assess the quality of the household data collected by the censuses and these surveys, and to investigate the influence of such connections on the study of household composition, a brief examination of the problems and difficulties existing in registering Chinese households is necessary.

Like collecting household data in other countries, the difficulty of obtaining accurate information about residential patterns generally arises from two factors. First, it is difficult to define a household and to implement the definition in the census and survey. To identify a household is more difficult than to register an individual. The household definition is frequently found less effective in coping with complicated reality. Second, difficulty is also caused by some common registration errors, such as undercounting or overcounting household members and making mistakes in recording people’s name, age, sex, relationship to household head, marital status, or other information.

These problems have been widely acknowledged and carefully treated by China’s census and survey organizers. For example, a fairly clear household definition was used in the 1982 census. To eliminate registration errors, a nationwide checking and updating of household registers was undertaken before the census: “More than 5.7 million household registration personnel, statistical personnel, and other basic-level cadres were mobilized” throughout the country. “They conducted a systematic investigation through household interviews and found and corrected errors: 6.1 double registrations per thousand and 5.4 omissions per thousand.”9 This campaign considerably enhanced the accuracy of household registers. It helped to ensure the high quality of the census data and made it one of the best sources for studying Chinese demography.10

Such difficulties and problems can be found in all countries and are not special to China. However, in Chinese household registration, there are other problems, which are clearly characteristic of the Chinese system and which tend to increase the difficulty of obtaining accurate household data. These problems are closely related to the distinction between domestic households and collective households and that between urban inhabitants and rural inhabitants.
Residential units in China are broadly divided into two types: domestic households and collective households. A domestic household is a normal family household. Its members generally live together in one dwelling and are related by kinship. A collective household is a group of people who live in the dormitories of universities, companies, factories, or institutions of other types. Its members are normally not related by kinship.\textsuperscript{11}

There are also two types of registration status, namely, urban inhabitants (or urban population) and rural inhabitants (or rural population). As one may expect, people who are registered as urban inhabitants normally live in cities and towns, whereas those who are registered as rural inhabitants live in the countryside, but it is not necessary for them to live in such places. In general, the status of urban inhabitant can be obtained under the following circumstances. When children are born, they are given such status if their mothers are urban inhabitants themselves. Rural residents can change their registration status when they are employed, in most cases permanently, by urban-based companies or institutions of other kinds. In addition, when the land of a village is used for construction by the state or local government, as an exchange, the rural dwellers may also be given the status of urban inhabitants. Operations of this kind are usually planned and strictly controlled by the government, particularly in the areas that surround large cities.

The two types of registration status influence the interest of each individual significantly. Before the 1990s, people registered as urban inhabitants were entitled to obtain commodities of certain types, particularly the basic foodstuffs, at a state-subsidized price. Children with such status could study in urban schools. After graduation, the local government usually found jobs for them in the same city or town. Because they worked in state-owned or collectively owned factories, companies, or organizations of other types, they were entitled to the benefit of free health service and, on retirement, the benefit of pension schemes. In contrast, those who were registered as rural inhabitants got food from the village to which they belonged. They normally began their studies in the surrounding rural areas. After their education, they worked in their home villages unless they got the opportunity to move out, for example, by entering university, joining the army, or being employed by urban-based companies. The types of health care and pension schemes to which they might be entitled were entirely dependent on how wealthy the village was. In many rural areas, free health services and pension schemes were simply not available. While considerable changes have taken place during recent reforms, many of these differences still widely exist.\textsuperscript{12} Because of such radical differences, the status of being an urban inhabitant or of being registered in an urban area, particularly in large cities, has become very attractive to rural dwellers, although it is very difficult to attain.

The above discussion inevitably leads one to question whether creating the distinctions between domestic and collective households and between rural and urban inhabitants is necessary and, indeed, whether such distinctions have played a positive role in China’s socioeconomic development. Despite their importance, these questions are not examined here because this is beyond the scope of the article. Yet, so far as the impact of such distinctions on collecting household data is concerned, one negative influence is clear. They increase the complexity of household registration and make it difficult to carry out.

The distinctions between domestic and collective households and between urban and rural inhabitants have created difficulties for household registration and, particu-
larly, for census enumeration. In some households, for example, people with different registration statuses live together. Some of them are recorded as urban inhabitants, whereas others as rural inhabitants. Households of this kind, which are often referred to as urban-rural households, are fairly common in the areas surrounding cities. Though these people live under one roof, they may have two household register booklets and thus be recorded as two households. Similarly, as some researchers point out, because some areas gave a better supply of grain and foodstuffs to collective households, this “stimulated members of certain families who actually resided at home to register separately in the collective household where they worked.” Therefore, some domestic households also included those who, according to the registration, belonged to collective households.13

Such complexities have been also acknowledged by China’s census and survey organizers. In the case of the 1982 census, for example, instructions on how to deal with these problems were given to enumerators before the census. In spite of these efforts, errors were still made in the process of recording households. Hence, a post-enumeration check was undertaken and adjustment made by the census office.14 However, as far as household size and composition are concerned, the adjustment is less than adequate. The census authorities, for instance, adjusted only the mean size of households. No change was made in relation to the distribution of households by structure, despite the fact that if such an adjustment were made the proportion of single-person households would likely decrease and the proportion of households of other types increase. Moreover, even the adjustment of the mean size of households is not very satisfactory.

During the post-enumeration check, 19,922 households were resurveyed. According to the census, 76,442 persons resided in these households. It was found that due to the problems in recording households, 135 persons who lived elsewhere had been registered in those households, while 2,376 persons who actually lived in those households had been excluded from the census. As a result, a net increase of 2,241 persons was recorded, and the total number of people rose to 78,683. Among those under-registered, 890 had been recorded in collective households. The other 1,486 persons had been either registered as members in other people’s households or registered as independent households. Based on these figures, a simple adjustment was made. The mean size of households was calculated by dividing the total number of households into the total number of people. In doing so, two figures of population totals were used, but only one for the total number of households. In other words, only the total number of people was adjusted, whereas the number of households remained unchanged.15

Obviously, this is not the best way of adjusting the mean size of households. When the foregoing registration errors are eliminated, the total number of households of the whole country, instead of remaining stable, would be most likely to decrease. The extent of the change depends on how many persons lived with their family members but were registered as independent households, or how many households were over-recorded in the census. If persons of this kind consisted of the bulk of those who were not registered in their real households, the total number of households would decrease and the mean size of households would increase. For this reason, the reported mean size of households could still be underestimated, even though an adjustment had been made. For the national population as a whole, the impact of these problems would be fairly small on both the mean household size and household composition. But, in certain areas and for certain types of households, such influence may not be negligible.
Difficulties in obtaining accurate household data, apart from the sources discussed above, are also related to the following facts. In China, household registration not only is used for maintaining public security and social order but is also closely related to the economic interest of the state and that of each individual. In addition to the enormous difference in people’s socioeconomic life, which is closely related to, if not caused by, the two types of registration status, household registration has often been used by governments as a means of planning, organizing, and controlling the distribution of commodities. Before the 1990s, for some commodities that were subsidized by the state or in short supply, a form of rationing was frequently adopted to overcome difficulties in distribution. Some of these commodities, for example, staple foods, were supplied on the basis of individuals. But others, such as gas stoves and coal, were rationed on a household basis or on both individual and household bases. In most cities and towns, houses were assigned to local residents by governments or their work units. When houses were allocated, both the household size and the number of households were taken into account. People who were registered as independent households generally had a better chance of getting a larger living space than if they were registered together with their relatives as one household. In most rural areas, the village was not responsible for providing houses for peasants. But the villager could apply for a piece of land for housing construction. When the land was allocated, whether the applicant was registered as a separate household was also an important consideration.

