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**Aging and Intergenerational Ambivalence in China: An urban-rural comparison**

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## ABSTRACT

Intergenerational relations are adapting to changing socio-economic conditions in China. Rather being lodged in a dichotomy between solidarity and conflict, this chapter reveals the emergence of ambivalence in changing intergenerational ties. Through an analysis of life history interviews collected with two generations of participants in both urban and rural China, this chapter reveals that while filial piety determines children's responsibility for parents' old age support, Chinese parents exhibit ambivalence toward their children's role in their older life plans, which in turn indirectly offers a glimpse into their ambivalent feelings towards their children. Further, the long institutionalized urban-rural divide and the associated dual welfare regime play a key role in accounting for the different contours of ambivalence in urban and rural households. The cultural configuration around filial piety in relation to gender also contribute to the different patterns of ambivalence. Due to differing implementation of the one child policy in urban and rural China, there is no difference in urban parents' old age expectations of sons or daughters while the overwhelming emphasis of old age planning among rural parents is still centered around sons. Methodologically, this chapter also throws new light upon the ways in which ambivalence could be explored in the Chinese cultural context.

*Key words:* ambivalence, China, urban, rural, generation, gender

## **Introduction**

Intergenerational relations have a long established history of investigation within family studies. Early approaches tended to characterize intergenerational relations in a bipolar dichotomy of solidarity or conflict, which often missed the nuanced complications of family relationships that occur in reality. To address this, Luescher and Pillemer (1998) introduced the concept of intergenerational ambivalence to capture the contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring. However, many existing studies that employ the concept of ‘ambivalence’ remain at the individual-level of ambivalence; that is, focus upon the mixed feelings between the parties in intergenerational relationships. By contrast, this chapter follows the call of Connidis (2010, 2012, 2015) to focus upon ‘ambivalence’ as a bridging concept across multiple levels of analysis and connects individual-level ambivalence (mixed feelings towards adult children) with structural ambivalence (parents’ attitudes towards adult children’s role in old age support). This multilevel treatment of the concept of ambivalence is critical to understanding the fundamental issue of ‘how what happens inside families relates to what happens outside them’ (Connidis 2015:78).

China is an ideal context in which to study the concept of ambivalence in family behaviour and decisions. It is an aging society; in 2018 the number of people in China who were 60 and over had reached 250 million or 17 % of the population (China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs 2019). The transition from a youthful society to an aging one took place much quicker and at an earlier stage of economic development than in many other countries. In urban China, economic reforms dismantled the ‘iron rice bowls’ (permanent and secure posts), leading to the loss of 60 million jobs by the end of the 1990s, and withdrew the

welfare function of the work unit. As a result, once again family forms a critical safety net for urban citizens (Solinger 2002, Liu 2007).

Meanwhile, two thirds of the aging population live in rural China where there is no comprehensive welfare and pension support, due to a long standing institutionalized rural-urban segregation. As a result, families, especially in rural areas, remain the main source of welfare and support in contemporary China (Shang and Wu 2011). In rural China, with the easing of restrictions on mobility, a large scale migration of the younger generation from rural areas to cities has taken place. This not only increases physical distance between family members, but also potentially cultural distance as young people develop new lifestyles away from parental influence. These wider changes intertwining with the old ideal of filial piety, which has long been the guiding principle of relations between aging parents and adult children, generate the potential for ambivalence in Chinese families.

#### *Theorizing ambivalence and intergenerational relations*

In the last two decades, family scholars have focused on ambivalence as an improved framework in which to study intergenerational relationships. In everyday language, ambivalence means ‘simultaneously holding positive and negative feelings or perceptions about a situation’ (Peters, Hooker, & Zvonkovic, 2006). In the context of social science investigation, scholars define ambivalence either on a psychological level, referring to conflicting emotions and attitudes (see Rycroft 1973), or on a structural level involving incompatible expectations as a result of conflicting normative structures or socio-structural positions (Merton and Barber 1963). Encompassing both levels of understanding of ambivalence, this ambivalence approach suggests that conflict and contradiction do not

always lead to antagonism, nor does their absence equate to parent-child solidarity (Connidis and McMullin, 2002; Luescher & Pillemeyer, 1998, Luescher 2002; Luscher and Hoff 2013).

