



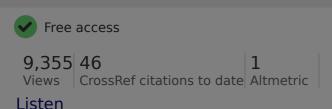




▶ Volume 22, Issue 43 ▶ Losing an only child: the one-child poli

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Original Articles

Losing an only child: the one-child policy and elderly care in China

66 Citations

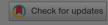
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increasing but is still not always adequate. To both sustain China's economic

development and limit population growth, it is essential for the government to reform the one-child policy and provide a comprehensive support system for the families who have lost their only children, including financial relief and elderly care, and work to reduce stigma against these families.

Résumé

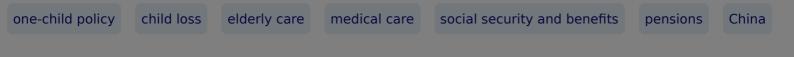
La politique de l'enfant unique est appliquée en Chine depuis plus de 30 ans. Elle rapidement a réduit la croissance démographique et a favorisé le développement économique. Néanmoins, elle a aussi engendré des difficultés, comme le vieillissement et la perte d'un enfant unique, sur lesquelles cet article se centre. Près d'un million de familles ont perdu leur seul enfant en Chine. Elles ont souffert psychologiquement et physiquement et ont parfois subi une stigmatisation sociale et une perte économique. Néanmoins, leur plus grande préoccupation concerne les soins aux personnes âgées qui représentent désormais un grave problème pour les familles ayant perdu leur unique enfant. Cet article se fonde sur plusieurs études qualitatives et 12 cas relatés par les médias chinois en 2012 et 2013, ainsi que les lois et politiques existantes pour soutenir les parents ayant perdu leur unique enfant. Il analyse aussi la situation actuelle des soins aux personnes âgées à laquelle sont confrontées ces familles. Le Gouvernement chinois a reconnu leurs difficultés et prodigue un peu d'aide, qui

augmen^t X économ que le de soutien Gouvern financières global a tion dont et des s ces fam Resume Dura redujo el crecimie e enfoca en económ nte un millón aquellas de famil a veces enfrenta es preocupa es el cui ue han perdido 12 casos

reportados por los medios de comunicación de China en los años 2012 y 2013, así como en las leyes y políticas vigentes que apoyan a las personas que han perdido un hijo único. Además, analiza la situación actual de estas familias con relación al cuidado de ancianos. El gobierno chino ha reconocido el aprieto y ofrece alguna ayuda, que está incrementando pero no siempre es adecuada. Para sustentar el desarrollo económico de China y limitar el crecimiento de su población, es esencial que el gobierno reforme la política de hijo único y establezca un sistema de apoyo integral para las familias que han perdido un hijo único, que incluya ayuda financiera y cuidado de ancianos, y que trabaje para reducir el estigma contra estas familias.

Keywords:

annual r



China's one-child policy, to control its huge population, has been in place for more than 30 years.* It has reduced China's birth rate from 33.4 per 1,000 in 1970 to 12.1 per 1,000 in 2012. Accordingly, the natural growth rate of population in China has fallen, to policy has 4.95 per X contribu he rapid econom Howeve so brought many pr k ratio at geing of the birth, lal populati largest aged number will popu on by 2053, conti accounti Among ose who have los re unable to have an e called shidu pa imate of the

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families who have lost their only children in China if children aged over 30 are included is approximately 1 million. If child deaths below age 15 are also taken into consideration, however, the total estimated number of shidu families is 2,412,600, including 826,900 families with urban household registration and 1,585,700 with rural household registration, according to estimates based on China's 6th National Population Census (2010).

The loss of a child is always terrible, and the loss of an only child is perhaps worse. Yet this vulnerable group did not receive adequate attention from society or the government until recently. In official documents, shidu families and families with disabled children are described as "needy families especially affected by family planning policies". To make their situation visible and claim their rights, some shidu families banded together and called for social and state support.