The close link between the household registration and the economic interest of each individual indicates that under this circumstance, registering a household was not simply a matter of reporting who co-resides with whom but could become a strategy of increasing family wealth. In some areas, trying to be registered as a separate household indeed became a way of gaining material and nonmaterial benefit, or at least of making it a possibility. For this reason, an interesting social phenomenon has emerged. Some persons, although living together, are being registered separately. These persons may live in one courtyard or one apartment, or in extreme cases, they may even live in one single room. They are related by kinship ties and eat together or eat together occasionally. But they are registered as two, or more than two, separate households.16

To what extent do problems of this kind exist in household registration? As yet there is no clear answer. However, evidence suggests that such a phenomenon is not uncommon in some cities and towns. In some rural areas, especially those very close to cities and towns, it can be found as well.17

It is very difficult to eradicate problems of this type. When the 1982 census was conducted, for example, the census authorities did ask enumerators to register households according to whether people were linked by kin relations and lived in the same place. But because of the above complexity, this might not be easily implemented, and a series of problems could appear. This was particularly the case when the household registers were used to produce a list of household heads as part of census preparation and as evidence to check the accuracy of the census enumeration. Suppose there was one domestic group that had two or more register booklets, but all members lived together. If an enumerator decided to register them as one household, then he or she would face the following difficulties. Because these people had been recorded separately in household registration, there would be two or more household heads. Choosing who should be regarded as the ‘new’ head, therefore, became problematic. When this was solved, the relationships between some household members and the head, as being recorded in the household registers, had to be altered. While these
changes were made, it would be difficult to compare the census enumeration against the household registers. Moreover, even if detailed instructions on how to deal with such problems were given, it might still be difficult for the census enumerators to implement them in practice. This is largely due to the fact that those who had already been recorded separately were reluctant to be registered together again, as this might mean that their interests would be affected.

The above discussion clearly suggests that the existence of domestic and collective households, the distinction between urban and rural inhabitants, and the close link between recording households and the socioeconomic interest of household members have further complicated household registration. Under certain circumstances, this could affect the accuracy of household data and increase the discrepancy between the registered household and the actual residential pattern. This occurs not only because there are problems in collecting household data. More important, it also arises from the fact that people’s residential behavior, including how they register their households, is far more complicated than what a household definition could cope with. Hence, to get a better understanding of China’s micro-social structure, attention should not only be focused on improving household registration, although this is important. Our research, just like its subject, should be extended beyond the boundary of the household.

THE THREE SETTLEMENTS AND SURVEY DATA

In the follow sections, the questions discussed above will be further investigated by examining residential patterns in three settlements in Beijing area: Bajie, Beixincun, and Xiazhuang, which are all in Changping County—one of the counties in the Beijing municipality. The town of Changping is about 30 kilometers northwest from the city center of Beijing. In the beginning of the 1980s, the total population in Changping County was about 380,000. The overwhelming majority of the population was engaged in agricultural production, and more than 80 percent of them were registered as rural inhabitants. However, rural industry has developed very rapidly since then. By the end of the 1980s, the total population in Changping increased to more than 400,000, while the rural inhabitants decreased to less than 70 percent.

The three settlements are fairly close together, and the distance between any two of them is less than 30 kilometers. All three were typical Chinese villages in the 1970s. In each of them, the settlement itself occupied an area of less than a square kilometer. The land they possessed either surrounded the village or was dispersed in the nearby mountains. The local economy depended heavily on agricultural production. These communities went through considerable social and economic changes during the 1980s. A rapid decline in cultivated land was witnessed in all three villages. By the end of the 1980s, no cultivated land was left in Beixincun. The land held by Bajie and Xiazhuang also diminished significantly. In the same time, rural industry expanded at a fast speed, which led to a considerable change in the economic structure in all three places. By the late 1980s, income from nonagricultural production already reached a fairly high level. Because of rapid socioeconomic development, living standards improved. The official statistics suggested that the average income rose considerably in all these communities in the 1980s. In addition, as part of the rural reform, the former communes were replaced by Xiangs, and in some cases, the former brigades were replaced by companies. According to these changes, some settlements, at least in a certain sense, perhaps should no longer be regarded as villages. However, because they were still
treated as villages at the time when the survey was conducted, they are also referred to as villages in the following discussion.

In spite of the similarities, noticeable differences have been found between the three settlements in their geographic conditions, social environments, economic developmental levels, and demographic regimes. Bajie, one of the economically better-off communities in the county, is situated in the northwest corner of Changping town where the county government is located. The motorway connecting the town and the city center of Beijing enables local people to get to the most modern part of China in less than an hour. This geographical advantage has brought them many social and economic benefits. For example, people living here have more access to better education and urban employment opportunities. Many of the residents have found jobs in the city of Beijing and the town of Changping. During the 1980s, Bajie experienced dramatic socioeconomic changes. The proportion of the labor force engaging in agricultural production fell sharply from about 85 percent to around 20 percent during the first four years of the decade. By the end of the 1980s, although Bajie was still called a village, only a few people worked on the remaining 85 mu of cultivated land, and the majority of the population was employed by some 20 rural enterprises owned by the community. This, with the experiences of some other geographically and economically similar villages, maps a transition from a rural community to a small city.

Because Bajie economically and geographically is close to the city of Beijing and the town of Changping, people living there were also often treated as, or similar to, the urban inhabitants by the government. For example, family planning was introduced in Bajie and the city of Beijing at the same time, and there was almost no difference in the family-planning policies applied in the two areas. The one-child family model was also strictly implemented in the community.