Many existing studies employing ‘ambivalence’ to examine intergenerational ties largely focus upon mixed feelings about family relationships at the individual level. From the point of view of adult children, studies have found that those in transition to different life stages and with caregiving duties for parents in poor health are more likely to develop ambivalent feelings (Beaton, Norris, & Partt, 2003). From the point of view of the parents, studies found that children experiencing life circumstances deemed less successful and who had a greater dependency, could trigger ambivalent feelings among the parents (Pillemer & Suitor, 2002).

There are few studies that have gone beyond the micro-level examination of mixed feelings to reveal how ambivalence could link contradictions in family ties to wider social processes and arrangements (see Connidis 2010). To readdress this imbalance, Connidis (2015:77) called for a ‘multi-level analysis that links individual experience; social institutions; and macro-level systems of inequality, social, economic, and political processes, and globalization’. Research should connect individual-level ambivalence to structured ambivalence (Connidis and McMullin, 2002) in order to identify ‘how social structural forces create contradictions and conflicts that are made manifest in the social interactions of family life and must be worked out in family members’ encounters with one another’ (Connidis 2010: 140).

The only existing study (available in English) using ambivalence in the context of China is by Guo, Chi and Silverstein (2013). In their study of older parents’ ambivalent

feelings towards their adult children in rural China, they used an indirect quantitative measure of emotional ambivalence in an analysis that emphasized social dimensions of ambivalence. They successfully highlighted the macro-level structure - gender and class as reflected in *Hukou* (i.e. household registration system) - and social change (migration) to micro-level ambivalent feelings of older parents toward their adult children. By contrast, this chapter adopts an indirect qualitative assessment of ambivalence through an examination of multi-generational life history interviews in urban and rural China. It identifies the features of intergenerational ambivalence through a generational comparison as well as an urban-rural comparison and indicates that the structural ambivalence is tightly intertwined with individual level ambivalence. While filial piety determines children's responsibility for parents' old age support, Chinese parents exhibit ambivalence about their children's role in their older life plans, which in turn indirectly offers a glimpse into their mixed feelings toward their children. Furthermore, it highlights how the wider structural context, including cultural as well as urban-rural divide in socio-economic development and social welfare provision, plays a key role in shaping intergenerational ambivalence at the micro level. Methodologically, this chapter also throws new light upon the ways in which ambivalence could be explored in the Chinese cultural context: due to filial discourse, Chinese parents avoid painting a negative picture of the relationship with their children when asked directly in interview; only through commenting about their old age care practices or expectations did parents indirectly reveal their complex feelings towards their children.

### **China Context**

Traditionally, family as the primary social unit in Confucian ideology plays a critical role in structuring Chinese life experiences. Confucian principles dictate a highly structured family unit ruled by a set of ethics in which respect, obligation and reciprocity are central to

building harmonious relationships within it; albeit with this harmony based upon a hierarchy of generation and gender (Mann, 2001). During the Maoist period (1949–1976), the political campaigns launched by the state undercut the power and authority of family elders to a degree, but material necessity often meant that a strengthening of close family ties was required (Davis & Harrell, 1993). The post-Mao era has seen the introduction of the one-child policy as well as market reforms; the way in which Chinese families adapt to these new socio-economic circumstances remains the focus of continuing discussion.

Survey-based studies have found that while parental authority has declined in China, the filial attitudes of support for parents remain strong at normative levels (Silverstein, Cong & Li 2006, Cong and Silverstein 2012, Ye & He, 2008). In pragmatic terms, changes regarding intergenerational living arrangements and transfer are underway, but these vary by region. Various empirical studies have identified a shift from traditional filial piety characterized by a subordination of the young to the will and welfare of parents and grandparents, to filial care based upon ‘mutual need, mutual gratitude and mutual support’ (see Croll, 2008).