On 5 June 2012, over 80 representatives of shidu families in China submitted a petition to the National Health and Family Planning Commission, asking for economic compensation, cheaper housing in residential communities exclusively for shidu families, and designation of a special department to manage shidu issues. Their petition, signed by more than 1,000 shidu parents, said:

"When we entered middle or old age, we unfortunately lost our only

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Although elderly chow Chir gove elderly uses 12 the relevant with poli

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ocused on standing of Chinese iding proper mproved. It literature on oncludes The one-child policy in China has gone through three phases as regards the rigidness of its implementation. Between 1980 and 1982, the Chinese government encouraged people to have one child and rewarded those who did so, but did not punish anyone for not doing so, and there was no forced abortion. From 1982, the one-child policy became a fundamental state policy, with very rigid implementation. People who had more than one child were fined, and if they had governmental affiliations, including working in public services, universities or state-owned enterprises, they would be fired. Policy starting from the early 2000s is still strict, but the range of people who are allowed to have more than one child has grown. Couples who are both only children themselves are allowed to have a second child. More recently, couples in which one partner is an only child became eligible to have a second child too.** However, in both cases, the couples need to go through a very complicated procedure to apply to the local government for a permit. Otherwise, they will be fined and punished. Although the onechild policy has been reformed gradually, it is still not adequate to cope with the ageing crisis. Many scholars and experts are concerned that the issue of ageing will become critical if there is no fundamental reform of the one-child policy.^{8,9}

The definition of "elderly" in relation to work and benefits

single fatners, the eligible age is 49.

In China, in the official demographic statistics, those aged 60 and over are counted in the elder X hose retireme 5. Women engaged ns for usually ses, the women public se ige" is d 40 may be defined lled by the deemed Chin rimination has also led in the R many sh The Chir der shidu the relief parents and the the father in a fam support. For

Difficulties and challenges in elderly care

The Chinese government foresaw the issue of elderly care arising from the one-child policy by 2020, but it has been too optimistic about the outcomes and solutions, believing the issue will be resolved through economic development, improved living conditions and increased social welfare and security.* In fact, the support and care for the elderly who are affected by the one-child policy has become an urgent social problem for China.

First, rural elderly people do not have stable sources of income to support their old age, as China's pension system does not cover the entire elderly population. According to one national survey in 2010, only 24% of the elderly population were eligible for a pension and 41% of elderly people had to rely on their families.² At this writing, only those with urban household registration[‡] and full-time employment are entitled to a pension, which is 1,721 RMB per person per month (US\$ 282 per month) on average. In contrast, the 50% of the Chinese population with rural household registration and living on small-scale farming are only entitled to a much lower payment, called rural old age insurance, which is 73–129 RMB per person per month (US\$ 11.9–21.1 USD per month).¹³ China's national poverty threshold is 2,300 RMB per year (US\$ 376 per year, about US\$ 1 per day), so unless elderly people have their own substantial savings or

financial rural old X age insu Most eld lerly care I costs of and buri 3 (US\$ 143) urban ai cial support respecti from the nely high. estate Ther ars. 15 Shidu deve. se they have parents spent a and the There is quality of mes cannot be found by the limited r 1 2010 only

met the needs of 1.8% of the elderly population. ¹⁶ Besides inadequate care facilities, a lack of professional carers and poor management of senior care homes are two major complaints among the elderly population. At present, China has only 20,000 certified elderly carers, and the turnover rate of carers in senior care homes is extremely high, some 100–140%. ¹⁷ Besides, it is the rule in China that if an old person wants to stay in a senior care home, they must be sponsored by their children, even if they will pay the fees themselves. Hence, shidu parents too who can afford to stay in a senior care home will have difficulties being admitted.

Lastly, Chinese people have a long tradition of relying on their children for old age support. For Chinese children, putting their parents into a senior care home is a last resort. In a survey conducted in 2012, 49.5% of elderly people said they would like to stay with their families in their old age. ¹⁸ Along with the elderly care tradition, China's various laws — including the Constitution, Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, Marriage Law and Criminal Law — also make it an obligation on children to support their parents in old age. Particularly, the Criminal Law stipulates that children who will not shoulder the duty of old age support can be sentenced to up to five years in prison. Such laws raise people's expectations of elderly care from their families and excuse the government's absence in old age support and relief policies.