Xiazhuang is an economically underdeveloped village compared with the other two. In sharp contrast to Bajie, Xiazhuang is located in the northern mountainous area of the county, about 25 kilometers from the town of Changping. Before the modern road was built and buses were introduced in this area, it was difficult for local people to go to the town of Changping and the city of Beijing. Xiazhuang was a very closed village in the past. During the 1980s, because of the rural economic reform and the construction of a railway that passes close to Xiazhuang, the villagers began to have more access to the outside world. In this mountainous village, the chance of a person finding a job in the city or of becoming an urban inhabitant was much lower than in the other two. In spite of the fact that rural industry started developing during the 1980s, most people still engaged in agricultural and horticultural production at the end of the decade. Living standards in the village were officially classified as at a low level within the county, although considerable improvement was also experienced in the community. Because of these reasons, family-planning policies were relaxed in Xiazhuang, and the local family-planning target allowed a considerable number of couples to have a second child. Consequently, fertility observed here was higher than in the other two settlements.

Beixinncun lies on the shore of Shisanling Reservoir and is close to Shisanling (the Ming Tombs)—one of the most famous tourist attractions in Beijing area. The community was formed by migrants from three other villages in 1958 when these villages were obliterated by the construction of the reservoir. As far as the distances to the city center of Beijing and to the town of Changping are concerned, Beixinncun is neither as close as Bajie nor as far as Xiazhuang, being about 5 kilometers from the town of
Compared with those living in Xiazhuang, the villagers of Beixincun generally had more contact with people living in the cities and towns, and they had greater opportunities of becoming factory workers and urban inhabitants. At the beginning of the 1980s, most people in Beixincun were engaged in agricultural production, and living standards in the village were about the same as the county average. The rapid expansion of the tourist trade, however, changed the face of this village. By the end of the decade, except for those who moved into the village during the previous year or two, all people were registered as urban inhabitants because all their cultivated land was occupied by a newly built golf course. Local governments found jobs for all persons of working age. The old people began receiving pensions from the state. In Beixincun, fertility decline started later than in Bajie. But the difference in the fertility patterns of young women was only marginal. This was likely to have been related to the fact that the same family-planning policy was implemented in the two communities.

Researchers at the Population Research Institute of Peking University conducted successive annual or biannual household surveys in these villages from 1979 to 1990. The undertaking was referred to as the One-Thousand-Households-Survey. This survey was initially designed for studying rural economy and demographic transition and particularly its interrelation with the rural economic reform that commenced in the late 1970s.

The survey recorded household members, specifying their name, relationship to the head of the household, age, sex, marital status, occupation, women’s fertility history, family income, and expenditure. It generated a valuable data set for the study of social and economic changes of 1980s rural China. The data also make it possible to use both cross-sectional and longitudinal methods to explore household composition and the dynamics of household formation. Unfortunately, in the surveys conducted before 1986, some people were not recorded because they were classified as urban inhabitants by the official household registration. Administratively, these people were not seen as the members of these communities, although they lived in the villages. The exclusion of these people may have less impact on the study of fertility transition, but it reduced the size of the total population and the complexity of household composition.

Some changes were introduced in the survey carried out in 1988. Both rural and urban inhabitants were included, and the urban inhabitants were recorded in the households they actually lived in. However, when this survey was conducted, households were recorded mainly according to the official household registration. The survey data, for the reasons discussed in the previous section, were still unable to give a complete picture of the residential pattern. Yet, this provided an opportunity for examining the discrepancy between the household records and the actual living arrangements. To further improve the study, together with researchers from Peking University and Cambridge University, I visited these villages during the winter of 1989-1990. My field research particularly focused on kinship networks and the difference between the registered household and the actual residential pattern. The results presented in the next two sections are primarily derived from the 1988 survey data and the outcome of my fieldwork.

Before reporting the research findings, it is important to emphasize the following points. First, these three settlements were not randomly selected. They therefore cannot represent the vast rural China in some respects. Because they are close to both the city of Beijing and the town of Changping, residential patterns and the way in which
households are recorded in these places would differ from those in areas that are entirely rural and have less contact with cities and towns. Nonetheless, what has been found in these villages may also be widespread in many areas with similar conditions. Second, the One-Thousand-Households-Survey and my field research were conducted about a decade ago. During the 1990s, further changes, including changes in residential patterns, occurred in these places. These new developments are not detailed in this article. However, this does not mean that what is discussed in this article is out of date. On the contrary, most of the research findings are still very important in our understanding of micro-social structure in many parts of rural China.19

REGISTERED HOUSEHOLD AND RESIDENTIAL UNIT IN THE THREE VILLAGES: A COMPARISON

Examining household composition is an important way of studying the micro-social structure in the three villages. Yet, if the analysis is based exclusively on the household or the registered household, the result tells us only what kin structure and people’s residential behavior are like within the scope of such domestic groups, but it says nothing about kinship relations between them, even if these households are in the same courtyard. In this section, to further investigate the complexity of people’s residential behavior and the discrepancy between the registered household and the actual living arrangement, residential patterns will be analyzed according to both registered households and residential units. Here, a registered household is defined as a household as being recorded by the 1988 One-Thousand-Households-Survey, which is largely in agreement with the official household registration. A residential unit is defined as a group of people who are related by kin links and live in the same courtyard. Households that are in the same courtyard but not related through kin relations are treated as individual residential units.

Choosing a courtyard as a physical criterion of a residential unit is based on the following considerations. First, as far as household registration and residential arrangements are concerned, the following phenomenon was quite common in the three villages. People who were linked by kinship relations lived in one courtyard but were registered as members of separate households. This obviously increases the difficulty of determining what is a household and obstructs the household study. To cope with the complexity and to reveal the actual residential patterns, an alternative approach is necessary. Second, in many parts of rural China, a courtyard is the second smallest unit of residence (the smallest unit is a room or a number of rooms with a common entrance). It has a clear physical boundary, which makes it relatively easy to distinguish one courtyard from others. A courtyard is normally occupied by a group of persons who are linked by kinship relations. It is common practice among them to help each other, both physically and financially. These people may be registered in different households and each household may have a separate budget, but it is equally common for them to work together and have meals together. The interrelationships between these people cannot be clearly cut off by the boundary of the household registration.

It should be emphasized that the primary object of this study and the use of residential unit are to find an effective way to further investigate China’s micro-social structure and to examine the influence of the problems in household registration in the study of Chinese households. The intention is not to use courtyard as a definition to replace household or to use residential unit to generalize family organizations throughout the
There are other ways to define a domestic group, and courtyard or residential unit is not necessarily the best, particularly in some areas where there is no courtyard at all. Finding a better way of defining a household, of course, is important for improving the study of households. But even if such a definition is available, difficulties in implementing it and exceptions would still exist, because the actual residential patterns are always far more complicated than any household definition can allow for.

The One-Thousand-Households Survey showed that there were 4,540 people and 1,397 households in the three villages at the end of 1988. It was found that 27 percent of households (373 households) and 22 percent of people (992 people) co-resided with at least another household in the same courtyard. Of the 373 households, only 6 lacked kinship relations, although they shared one courtyard with other households. When they were excluded, 367 households consisting of 976 people lived with at least one other kin-related household in the same courtyard. By definition, there were 1,214 residential units in these villages, and 15 percent of them (184 residential units) consisted of 2 or more than 2 kin-related households.