Existing literature remains largely built upon a filial obligation discourse (Liu 2017). However, this reflects how intergenerational relations ought to be, constituting a form of ‘generational rhetoric’ (Luescher, 2011, 192). The overemphasis on ‘generational rhetoric’ has often led to ‘a generalizing antagonistic argumentation between idealization (solidarity) and threat (conflict)’ (Luescher, 2011, 192). By contrast, the ambivalence framework provides the opportunity to capture the subtleties, contradictions and complexities of navigating family relationships in an era of social change. Through exploring the ambivalent experiences of Chinese households, this chapter aims to address the imbalance within the

existing scholarship of intergenerational relations in China, which tends to prioritize the function and structure of relationships at the expense of feelings and emotions.

## **Method**

The majority of existing studies on intergenerational relations in rural China are survey-based (Ye & He, 2008, Silverstein, Cong & Li 2006, Guo, Chi & Silverstein 2013). Although these statistical studies may map out a trend, this is often to the detriment of examining in more depth the complexities and dynamics of lived experiences, tensions, strategies and expectations of people who have gone through these social changes. The qualitative methodology adopted here captures the micro-level processes that constructed people's experiences.

Research shows the value of life histories in capturing lived experiences and personal accounts of human agency (Wengraf, Chamberlayne, P. & Bornat, J. 2002). Furthermore, life histories provide narratives of shared past experiences from the point of view of different generations within the family. This is particularly important in studying family relationships because it describes the overlap in the chronology of the family unit. As most people spend the majority of their lives in families, life history interviewing gains in-depth insights into their changing family relationships and relevant strategies.

This chapter draws upon 100 life history interviews from a larger project collected across three generations in urban and rural China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Between October 2016 and October 2018, the author led a team of local research assistants and postdoctoral researchers and collected a total of 560 life history interviews. The cases included in this chapter are selected from urban sites of Tianjin and Xi'an, rural Shandong and rural Fujian.

By repeat visits, and frequent communication via social media, the author followed the lives of one-third of the interviewees through ethnographic observation over a period of 36 months (October 2016 to September 2019). The ethnographic data added context and further dimensions to the narratives collected via life history interviews. Interviews were conducted with at least three generations in each family unit, including a mixed gender distribution among each generation, and families from different socio-economic backgrounds. This chapter focuses upon only the experiences of first two generations: the older generation (defined as aged 60 and over - the majority of interviewees were born in the 1940s and early 1950s) and the middle generation (defined as aged 30 to 50 - the majority of interviewees were born in the 1960s and early 1970s). Each interviewee was asked to recall his/her childhood first and then encouraged to take the lead. If not covered during the natural course of the ensuing conversation, specific questions relating to relationships with family members were asked.

Luescher (2011) proposed that one should understand ambivalence as a ‘sensitizing concept’. Defined by Blumer (1954) it offers the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances; whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look (Luescher 2011). As the Chinese translation of the term ambivalence is very scholarly, no direct questions about intergenerational ambivalence were asked. Instead, questions such as ‘how is your relationship with your children/parents?’ were probed. However, the answer to this question is not straight forward and cannot be read at face value.

Due to socio-cultural factors, three explicit processes are required to capture the ambivalence in Chinese intergenerational ties. First, as unfilial behaviour is considered one of

the worst wrongs in Chinese morality and directly linked to one's social reputation, parents carefully avoided describing their children as 'unfilial' and the most common response in interview was 'it is okay (*keyi*); children are good (*haihao*)'. These vague terms indicate a sense of ambivalence. Second, when probed further about old age care practices or expectations, ambivalent feelings towards their children's role in old age support were prevalent and on various occasions the narratives revealed dissatisfaction with their adult children. Third, many parents recognized their adult children's limited capacity to provide old age support as a consequence of wider societal constraints; this meant their dissatisfaction did not necessarily turn into intergenerational conflict - but they also did not generate intergenerational solidarity either. Ambivalent feelings towards adult children were indirectly revealed, rather than directly revealed, throughout the interviews and observations.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed by local research assistants. I applied a thematic analysis to each transcript to identify common issues that emerged from different transcripts in each generation in addition to an in-depth analysis of intergenerational relations for each household. Names have been altered to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees. Intergenerational relations, as narrated by interviewees, covered a wide and broad range of experiences. In this chapter, I present the findings related to the theme of ambivalence only.