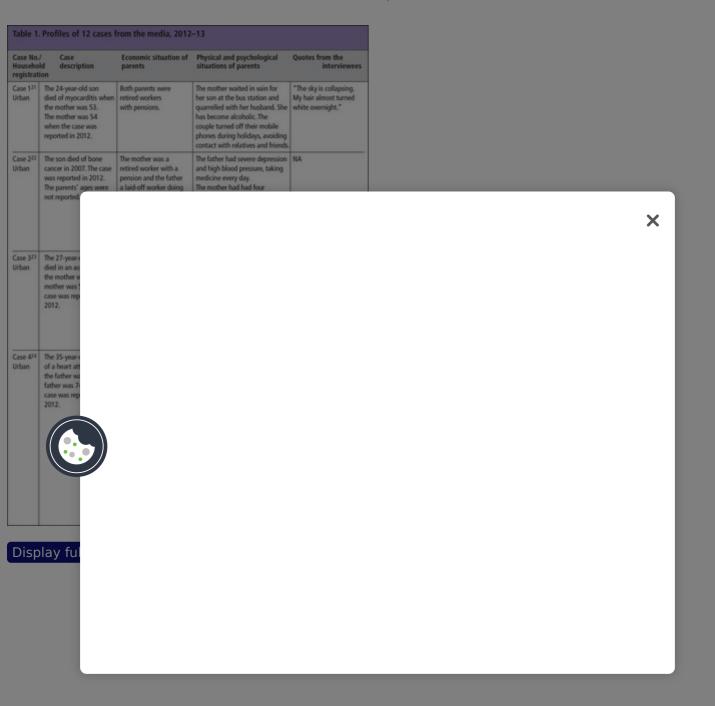


two with rural household registration. Few rural cases are covered by the media, even though the countryside has a larger number of shidu families, who usually need more help. This may be because urban residents are usually more educated and better able to represent themselves. In both rural cases found, the families had lost their only children during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which brought them attention.

The 12 recent cases reported in the Chinese media elaborate on the current situation of some shidu families and their elderly care (<u>Table 1</u>). Mentally and physically struggling, and economically challenged, this group of people are most concerned about elderly care.

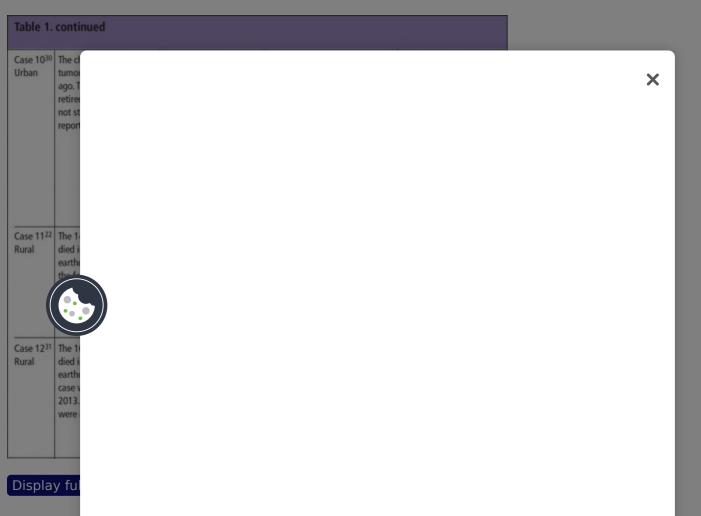
"What we're afraid of is not death, but illness and having no one to rely on for our old age." (Case 6)

Table 1 Profiles of 12 cases from the media, 2012-13. 21-30,22,31



| Case 575 | The 25-year-old daughter | The mother had a | The couple sold their apartment | "Lost my child, lost my |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| Urban | died in a traffic accident when the mother was 53. The mother was 57 when the case was reported in 2012. | monthly pension of over 2,000 RMB and the father had a monthly income of 400–500. | and moved to a city where nobody knew them. The mother tried to commit suicide, but gave up. She thought of herself as "a coward". | backbone." "I'm a walking skeleton. My life is lonely and helpless." |
| Case 6 ³⁶ Urban | The 25-year-old daughter died in a traffic accident when the mother was 49. The mother was 59 when the case was reported in 2012. | The couple were both laid-off workers, having a monthly income of less than 1,500 RMB and only about 500 RMB saved every month. | The couple wanted to commit suicide, unable to accept reality. The couple would look at their daughter's photo several times a day, crying. The father had to take 5-6 medicines for different diseases. | "What we're afraid of is not death, but diseases and having no one to rel on for our old age." |
| Case 7 ²⁷ Urban | The 18-year-old son died of a sudden disease when the mother was 45. The mother was 53 when the case was reported in 2013. | The mother had a monthly persion of 1,400 RMB. | The couple got divorced the second year after their son's death. The mother changed her phone number, moved to a remote village far from her city and stayed there for three years. When she returned, she couldn't avoid her neighbours' sarcasm. She had many nights of sleeplessness and loneliness. She had two abortions. | "Some men had children with other women and came home, asking for divorce." "Perhaps my pain will only be relieved if I seal myself up and run away from this sad world." |
| Case 8 ²⁸ Urban | The 19-year-old son was killed in a fight when the mother was 44. The mother died at the age of 52, a year before the case was reported in 2013. | The handicapped mother was laid off later. She had a morthly salary of 1,100 RMB. The father had an affair and the couple got divorced. | The murdener of her son was sentenced to pay her 150,000 RMB, but she didn't receive any of the money before she died. The mother attempted suicide but was rescued by her friends. She needed an operation for her curved spine but couldn't afford it. The other shids' families who knew her donated the money for her operation but she died during the operation. | NA |
| Case 9 ²⁹ Urban | The 38-year-old son died of a tumour when the mother was 64. The case was reported in 2012 when the son died. | The mother was the director of the birth control office of a state-counced enterprise before she retired. To pay for her son's treatment, they borrowed more than 100,000 RMB and had to repay it little by little after the son died. | She had a stroke out of extreme grief. The mother was pregnant when her son was five, but she was persuaded to have an abortion. She regretted this decision when she lost her son. She said she would not choose abortion if she'd been given a second chance. | "It's not just loneliness. We cannot afford to be old, to be sick and to be dead." "We will never recover from this grief." |