Information concerning the relationship between the heads of co-residing households found in these 184 residential units is presented in Table 1. In this table, residential units and their members are first divided into two groups according to the number of households within a residential unit. The residential units consisting of only two kin-related households are listed in the upper panel, and those including more than two households are in the lower panel. Within these two groups, the residential units and their members are further divided according to the relationship between the heads of these co-residing households.

Table 1 shows that more than 90 percent of these 184 residential units consisted of two kin-related households, and nearly 10 percent consisted of three or more. Parent-child relationship was the major link between the heads of the co-residing households. Residential units that were composed of the household of parents and that of their children made up the overwhelming majority. Those consisting of the household of par-

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**Table 1**

Distribution of Population and Residential Units by the Relationship between the Heads of Co-Residing Households: Bajie, Beixincun, and Xiazhuang, 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residential units with two households</th>
<th>Population n</th>
<th>Residential Units n</th>
<th>Population %</th>
<th>Residential Units %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents-sons</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>76.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents-daughters</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings-siblings</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents-grandchildren</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin relations of other types</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residential units with three households</th>
<th>Population n</th>
<th>Residential Units n</th>
<th>Population %</th>
<th>Residential Units %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents-children</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents-grandchildren</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 976 100.0 184 100.0

*Note:* There were 16 co-residing households that were not recorded by the survey because they did not belong to the villages and all their household members were classified as urban inhabitants. They were excluded from the table and data analysis.
ents and that of their sons (most of them were married sons) accounted for more than 80 percent (including some three-household residential units). The residential units established through other types of kin links such as sibling-sibling, grandparent-grandchild, or uncle-nephew were around only 10 percent. Generally, the relationships between the heads of these co-residing households are the most important kin ties between people.

Because of the close kin links between these co-residing households, some readers might argue that these courtyards are, or can be treated as, households. This, indeed, is a question worth further discussion. However, what follows will be focused on the comparison between composition of households and that of residential units rather than the household definition itself.

I start by comparing the mean size of the domestic groups. According to the One-Thousand-Households-Survey, 4,540 people lived in the three villages at the end of 1988. There were 1,397 households and 1,214 residential units. The mean size of households was 3.2 persons, and that of the residential units 3.7 persons. The mean size of the residential units was noticeably larger than that of the households.20

Table 2 presents distributions of households and residential units by generational span. According to the analysis, more than 70 percent of households consisted of two generations. The proportion of households with members from only one generation was relatively high, about 20 percent. The proportion of households with a generational span of three or more than three generations was low and less than 10 percent. By contrast, the distribution of residential units was a different picture. Although those with two generations were also the majority, residential units with one generation made up less than 12 percent, and those with a generational span of three or more generations accounted for more than 20 percent. As far as generational structure is concerned, residential units were more complex than households.

Table 3 shows the distribution of households and that of residential units, both by kin composition. The Hammel-Laslett typology is used to classify both households and residential units.21 When the domestic groups are analyzed according to households, the results show that more than three-quarters of them belonged to simple-family households. There were 10 percent of households with an extended-family structure, and only 4 percent were classified as multiple-family households. The proportion of people living alone was relatively high, and nearly 10 percent of domestic groups were single-person households. According to these figures, particularly when they are compared with those found in some historical communities, it seems reasonable to conclude that simple-family households have been expanding very rapidly, multiple-

Table 2
Generational Span of Households and Residential Units:
Bajie, Beixincun, and Xiazhuang, 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Households</th>
<th></th>
<th>Residential Units</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One generation</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two generations</td>
<td>1,003</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three generations</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four generations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,397</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1,214</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
family households have been diminishing, and nuclearization has increasingly become a feature of the change in Chinese household composition.

When the distribution of residential units is examined, however, the limitations of the above conclusions immediately emerge. The analysis reveals that residential units with extended or multiple structures made up 27 percent, which was twice as high as that for the households. Residential units with a single person accounted for only 5 percent, and the figure was considerably lower than that for the households. Proportion of residential units with simple-family structure was also lower than that for households.

Similar patterns can be found in Table 4, where the distribution of the population is presented. According to the figures on the left side of Table 4, four-fifths of the villagers lived in households with simple structures, and only one-fifth lived in households with extended or multiple structures. In contrast, the data on the right side indicate that three-fifths of the population lived in residential units with simple structures, and nearly two-fifths lived in residential units with extended or multiple structures. Compared with the results of the household analysis, the residential unit analysis shows a notable decrease in people living alone and a considerable increase in people residing in domestic groups with complex structures.

The above comparisons suggest that when domestic groups are analyzed according to residential unit rather than household, the complexity of the residential patterns increases considerably. While the analysis of households shows that a very high proportion of households were simple in structure, and this is frequently seen as evidence of nuclearization in household composition, the analysis of residential units indicates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Composition of Households and Residential Units: Bajie, Beixincun, and Xiazhuang, 1988</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No family</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple family</td>
<td>1,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple family</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,397</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Distribution of Population by the Structure of Domestic Groups: Bajie, Beixincun, and Xiazhuang, 1988</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single person</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No family</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple family</td>
<td>3,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple family</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that the changes in residential patterns may be less pronounced. Indeed, if we treated the residential units as households—in a certain sense, it is reasonable to do so—the results would suggest that the change in household composition could have been exaggerated by the studies that are exclusively based on registered households. Suppose that the proportion of households with complex structures was 27 percent rather than 14 percent and that those living in such households were 38 percent rather than 20 percent; the conclusion of the changes in household composition would be rather different.

Using different units of analysis, or different definitions of households, to study domestic groups also has a significant influence on our understanding of many other issues. One such issue is family support of the elderly. This support has been widely seen as a tradition and is still very important for the welfare of the old people in contemporary China. Figures 1 and 2 show, by age, the proportion of old people living alone and the proportion of old people of living in domestic groups with extended and multiple structures. The results of both household and residential unit analyses are presented for comparison.

In Figure 1, the gap between the two curves is considerable, especially in the older age groups. According to household analysis, the proportion of old people living alone was rather high, and 26 percent of those age 65 and older and 32 percent of those age 75 and older resided in solitary households. This seems to suggest that family support for the elderly is facing a crisis. However, according to the residential unit analysis, the relevant figures are 10 percent and 13 percent, respectively. These figures indicate that the high proportion of old people living in single-person households did not necessarily mean that these people had no children living around them but only that their children had not been registered with them in the same household. The majority of them, indeed, not only had children living nearby but had them living in the same courtyard.