## **Results**

### *Urban China – older generation*

This generation was in their 70s or early 80s. If physically able, they lived alone and looked after themselves on an everyday basis. Their adult children (on average they had two) contacted them via phone / video call on a weekly basis. Their state pension, often from

factory work, was around 2,000 Yuan per month. Adult children generally offered financial support (ranging from 100 to 1,000 Yuan, depending upon their own economic situation) during birthdays and important Chinese festivals.

Mrs Wang (formerly a factory worker) in Tianjin explained her family situation: she had two married sons, the younger son lived in the same city around 20 minutes' car journey away and the elder son worked in Guangdong (another province). Her husband had a stroke 12 years ago which left his half body paralyzed, but he was still able to walk, and during the ensuing years he had been hospitalized twice for a period of over 40 days on each occasion. On both occasions hospital expenses were covered by a combination of their own savings and urban residents' medical care provision (i.e. hospital charges could be reimbursed up to 80 per cent). During each hospitalization, both her sons had been working in another city and so only the younger daughter-in-law sent meals once or twice in total. Mrs Wang made the following reflection that demonstrates 'an awareness of a temporary or enduring irreconcilability', a key feature of ambivalence (Luescher, 2002):

*During both hospitalization periods, it was only me. Hospital staff thought we were 'childless' (her emphasis). Later they heard that I had children and asked me to call my sons. I replied, why should I? If my husband was to die today or tomorrow, I would gather both sons here. What if he didn't die and also my children lost their jobs? I cannot afford to provide a living for my sons. Other people agreed.... I once had a fortune teller tell me that my younger son will have a great achievement and I will certainly rely upon him in future. I said to myself – how could I rely upon him since he was often all over the place (for work).*

Mrs Wang claimed to have a good relationship with both sons. Their absence was not

due to any ill feelings. But her narrative was recalled in an ironic tone. On one hand, she revealed a sense of sadness and dissatisfaction with her sons because they had not conformed with filial piety, but on the other hand, she understood the irreconcilability between the demands upon adult children's time available for old age support and the need to commit time to making a living for themselves. This was also recognized by the middle generation: Mrs Wang's younger daughter-in-law said of her own parents as well as her in-laws' old age arrangement: *I know what most older parents need is our companionship. But I cannot satisfy this. My workplace is already like a battle field and requires all my energy. I tried my best to earn money to buy accommodation for them to live near my older sister's flat.* In effect she attempted to provide financial support to replace the instrumental and emotional support demanded of her. By doing so she also aimed to transfer care responsibility to her sibling, whom she assumed had less important career than herself.

This irreconcilability is exacerbated by the neoliberal market reform, which has made precarity a feature of employment in post-Mao China. Mrs Wang's elder son was a technician, working in Guangzhou because its factories paid better than local factories. Mrs Wang's younger son had lost his job with a state-owned enterprise during the economic restructuring of the late 1990s, was subsequently engaged in a series of sales positions which required frequent travel, and finally he had become self-employed (although the interview with his wife revealed his business was not very successful).