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"No one takes care of us when we're sick; no senior care home is willing to take us; no one will help if we're dying. These are three big issues facing elderly people without their only children. We're getting old. We don't expect to live better but we want to die better." (Case 4)

Many parents who have lost their only children experience severe mental suffering. They say they have lost the meaning in their lives, have been reluctant to face reality, and have cut themselves off from contact with friends and neighbours, leading to isolation. Many among these 12 cases have experienced depression, and some have post-traumatic stress disorder and abuse alcohol. Almost all of them have said they have considered suicide. Their mental suffering has also caused physical health problems, which make their care more difficult. 12

In Chinese tradition, losing children is sometimes thought to be a sign of bad luck. China Weekly reported that a group of shidu parents wanted to spend Chinese New Year at a restaurant. The manager of the restaurant turned them away, saying that they would bring bad luck to his restaurant. Stigma also comes from neighbours; in Case 7, for example, the neighbours of the shidu mother said: "The parents did something evil." Such social stigma prevents shidu families from getting help and understanding from their community, let alone elderly care and support.

In additi the parents, X who are der. Some es become shidu m indiffere s and the cohesive arent is likely to eration in As regar 2013 difficula subsiste s. They had finished her spent a vas killed in master's a truck a ncome of (US\$ 82) less thai worker and per mon

divorced from her husband. When she got ill, it was other shidu parents who raised the money for her surgery, but she died during the operation. For those whose only children died of a disease, they were often deep in debt. In Case 9, the parents spent more than 800,000 RMB (US\$ 130,800), including over 100,000 RMB which they borrowed from relatives and friends, to try to cure their son's disease. They needed to pay the debt off little by little with their pensions and income from part-time jobs.

In Case 4, the old couple had tried many senior care houses and were refused by all, because there was no one to sign the contract on their behalf. To have surgery in China, the patient's child or an immediate family member need to sign a consent letter. Again, shidu parents face this dilemma.

Thus, the lives of shidu parents have been greatly affected by China's one-child policy. Some shidu mothers (Cases 2, 3, 4, 7 and 9) had had abortions to conform with the one-child policy. All were regretful of this fact, given the loss of their only children, but they did not really have any other choice at the time, as the one-child policy was rigidly implemented.

Policies for elderly care of shidu families

Recognizing shidu families and families with a disabled only child as a special

vulnerak **Chinese** X n ten pilot governm vever, there places a subsidies, are very or disabled for exan ed if they only chil adopt or was quite low, only amount has Accordin cal Because the governm main so ackages provided exemplified by three vinces, including