Figure 2 reveals a similar story. According to household analysis, only one-third of those age 65 and older lived in extended- or multiple-family households, and the remaining two-thirds lived in households with a simple structure or lived alone. The
figures seem to imply that the interrelationship between parents and their married children was less important. However, the residential unit analysis shows that two-thirds of these old people lived in residential units with complex structures, and about three-quarters of old people had their children living in the same courtyard. Co-residing with their married and unmarried children, though some of them were not registered in the same household, was still the most important living arrangement for the old people. This proportion might be even higher than that recorded in some historical Chinese communities.

KINSHIP NETWORKS WITHIN THE VILLAGE

The previous section primarily focused on the difference between the household and the residential unit. The comparison has provided further insight into people’s household formation behavior and residential patterns, but this is still not a complete picture of the complicated micro-social structure. In his well-known book *Peasant Life in China*, Xiaotong Fei pointed out that “kinship is the fundamental bond uniting the members of ‘Chia,’ but it does not confine itself within this group. It extends to a much wider circle and forms the principle of association of larger social groups.” In spite of the facts that people living in the same household are normally related through close kin ties and that households are widely seen as the basic building blocks of a society, kinship relations beyond households are also important. To provide detailed information on village kinship networks and their changes in China’s rapid demographic transition and socioeconomic development, a further survey was conducted in the three villages in the winter of 1989-1990. This survey recorded nearly 4,500 people. Each person’s name, marital status, year of birth, sex, and place of residence, and the same information for each person’s living parents, spouse, siblings, and children, were collected. A brief discussion on village kinship networks is presented in this section.

In these villages, just like in many parts of rural China, households and individuals were surrounded by complex kinship networks. Although it has been shown that the
mean size of residential units and that of households were rather small, the villagers had many relatives living within the same village. “Residence in separate households did not necessarily mean functionally separate families.” Cooking, childcare, care of the elderly or disabled, and many other socioeconomic activities all frequently took place among geographically divided branches of networked families or within broad kinship networks. In the rest of this section, village kinship networks will be examined under two general headings: close kin and distant kin. Here, close kin include parents, spouse, siblings, and children regardless of their marital status. Distant kin include grandparents, uncles and aunts, parents-in-law, children-in-law, nephews and nieces, grandchildren, siblings’ spouses, and spouse’s siblings. According to the survey, each individual had on average 9.1 specified relatives living in the same village. More than 50 percent of people had 8 or more, and more than 10 percent had 15 or more relatives residing within the village. Those who had no close kin living within the village accounted for only 0.4 percent. The majority of them, however, had siblings or children living in the same county. Only 3 people were recorded as having no living parent, spouse, sibling, or child, but at least 1 of them had a distant relative residing within the village. People who had no distant kin living in the same village or whose distant kin have not been linked accounted for less than 10 percent.

Close Kin

One of the most remarkable features of the village kinship network is that a very high proportion of close kin lived in the same village of the people being surveyed. Altogether, 25,170 living close kin were recorded for 4,419 persons who resided in the three villages. Table 5 shows that of these reported kin, 80.8 percent of fathers, 80.3 percent of mothers, 98.3 percent of spouses, 58.8 percent of brothers, 41.7 percent of sisters, 89.6 percent of sons, and 70.4 percent of daughters lived within the village. The density of the village kinship network was high, and this was more striking when the size of the village—each occupied only an area of less than a square kilometer—has been taken into account. Most of the close kin were concentrated in a very small area:

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2,904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>3,253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>98.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>2,508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>5,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4,982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3,243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2,913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>25,170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Places of residence are defined as following: 1 = living within the household; 2 = living within the village but not in the same household; 3 = living in the same county but not in the same village; 4 = living outside the county; 5 = unknown.
more than three-quarters of them lived within an area of which the radius is less than 500 meters, and more than 95 percent within an area of which the radius is less than 25 kilometers. This can be further illustrated by the following example. When undertaking field research, I interviewed a woman who told me that she had six siblings and all of them had already married and formed their own nuclear families. However, the distances between their homes and the home of their parents were all very short. Hers was the farthest, only some hundreds of meters away. Examples of this kind were not uncommon in these villages. The survey reveals that 99 persons had five or more siblings and that 95 persons had five or more children living within the village.

Figure 3 graphs the mean number of close kin living in the same village by people’s age. The number of kin of a particular type is represented by a designated pattern, and the total number of close kin is indicated by the upper boundary of the graph. According to the chart, people age 15 and older generally had more close kin than those under this age. The close kin of people of younger ages consisted primarily of parents and siblings. Because of the fall in mortality, most children and young people would not experience the death of their parents during their childhood. Living with only one surviving parent or no surviving parents already became a rather uncommon event. For children younger than 15, the mean number of siblings was small. The fact that they themselves were young and not all of their siblings were born may partly explain this circumstance. But, because of the fertility decline, it would be unlikely that they will have more than two siblings even when they grow up.

For people age 15 and older, mean numbers of their close kin were about the same for all age groups, but the composition of their relatives was different. People age 15 to 44 were born during a period when mortality fell dramatically while fertility remained very high. They probably had the largest number of surviving siblings ever recorded in a large Chinese population. In spite of the fact that some of their brothers and sisters had already moved out of the village, siblings were still the main component of their close kin who resided within the village. When these people entered their reproductive period, however, China’s nationwide family-planning program had already com-
menced. As a result, the number of their children showed a clear trend of decline. It is very unlikely that their complete family size will outstrip that of their predecessors. The bulk of the close kin for people age 45 and older was married and unmarried children; 86.7 percent of them had at least 1 son, and 64.2 percent had at least 1 daughter living within the village. Each person, on average, had 2.64 children—1.66 sons and 0.98 daughters. This made it easier for children to provide their support to the elderly. These figures and the total number of surviving children available to old people also imply that the traditional design (or ideal) of many sons surviving and assisting in the old age of their parents has only become feasible for most people during recent decades. However, due to the decline in fertility, such conditions may not be maintained for very long.

The chart also indicates that people had more brothers and sons living in the same village than they had sisters and daughters. On average, each person had 0.71 brothers and 0.66 sons living within the village, but the figures for sisters and daughters were only 0.47 and 0.46, respectively. Among those residing within the village, the number of male kin outranked that of female kin, while the intervillage kinship linkage was, as suggested by Table 5, to a large extent built up through female relatives. There might be several possible explanations for this, but patrilocal marriage, in which a bride moves into the household or the village of her husband’s parents at marriage, was the major cause. Nonetheless, it has been found that some middle-aged women had their parents and that some old people had their married daughters living in the same village. These facts indicated that not all locally born women moved out of the village at marriage, and some of them might continue to live with their own parents.