Like Mrs Wang, parents had ambivalent feelings about relying upon their children in old age. A considerable number of interviewees had been told by friends or relatives that the actual provision of good quality care was also dependent upon the goodwill of children. Mrs Zhong recalled her elder brother's arrangement: he had suffered a stroke and was mentally

impaired as a result. His four sons cared for him on a rotation but only the eldest and youngest son's family changed his clothes and cleaned his accommodation. The families of the remaining two sons' only sent meals and did nothing else. It would seem that filial piety continues to have moral effects among adult children but no longer has the overarching binding power to guide old age practices. As Mr Fang said, *people say that raising children is for old age protection, but what if they don't look after you in old age, what can you do about it?* Mr Fang never directly criticized his children, referring to them as 'okay' and 'fine'. But when describing his own old age plan, he revealed a sense of choicelessness and disappointment with his children. This chimed with a general emerging pattern that on the one hand, older parents attempted to hang onto the moral power of filial piety and hoped for their children to comply, but on the other hand, they recognized uncertainties beyond their own control. As a consequence, unless there was a major conflict between two generations, the older generation did not exhibit strong like or dislike towards their children, the ambivalence in intergenerational ties was captured in their response 'okay' (*keyi*) to questions about their relationship with their children.

As a consequence of dealing with ambivalence, intergenerational ties may produce 'innovative, emancipatory actions and forms of relating' (Luescher, 2011, p.196). When asked of her plans for her own old age, Mrs Wang explained: *my husband has discussed this with me, if four old people* (i.e. including her younger daughter-in-law's parents with whom they get on well) *live nearby, we are sufficient to look after each other. It can't be that all four become unable to move about at the same time. When one becomes bedbound, can't three people look after one sufficiently? We won't burden the younger generation. Only when we can't manage on our own, then we can ask for their help. We cannot give them trouble. Their life is already pitiful – one day their work is stable, and tomorrow if the enterprise is*

*not well, they will have to be laid off.*

### *Urban China – middle generation*

For the middle generation, oscillating between reliance upon children and using institutional care for old age support has become a dominant feature of their future expectations. Many interviewees stated this as a matter of fact. When asked about their future old age arrangement, the most common response was that '*I have no specific planning. If my children have the ability to care for and support me, they can do that. If they don't have the ability to support me, I will just go to an old age care home*'. Mrs Yuan (1 daughter) offered a more elaborated answer:

*I've been thinking about what I should do about my old age. I feel that I shouldn't rely upon my child. But I still have to rely upon her. This is her obligation. If there is an old age home that suits me, I can go there but I will miss my child. I once said to my daughter – I will follow her wherever she is. She said that she wanted me to live with her so that I can clean her home and then her dad could help her with other chores.*

There are at least three layers of consideration in her reflection. First, the cultural norm of filial obligation required of adult children still played a role in her making an old age arrangement. Second, the interdependence between adult children and old parents is the dominant feature in Chinese families, especially when adult children have young children themselves; i.e. old parents were not only expected to undertake household chores for their adult children, they were also important carers for grandchildren. Third, the level of socialization of care remains low in China. Whilst there are stories of elite families (former government officials, fellows of the Academy of Science, etc.) having access to good quality institutional care; ordinary families found it difficult to access or afford a good quality old

age care home. Further, there is still a general distrust of care services (including both childcare and old age care) provided by non-familial members and so care by family members continues to be the preferred form of old age arrangement.

Some therefore thought about other possibilities. Mr Guo was a school teacher in Xi'an with a (one-child) daughter busy preparing to study abroad. When I asked what his old age plan would be if his daughter settles abroad, he explained a form called collective aging he had been contemplating: *some of us who got on well could find a flat or house together. For example, my brother, my sister and my wife's sister. Four families living together. The ideal situation is that the children of four families would take turns to visit us. One day per adult children's family. I am not sure if it would work. But after all, we are all part of (an extended) family. I prefer to live with my own generation, eating together and playing together rather than with my daughter's family. We are two different generations. I feel even now definitely I won't live with the younger generation in future.* The reason why Mr Guo did not want to live with the younger generation partly related to his own experience with his parents: after they divorced, each adult child took on the obligation to look after one parent. He brought in his father to live with his family, but this co-living between generations brought inconveniences: *we have different habits. My father only showers once a week in hot summer because he felt that in the past he only showered once a month or sometimes once a year. But myself and my wife felt in the summer people should shower once a day. Anyway, different generational lifestyle.*

Guo, Chi and Silverstein (2013) found that greater ambivalence is felt towards sons than towards daughters in rural China. They explain this supports the claim that parents feel more ambivalent about children of the gender deemed most responsible for supporting them.