Table 2 Types of subsidy for shidu families in five regions of China $\frac{36-43}{2}$ Data sources: Relevant policy documents issued by the municipal and provincial governments.*

| Region | Subsidy amount and package | Subsidy type | Local minimum living standard* |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| Chongqing ³⁶ | 3,120 RMB per person per year for shidu families. | Annual subsidy only | 360 RMB per person per month |
| Shanghai ^{37,38} | A lump sum of 5,000 RMB per person for <i>shidu</i> families who lost their only children aged 16 or younger, plus 500 RMB per person per month for <i>shidu</i> families. | Lump sum, plus a monthly subsidy | 640 RMB per person per month for people with urban registration and 500 RMB for rural registration |
| Beijing ^{39,40} | A lump sum of 5,000 RMB per person for shidu mothers aged 55 and over and fathers aged 60 and over, plus 200 RMB per person per month for shidu families, plus an annual comprehensive insurance cost of 2,800 RMB per person for shidu families, covering old age support, medical care, accidents, life, etc. | Lump sum, plus a monthly subsidy and an annual subsidy for insurance | 580 RMB per person per month for people with urban registration and 460 RMB for people with rural registration |
| Fujian ^{41,42} | 500 RMB per person per month for shidu families, or 800 RMB per person per month for low-income shidu families. A lump sum of 1,000 RMB per family for shidu couples who use assisted conception technology or 20,000 RMB for those who use intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) technology. | Monthly subsidy, plus one of two possible lump sums for using assisted conception technology | 460 RMB per person per month for people with urban registration and 350 RMB for rural registration in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province |
| Shaanxi ⁴³ | For families with urban household registration, a lump sum of 30,000 RMB per family (including 10,000 RMB for emotional consolation and 20,000 RMB for living costs), plus 140 RMB per person per month for shidu families, or 1,000 RMB per person per month for those aged 60 and over. For families with rural household registration, a lump sum of 20,000 RMB per family (including 10,000 RMB for emotional consolation and 10,000 for living cost), plus 140 RMB per person per month for shidu families, or 800 RMB per person per month for those aged 60 and over. | Differential subsidies based on household registration and age; a lump sum, plus a monthly subsidy | 450-480 RMB per persor per month for people with urban registration and 225-235 RMB for those with rural registration in Xi'an city, capital of Shaanxi province. The amount may vary by district in Xi'an. |

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ar and will 10 million out of 200 million only children born between 1975 and 2010 would die before the age of 25 years. With more and more shidu parents getting old, their elderly care has become an urgent issue for China. The Chinese government realized this and has introduced some policies to improve their situation. However, there is still a long way to go.

The differential between urban and rural China is a particularly important issue. Shidu parents in rural China get much less help and support than their urban counterparts. They have neither pensions nor access to other governmental resources and have received less attention from both the state and the society.

I believe the fundamental solution to elderly care for shidu parents is substantial reform of the one-child policy, with a policy that both avoids unsustainable population growth and relieves the serious ageing problem in China. This is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Within the framework of the current one-child policy and existing elderly care laws and policies in China, I believe shidu families should receive increased economic and emotional support, and efforts made to eliminate discrimination against them.

In addition, the urban-rural differences in lump sum payments and subsidies should not continue. Although living costs are higher in the cities, the families in the countryside usually have lower or no pension. The government should provide shidu families with

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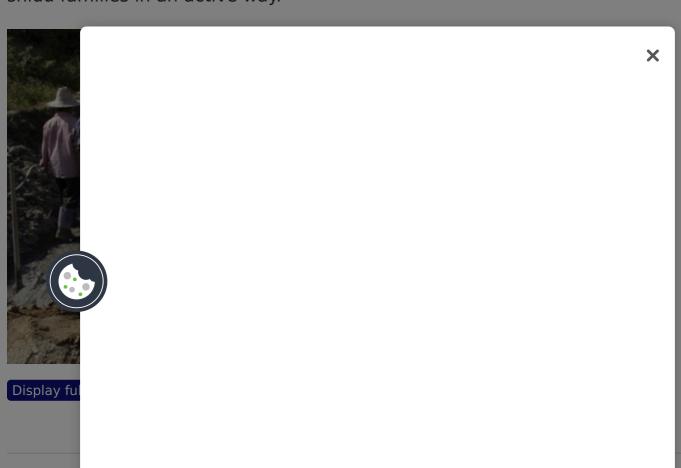
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child with financial and clinical support. For those who are willing to adopt a child, the government should simplify the adoption procedures and waive the adoption fees.

Further comparative, nationally representative data are needed, particularly from the countryside, to better inform policies. China's one-child policy has created the largest number of shidu families in the world. Its unique urban-rural household registration system makes the subject of elderly care, including for shidu families in China, an issue that needs sophisticated study.