Another noteworthy phenomenon is that during the few decades before the survey was undertaken, an increasing number of close kin stayed within rather than moved out of the village. The comparison between the number of the siblings and children who lived within the village and that of the total number of kin of these types reveals the following trends. Among people age 25 and older, the higher the age, the higher the proportion of their siblings living outside the village. Among people age 40 and older, older people again had a higher proportion of their children living outside the village than did those who were relatively young. Such a tendency was more noticeable among sisters and daughters than among brothers and sons. These findings suggest that during the preceding thirty or forty years, the proportion of those staying within the village was on the rise. An increasing number of women married in their home villages. This might relate to many factors, but the strong government control of migration, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, is undoubtedly one of the major causes. Another factor is the changing marriage pattern. After 1950, marriages arranged by parents decreased considerably. Young people gained more freedom in choosing their partners. However, this freedom was constrained by low mobility. This contributed to the rise of intravillage marriages in some areas.

Distant Kin

Questions concerning distant kin were not asked in the survey. Such information, however, can be obtained through data linkage if people had their close kin living in the same village. While results derived in this way tend to underestimate the number of distant kin who actually lived in the village, they can be used in illuminating the complex kinship networks existing in contemporary rural China. Despite the fact that only
selected types of distant kin have been examined and that some of these kin may have lived in the village but not been recorded or linked, the available information suggests that the average number of distant kin is also high in these communities. Figure 4 shows the mean numbers of various types of distant kin who lived in the village, by people’s age. The following characteristics are evident.

The numbers and the types of distant kin residing within the village are closely related to people’s age. Although children younger than 10 had the lowest mean number of close kin (see Figure 3), the mean number of their distant kin, which primarily consisted of uncles, aunts, and grandparents, was relatively high. The mean number of distant kin of people age 25 to 39 was about the same as that of those younger than 10. These people had a lower mean number of grandparents, uncles, and aunts than did those of younger ages. But they had a higher average number of siblings’ spouses, nephews, and nieces, an obvious result of having a larger number of siblings, which was discussed earlier. Owing to the fact that most of them were married, they also had the highest mean number of parents-in-law and spouses’ siblings. People age 50 and older had the largest number of distant kin. The major feature of the kin composition of these old people was that it contained the highest mean number of children-in-law and grandchildren, because most of their children had already married and established their own families. In addition, these people also had many nephews and nieces. There were two low points between the three peaks. The first was in the age group 10 to 19. The majority of this age group, on one hand, had not yet married and consequently had no relatives who were related through marriage. On the other hand, because of the influence of mortality, the mean numbers of their grandparents, uncles, and aunts were much lower than those for persons younger than 10. The second low point was found in the age group 40 to 49. People of this group had all types of distant kin, but since most of their children were unmarried, they were unlikely to have a large number of grandchildren and children-in-law. In comparison with those of young ages, the mean number of their distant kin of all other types except nephews and nieces also notably decreased.

Figure 4. Mean Number of Distant Kin Living within the Village, by People’s Age: Bajie, Beixincun, and Xiazhuang, 1989
The grandparents and grandchildren relationship was one of the most important kin links in these villages. Out of the 660 children who were younger than 10, about 90 percent had at least 1 grandparent, nearly one-fifth of the children had 3 or 4 grandparents, and about one-eighth had all 4 grandparents residing in the same village. On average, each child had 1.9 grandparents living within striking distance. Because all three villages are fairly small, it would be expected that the interrelation between these children and their grandparents was very close and that connections like this were very important for the socialization of the children. Grandchildren also made up the largest share of the distant kin of old people. More than 85 percent of people age 60 and older had at least one grandchild living in the same village, and on average, each of them had 3.3 grandchildren. People younger than 60 had a smaller number of grandchildren. This is largely due to the facts that some of their children had not married and that the family size of those married was decreasing. The rapid fertility change recorded over the past thirty years had reduced the probability of a person living with many grandchildren to a considerable degree. However, if the current fertility is maintained and mortality continues to decline, an increasing number of people will be able to live in the presence of their grandchildren or great-grandchildren. A vertical extension in the kinship network is most likely to be observed over the next few decades.

Marriage and the relationships established through marriage played an important role in the formation of local kinship networks. In these villages, 46.2 percent of those age 25 to 44 had at least one parent-in-law living within the village, and 85 percent of those age 55 and older had at least one child-in-law living within the village. People between the ages of 25 and 44 had, on average, 2.3 siblings-in-law residing in the village. Altogether, the mean number of parents-in-law, siblings of spouse, spouses of siblings, and children-in-law was 2.7 for people age 20 and older, which made up half of their distant kin. The analysis suggests that nowadays within a household the relationship between parents-in-law and children-in-law and that between siblings-in-law are not as prominent as they were in the past because many newly married couples have formed their own families. But these relations are still an influential factor in the daily life of any two or more nuclear families so related. They are also likely to have an important influence in the social life of these rural communities.

Finally, uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces are the major components of the distant kin. In constructing the kinship networks, a person’s uncles and aunts were linked through his or her parents, and nephews and nieces were linked through siblings. This means that the number of successfully linked uncles and aunts for middle-aged and old people and that of nephews and nieces for old people would be lower than the actual numbers of these specified kin. This is due to the fact that some parents and siblings lived outside the village, while others may have died already. Even so, each person on average still had 1.07 uncles and aunts and 1.06 nephews and nieces who lived in the village. This was apparently the consequence of the high fertility that existed before the 1970s and the low migration. People age 20 to 49 had a higher number of living siblings than any generation in the past. This enabled them to have a large number of nephews and nieces, despite the mean number of their own children already decreasing. For the same reason, children younger than 15 had a larger number of uncles and aunts, and those having at least one uncle or aunt residing in the same village accounted for more than 90 percent. These facts imply that although we have not touched on the issue of cousin relationship, a corresponding high number of cousins is likely to be found in these populations.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study is primarily based on research conducted in three Chinese settlements. Nevertheless, there is evidence showing that discrepancies between registered households and actual residential patterns have been found in some other areas. Complex kinship networks like those observed in these villages widely exist in rural China. The research findings reported in this article are therefore of considerable importance for both further improving the study of Chinese households and better understanding China’s micro-social structure.

Collecting accurate household data is a precondition of high-quality household studies. Over recent decades, China has made very impressive progress in gathering demographic data for scientific research. This article, however, has demonstrated that some problems that exist in the household registration system have been introduced into Chinese censuses and perhaps some other surveys. They have exerted a nonnegligible impact on the studies of households and some related issues. Improving the quality of household enumeration will be one of the challenges facing Chinese census authorities and researchers. Problems in recording households, as has been said, not only come from the common registration errors but also arise from the complexities of actual residential patterns, such as those examined in this article. Although the difficulty of obtaining accurate household data has increased in China because of the close link between the way of recording households and the economic interest of each individual, and the link between household registration and census enumeration, problems of this kind have been also found in other populations. Some efforts have been made to cope with these complexities. In Britain, for example, the census authorities once used postcensus surveys to investigate the impact of changing household definition. In Taiwan, a dual household definition was applied to handle complicated situations and to examine living arrangements. These endeavors provide us with some valuable references for further improving household registration and household studies.