The gender difference is not strongly felt in the urban middle generation because this generation mostly have only one child, as a result of the strict implementation of one child policy in urban cities. In cities, only daughters assume the same normative obligation, just as the only sons do.

When compared to the older generation, the link between structural-level ambivalence and individual-level ambivalence is not straightforward among the middle generation. There is a temporal dimension, the middle generation are relatively young, not yet in need of care, and so ambivalent feelings towards their children lie in a contrast between ‘present’ and ‘future’. When asked about the relationship with their children, the middle generation often used the term ‘intimate’ unlike the vague ‘okay’ answer of the older generation. However, when discussing future expectations, the tone became uncertain; ‘I don’t know’ and ‘it depends’ become more common. While the middle generation was more positive about the relationship with their children at present, there was an ambivalence towards their children in the future sense.

#### *Rural China – Older generation*

Since the 1990s, outward migration has been a common feature of rural life in China. Remittances from migrant workers have played a role in lifting rural families out of a subsistence livelihood dependent upon agriculture and therefore potentially great hardship in times of poor harvest. However, it has also put a strain upon those left behind - mostly older people. These older people lived alone and looked after themselves on an everyday basis. If the one parent was incapacitated, the first choice carer was their spouse. If widowed, remaining members of their kinship network were solicited to provide instrumental support with the migrating children provided financial support (unpredictable depending upon

various factors, see below). The state pension, introduced in 2009, was 50 – 100 Yuan per month depending upon the region and only paid to those whose children contribute to the scheme [I discussed in details elsewhere that the state pension was only available to older people whose children paid into their own scheme (Liu and Cook 2020)].

In common with the enduring irreconcilability noted by Mrs Wang in an urban setting, Mrs Zhao (2 sons and 2 daughters) in rural Shandong commented: ‘*Both my sons are working away. Neither of them are with us. What is the point of raising children? We feel like the family without sons. Other villagers say “how successful your sons are!” I reply “distant water cannot quench instant thirst; they can only look after me if they are close by!”*’ Her husband explained that whenever they visited their sons’ families in the city it was not a pleasant experience due to different generational habits (e.g. hygiene habits) and while they were keen to see their grandchildren, they hesitated to visit.

In fact, Mrs Zhao’s eldest child, a daughter, recently divorced and returned to the village, visited them every day and helped with farm work and domestic chores. In line with Guo, Chi and Silverstein’s 2013’s findings that rural parents were less ambivalent towards daughters than towards sons, here daughters were excluded from old age expectation/planning even though in practice stayed behind daughters stepped up their emotional/instrumental support to their parents due to their brothers’ migration (c. Xu 2001). The reason for ambivalent feelings towards sons is related to the traditional patrilineal and patrilocal system specified in Confucianism (Mann 2001); that is, familial continuity is maintained by producing male heirs. Sons are considered obligated to provide old-age support for their parents with married daughters located onto the filial map of their in-laws.

Migration has modified the role of sons in old-age support. Among the interviewees, all-round support from sons specified in traditional filial piety was reduced to financial

support in the case of migrating sons. Cong and Silverstein (2011) found financial support (enhanced by migration) could have positive effects on financial security and the welfare of parental generations, to some degree offsetting the disadvantage of living at a distance. However, I found that adult children's financial support to their stayed behind parents is dependent upon various factors including (i) employment status of the migrating children, (ii) the temporality of migration, (iii) family life cycle of the migrating children and (iv) the family relations between the older generation and adult child generation (Liu 2016). These mediating factors make old age parents aware that complete reliance upon adult children might not be feasible in practice, thus generating ambivalent feelings towards children's role in old age support.