On 26 December 2013, the Chinese government issued a new policy on relief for shidu families. 44 The monthly subsidy was increased to 340 RMB per person per month (US\$ 56) for those with urban household registration and 170 RMB per person per month (US\$ 28) for those with rural household registration, in recognition of the challenges facing the shidu families. Under this new policy, the government will also provide subsidies for insurances and put those who are aged 60 and over and also disabled members of shidu families into state-sponsored senior homes; and the richer regions will provide elderly care subsidy to the disabled and economically constrained elders in shidu families. Although it will take some time to turn these guidelines into implementable measures, it is a good sign that China is addressing the elderly care of shidu families in an active way.



Notes

- * The one-child policy was launched with the "Open letter to all the members of the Communist Party and the Communist Youth League regarding the family planning issue in China", issued by the Chinese Government, 25 September 1980.
- † Shidu is the transliteration of the Chinese words 失独 (losing an only child).
- * The terms "shidu families" and "shidu parents" are used interchangeably here. Since all the relevant policies in China target families, the term "shidu families" will be used most of the time, except when parents are particularly referred to.
- † In some parts of China, a couple with rural household registration are allowed to have another child if the first child is a girl; in some ethnic minority regions, a couple can have more than two children.
- ** Mentioned in: Resolutions on Deepening the Reforms on Several Major Issues, released by the Chinese government, 15 November 2013.
- * See the 1980 Open Letter. But the Letter did not mention the risks of parents losing their only children.

† China's household registration system, introduced in early 1950s and still in force today, divides its citizens into those with urban household registration and those with

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* A few regions have more rigid criteria. For example, in Shanghai the policy stipulates that eligible families include only those whose only child died before the age of 16 years. See:

http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/shanghai/node2314/node3124/node3134/node3136/u6ai15 99.html

† The law stipulates that local governments should provide necessary help to parents whose only child is deceased or disabled, who are not going to give birth to or adopt another child.