During the last two decades, a large number of studies concerning Chinese families and households have been published. One of the claims that has frequently been made is that Chinese households have been going through a process of nuclearization. This conclusion more or less reflects the general trend of the change in household composition in China. However, given what has been revealed in this article, it is important to keep in mind that people’s household formation behavior is far more complicated than the definition of a household is. Although the statistics derived from the registered households could provide some useful information concerning people’s residential patterns, the picture mapped by these figures may not be complete. Under certain circumstances, the changes in household structure and residential behavior could have been exaggerated by such figures. A further lesson learned from this study is that the way in which households are defined has considerable impact on the study of families and households. Such examples have been found both in China and in other parts of the world. In collecting household data, census authorities or researchers may use different definitions so as to satisfy their own purposes. Understanding such differences is also crucial for the study, particularly the comparative study, of families and households.

Another frequently cited claim is that Chinese households have increasingly become similar to their Western counterparts. This suggestion also needs some qualifications. Chinese households have indeed become smaller and simpler during the past
few decades, but they are still very different from those in the West. Apart from the particular characteristics in the formation and composition of the household and in the relationship between household members, the complex local kinship networks alone make Chinese households considerably different from those in the Western society. In China, especially in rural areas, being a “member in a particular household does not imply that social obligations are limited to members of the household, or that the household is socially isolated.”36 Many households exist in a web of a broader kin group and are surrounded by the households of their relatives. The interrelation between them is so close that the household boundary drawn by the registration may not be very meaningful. In spite of the fact that these households are also labeled by the same terms that are commonly used in the West, the actual social context of these terms might be remarkably different.37 In societies of this kind, even if one wants to understand household formation and composition, knowledge of kinship linkages between households and of larger kin group is essential.

The household is widely acknowledged as the basic building block of a society, but it is not the only unit and is not necessarily the most important unit when studying a society. This is particularly true in China. In the past, lineages, as a kind of kinship network, widely existed in China, and many villages were actually formed by such lineages. After 1950, the Chinese government tried very hard to eliminate the influence of lineages. As a social institution, lineages have become less influential. However, as suggested by this research, the components of such lineages are still there, and local kinship networks have in fact become denser in many areas. Lineage organizations, as has been reported by some studies, have reemerged in some parts of China in recent years.38 Complex kinship networks like those discussed in this article inevitably have considerable bearing on the daily activities of individuals as well as on their family life. It is fairly common that in Chinese society many activities, which are usually undertaken by individual families or other institutions in the Western world, are carried out by kinship networks of this kind. Even social, political, and economic institutions are frequently found to have been penetrated by the influence of such kinship networks. All these not only exert their particular impact on China’s socioeconomic development but also give the contemporary Chinese social structure some distinguishing features.

Family support of the elderly has a long tradition in China, although institutions of other kinds also exist. Facing rapid population aging, the importance of family support has been increasingly stressed by government officials and scholars in recent years. To what extent old people can be supported by their families, however, is directly affected by demographic conditions. China’s dramatic demographic transition has considerably changed the availability of kin for each individual. The declining mortality and high fertility rates existing between the early 1950s and the early 1970s once greatly increased the number of kin available to each individual. But because of recent rapid fertility decline, the kinship structure of the Chinese population has been undergoing another radical change. All these factors undoubtedly have significant implications for family support of old people. As has been shown, the mean number of children for people age 40 and older was fairly high in the studied population. This implies that up to the year 2020, when people of the 40 to 44 age group reach 70 to 74, it will not be difficult for them to get support from their children, if the children are in a position to do so. Indeed, as far as family support of the elderly, or the dependent ratio between the old- and the working-age populations, is concerned, the next 20 years are likely to be the
best time in Chinese history. But after that, providing that there is no dramatic change in fertility and mortality, or that mortality continues to improve and there is no increase in fertility, the task of supporting the elderly will become difficult for the younger generation to fulfill. In other words, the period between 2020 and 2050 may be a crucial time in China’s future socioeconomic development, when family and the state support for the elderly will face a serious challenge.

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NOTES


5. For details on how household registration should be, and has been, conducted, see National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, “Regulations on Household


15. If the number of households was not overcounted or undercounted in the census, the above procedure might be justified. But because about two thirds of those under-recorded people were registered elsewhere rather than in collective households and some of them were likely to have been registered as living in independent households, the total number of households recorded by the census might be an overestimation. Xia Ma, “An Analysis of the Size and Structure of Chinese Households” (paper presented at the International Symposium on Population Census, Beijing, 1984) (in Chinese), 3-4.

16. That some people live together but are registered separately of course could also be a result of housing shortage. This is to say that in some domestic groups, the members are registered in different households and want to live separately, but they cannot do so because there is no house available to them. Nevertheless, their residential patterns are similar to those mentioned above, although the underlying cause is somewhat different.

17. After her field research in China, Hareven reported the following example. There were “six separate nuclear families living in the same flat, but they consisted actually of parents and five married children. Such families maintained close ties, and the children supported their parents.” Tamara Hareven, “Reflections on Family Research in the People’s Republic of China,”
Social Research 54 (1987), 680. In their study, the researchers of the Dongheyan Survey Team found similar cases in some urban districts of Beijing. Dongheyan Survey Team, “Family and Marriage in Dongheyan,” in Households in Urban China, Five Cities Household Study Survey Team (Jinan: Shandong People’s Publishing House, 1985) (in Chinese), 11-12. In a village in Jiangsu province, Guanbao Shen and Youmei Li also found that some kin-related persons, most of them being parents and their children, adopted the following living arrangement. They lived in a house but were registered as two or more households. According to them, two factors were responsible for this pattern. The first was related to employment opportunity. Facing the difficulty of creating enough jobs for local people, the local government adopted a form of rationing by stipulating that if there were insufficient vacancies in local factories, only one person from each household could be employed. This inevitably impelled people to register separately. From 1983 to 1987, the total number of households in the village increased from 570 to more than 700. A large number of the “new” households were created for the purpose of increasing the opportunity of occupants becoming factory workers. The second factor was related to house construction. As has been said, when peasants wanted to build a house, they applied for a piece of land from the village committee. In this village, two elements determined the amount of land given to the applicants. In addition to the land that was allocated according to the number of household members, each household was also entitled to a plot of land. Given the difficulty of getting a house and land, this policy apparently stimulated people to divide their households. These examples were provided by Shen and Li in a personal discussion in Cambridge, United Kingdom, in October 1990. Residential patterns of this kind were also found in the three settlements studied in this article.

18. A mu is a Chinese unit of area. One mu is equal to 0.0667 of a hectare.

19. For example, the kinship networks observed in these communities are mostly likely to be very similar to those existing in many parts of rural China. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, high fertility, relatively low mortality, and strictly controlled migration widely existed, which considerably increased the density of village kinship networks in China’s rural areas.