Mrs Yu (2 sons and 2 daughters) in rural Shandong commented: '*my elder son and his wife both said that they wanted me to live with them in future. In the city, they live in their own flat and pay a lot attention to hygiene. I don't think I would get used to it. In the city, the floor is tiled and once entering the flat, one needs to change from shoes to slippers. At my rural house, I feel more relaxed*'. This oscillation in respect of co-living with her elder son's family, on the surface, seemed grounded in perceived differences in generational living habits. In her first interview, Mrs Yu portrayed an 'Okay' relationship with her both sons. However, a subsequent interview with Mrs Yu's second son revealed that his elder brother, albeit the most affluent among all children, was not keen on providing any support to his parents as their relationship lacked intimacy ('*they seemed to regard my parents as their enemies*'). As the second son was economically much worse off; he claimed that he had the will but less capacity to provide a better life for his parents. When asked on a subsequent occasion, who Mrs Yu would like to look after her in old age, she replied: *my hope is to be healthy so I don't need anyone to look after me. If I need to be looked after, that will be*

*troublesome. If I ask my daughters to look after, this is after all not their obligation. If I ask sons to look after me, they have their own families to tend to.* She did not openly criticize her children but her narratives about them did not reveal enthusiasm either.

In negotiating ambivalence, unlike urban parents who had more resources and outlets to make innovative plans, rural parents resorted to the basic strategy of ‘saving for a rainy day’ as a primary form of old age protection. Indeed, Mrs Gao (farmer and housewife) in rural Fujian had hidden some of her savings in her married daughter’s name because she felt that if it was visible to her family then her sons might want to borrow it for a business venture which could fail. But if she said this to her sons, it would damage her relationship with them and so jeopardize the prospect old age support in future. Mrs Dai (farmer and housewife) agreed that to ‘*hold onto my own money in old age – this was the safest form of old age protection*’.

A consistent feature of the rural experience is that despite being ambivalent, none of the older generation would consider moving to state-run care homes. In 2015, rural China had 27,000 state-run care homes providing 2.5 million beds, however the bed occupation rate is low – only 45 per cent – and studies reveal a strong antipathy among rural older people (Zhang 2016). This antipathy is because state-run care homes are associated with their original function as establishments for the childless and the social stigma attached to being childless is seen as an unfilial act towards one’s family and lineage. Interviewees also thought it would damage their children’s reputation.

#### *Rural China – middle generation*

Until very recent amendments, from 1979 onwards, the one child policy was strictly

implemented in urban China through workplace fines and punishment. However, in rural China (since the mid-1980s) households have been allowed to have a second child if the first is a girl, and rural families often continued to have children until they had a son anyway. The rural middle generation in this study usually had 2 to 5 children, with an average of 3. Because of this demographic background, the pattern of ambivalence about children's role in old age support varied depending upon whether the family had a son or not.

In families with only daughters, strong ambivalence was expressed. When asked about his plans for old age support, Mr Ding (3 daughters) of rural Shandong commented: *I haven't thought about it carefully. It is still a long way off. What I can do now is to bring them up and provide them with an education. If they are willing to look after us, that will be great. But I think we should not really put too many expectations upon them. When my daughters grow up, they will all have their own families. If their future husband is fine, that will be good; but if not, what can we do? The best is to rely upon ourselves.*

By contrast, Mr Jing (3 daughters and 1 son) of Fujian, when asked what his old age expectations said: *my children must be filial. That's without doubt. I have spent so much money on their education. Is it possible that they don't show any gratitude towards me?* When I asked him where he would like to settle (city or countryside), like others in his generation, Mr Jing preferred the village in old age: *I have been living in the city for a long time but I prefer a country life to city life. I can grow vegetables and raise some fish in the pond in the countryside. It is uncomfortable in the city.* When asked which child he would like to live with in future, he replied: *none of them since they would be in the cities, but as long as my son sent money back, that will be fine. If my daughters visit us occasionally that would be good.* When asked if the tradition of sons, rather than daughters taking the main

responsibility of looking after parents in old age should change, he said ‘*in rural villages, it is impossible to change this tradition*’.