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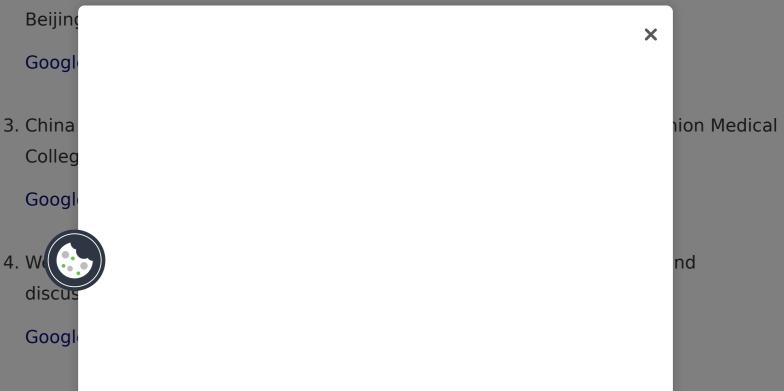
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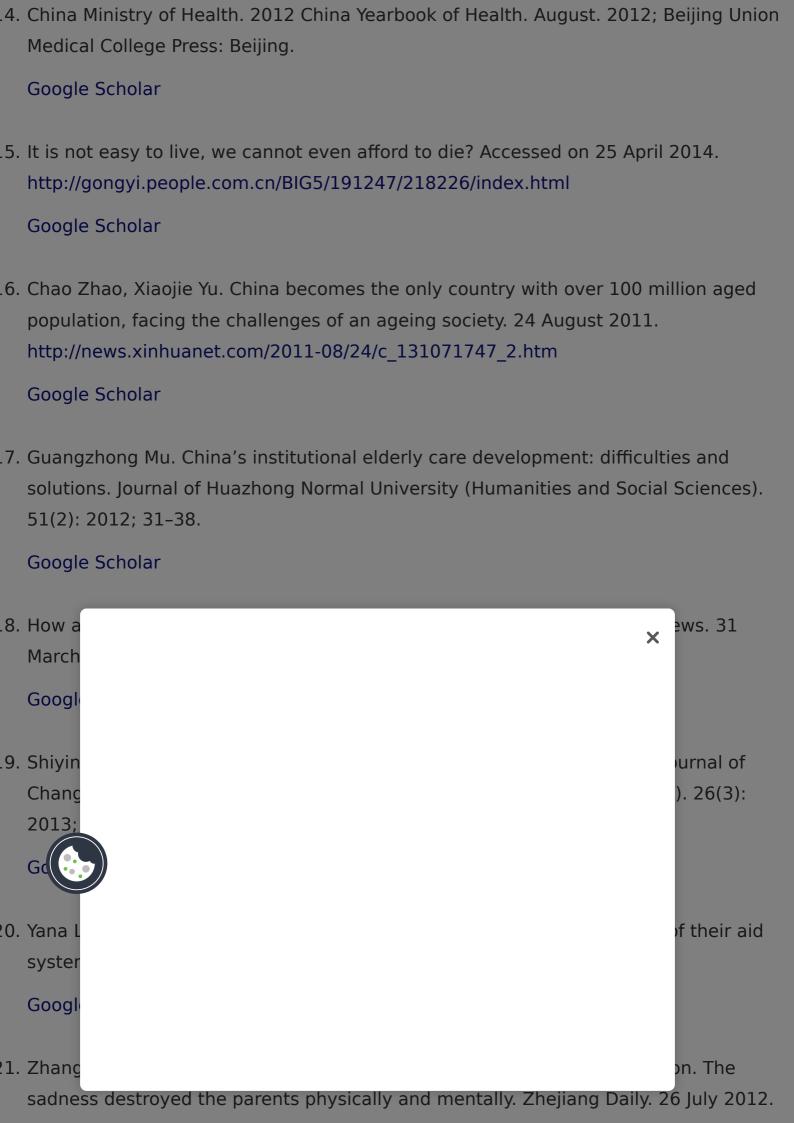
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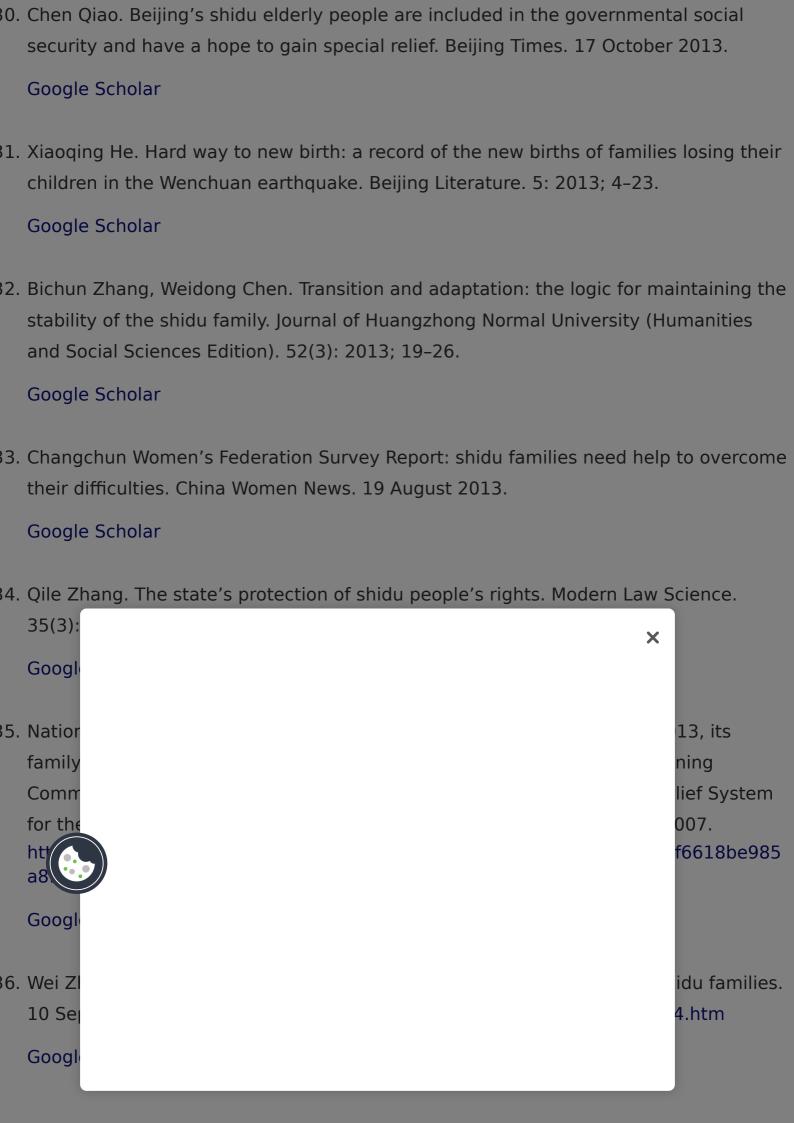


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