20. The census result showed that the mean size of households in these villages was 3.55 in the year 1982. See Wenmei Cai, Peiling Qiu, and Jingan Song, “A Survey Report: The Changes in Family Structure in Three Villages of Changping County,” in Zeng, Zhang, and Peng, Changing Family Structure. This was extremely close to what derived from the household survey (3.6) carried out in that year.

21. The household classification scheme adopted here was developed by Hammel and Laslett and has been widely used by family historians. In this scheme, the main criteria used for classifying household structures are the number of conjugal family units in a household and the presence of relatives who are not included in these conjugal family units. Households are classified into the following categories. Single-person (or solitary) households are persons living alone. No-family households include persons who do not live with their spouses and their unmarried children but who live with one or more relatives of other types. In this type of household, there is no conjugal family unit. Simple-family households consist of only one conjugal family unit in the absence of other relatives. Extended-family households are those in which there is one conjugal family unit and other types of kin are present. Multiple-family households include two, or more than two, conjugal family units and perhaps other relatives as well. For further explanation of the classifications of household structure, see Peter Laslett, “Introduction: The History of the Family,” in Household and Family in Past Time, ed. Peter Laslett and Richard Wall (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 31, 41-42.

22. Recent surveys suggest that family support for old people is still important in China. The majority of old people live in households with three generations. Monetary support from their children makes up a major part of their total income. See Xueyuan Tian, “The Report of the 1987 Sample Survey of Aged Population,” in 1987 Aged Population over 60 Years Sampling Survey
23. Simulation studies have suggested that because of high mortality, the proportion of old people living with their children was not very high in historic China. It was most likely to have been lower than those recorded in contemporary China. See Zhongwei Zhao, “Demographic Conditions, Microsimulation, and Family Support for the Elderly: Past, Present, and Future in China,” in The Locus of Care, ed. Peregrine Horden and Richard Smith (London: Routledge, 1998).

24. Xiaotong Fei, Peasant Life in China (London: Lowe and Brydone Printers, 1939). Chia is a Chinese term for household or family. For the description of chia, see p. 27 of the same book.


26. The distinction between close kin and distant kin is an arbitrary one. It is not necessarily a measure by which the importance of a certain type of kin relation can be determined, although in most cases people have more contact with relatives of the first category. Furthermore, because of the complexity of the analysis, some types of kin relations, for example, cousins, which could be more important than some of those specified above, have not been presented and discussed in this article.

27. In this study, the distant kin of an individual are linked through his or her close kin. If the close kin have not been found in the village, that person’s distant kin could not be easily traced, even if they lived within the village.

28. This figure is greater than that indicated by the proportion living within the village. The difference is related to the following fact. By the late 1980s, Bajie, one of the villages being studied, already became a part of the town of Changping due to urban expansion. The village is, therefore, an administrative unit rather than a residential area with a clear geographic boundary. People living on the next street or registered as urban inhabitants might be recorded as living in the county on the grounds that they belong to other administrative units. Accordingly, the number of close kin reported living in the same village would be somewhat lower than the actual number of close kin living within an area that is the same as living within the village. This has some effect on measures of the kin density and the kinship networks of Bajie. If we treated the persons who live within the “village distance” as being in the village, the proportion of close kin within the village would be higher.

29. Other possible explanations include that sex ratio at birth is normally in favor of males and that mortality in the female population might have been higher in the past in these villages.

30. Detailed discussion of the marriage patterns in these villages is presented in Zhongwei Zhao, “Household and Kinship in Recent and Very Recent Chinese History” (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1993).

31. The actual number of nephews and nieces for people age 60 and older would be higher. Since many of their siblings might have already died, some of their nephews and nieces have not been linked.

32. In addition to those reported earlier, it has been found that in Changping County, where the three villages are located, the mean size of registered households was just above three in 1988. This is slightly lower than that found in these villages. See Statistical Bureau of Changping County, Economic Statistics of Changping County 1988 (Changping: Statistical Bureau of Changping County, 1989) (in Chinese). In my fieldwork, I was told that the phenomenon discussed in this article widely existed in Changping. In many parts of China, particularly in some suburban areas, the mean size of households recorded in the 1982 census was even smaller than that found in Changping. As for the household composition, the 1982 One-Per-Thousand-Fertility-Survey showed the proportion of single-person and no-family households was 9.9 percent, which was the same as that derived from the registered households in the three villages in 1988. See Kaiti Zhang, “An Analysis of the Household Types and Its Composition in

33. In a recent article, Yi Zeng and his colleagues pointed out that in China’s census results the proportion of single-person households is higher than its actual proportion. This is largely caused by the facts discussed in the present article. Their results show that, in comparison with some small-scale surveys, the census has reported a larger proportion of single-person households and a smaller proportion of households with three generations. Zeng, Li, and Liang, “Household Composition.”

34. In Britain, when the 1951 census was conducted,

Households were defined as single persons living alone or groups of individuals voluntarily living together in the same menage, in the sense of sharing the same living room or eating at the same table. However, in 1961 the definition was made narrower, so that those sharing a living room were not counted as members of the same household unless they also shared common catering arrangements. This definition with minor amendments was used until 1981 when the concept of a household including those who shared living rooms, even if they did not share catering arrangements, was reintroduced.

After the census of 1981, the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys conducted a household definition checking study, in which the above two definitions were used to classify households. It was found that according to the old definition (sharing both living room and catering arrangements) there were 17.228 million households in Britain, while according to the new one (sharing living room) the total number of households decreased to 17.120 million. The fall of 108,000 households was due to the change in household definition. Because those who shared living rooms but not catering arrangements were primarily single persons living with others as tenants, the change in household definition also led to a considerable reduction in the number of single-person households. For details, see Jean Todd and David Griffiths, *Changing the Definition of a Household* (London: Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1986).

35. To study complicated residential patterns in Taiwan, Ronald Freedman and his colleagues used two criteria to classify domestic groups. These criteria were economic basis, whereby pertinent relatives ate and lived together, and associative basis, whereby pertinent relatives ate and/or lived together. Their study demonstrated that, when the household definition was shifted from the economic basis to the associative basis, household structure changed noticeably. Nuclear-family households decreased from 60 percent to 49 percent, and joint-stem and joint-family households increased from 7 percent to 17 percent. Ronald Freedman et al., “Household Composition and Extended Kinship in Taiwan,” *Population Studies* 32 (1978). Ronald Freedman et al., “Household Composition, Extended Kinship and Reproduction in Taiwan: 1973-1980,” *Population Studies* 36 (1982).


37. A similar phenomenon has been reported in some European countries, but generally speaking, the density of local kinship networks has been noticeably higher in rural China. For discussion, see Zhao, “Household and Kinship.”