This generation had been willing to invest in daughters’ education if they were academically able to continue unlike the rural older generation. However, patrilineal and patrilocal tradition still dominates their mindset and so Mr Ding oscillated between relying upon daughters and relying upon self-provision with a tendency more towards the latter. Mr Jing, on the other hand, appreciated the irreconcilability between his desire of living in the countryside and children’s livelihood in the city and so had adapted his expectations to focus upon financial support from his son and emotional support from his daughters.

Unlike the middle generation in urban China, rural parents of the middle generation had another layer of complication in the relationship with their children; i.e. many of these parents were migrants themselves and so were absent from a considerable part of the growing up process of their own children. Mr Ding and Mr Jing had both worked away in the cities. While Mr Jing’s wife followed him, Mr Ding’s wife stayed behind. Interviews with their children described a sense of ambivalence towards their absent fathers: according to filial piety, children ought to have an intimate relationship with their parents (Liu 2017); however due to a lack of communication and everyday interaction, the children did not know how to be intimate with their father. In her interview, Mr Jing’s wife expressed her worry that she sometimes felt awkward when spending time with her children due to a lack of familiarity.

### **Discussions and conclusion**

Intergenerational relations are adapting to changing socio-economic conditions in China. Rather being lodged in a dichotomy between solidarity and conflict, this chapter

reveals the emergence of ambivalence in changing intergenerational ties. Going beyond interpersonal interactions as the context of producing ambivalence, it shows how ambivalence is shaped by wider socio-economic and cultural changes, and can be an important interface to link social structures and individual action.

While awareness of the irreconcilability and the ‘processes of oscillation between polarized juxtapositions’ (Luescher 2011, 196) feature both urban and rural older parents’ narratives around their later life plans, the long institutionalized urban-rural divide and the associated dual welfare regime play a key role in accounting for the different contours of ambivalence in urban and rural households. Since the 1950s the development of cities has been prioritized in the Communist Party’s industrialization strategy, with resources and capital pouring into them at the expense of rural China (Xiang 2007). One consequence is that the income ratio between urban residents and rural residents has been around 4:1 since the 1990s (Guo 2013). This inequality is exacerbated in the welfare system; e.g. in 2019, a retired factory workers’ monthly pension in the city was around 2,000 Yuan while the state monthly pension (only introduced in 2009) for a rural citizen was around 100 Yuan (i.e. a ratio of 20:1).

As a result of the economic inequality underlying urban and rural households, when faced with ambivalence, urban and rural parents use different practices to manage it. Connidis and McMullin (2002, p.565) note, ‘power and variations in the resources available to individuals’ means ‘variability in the options available for managing ambivalence’. Urban households created innovative aging plans, revealing the potential of ambivalence for personal and social development (Luescher 2011). However, for the rural households which struggle financially, a strategy of hiding savings from their children could potentially become

a source of intergenerational conflict and emotional alienation. Indeed, during interviews, the tone and atmosphere when talking about managing ambivalence among the older generation revealed a sharp contrast: urban parents explained vivaciously a future they had designed, something they were looking forward to whilst rural parents on most occasions seemed choiceless and dreading (one rural interviewee commenting '*between couples, the one to die first was the luckiest*').

The cultural configuration around filial piety in relation to gender also contribute to the different patterns of ambivalence. Traditionally, the son's family is responsible for their parents' old age care and married daughters are obligated to provide support to their in-laws. Due to differing implementation of the one child policy in urban and rural China, parents of the middle generation have different expectations of sons and daughters in the two locations. In urban China, there is no difference in old age expectations of sons or daughters because they are the only child. While oscillating between relying upon their children or not, there is a tendency to be more prone to self-reliance in later life and there is a greater readiness to accept institutional care as an alternative.

Among the rural middle generation, the overwhelming emphasis of old age planning is still centered around sons, albeit now with parents contemplating whether or not to practice generational co-living with sons – a feature of traditional filial piety. A positive consequence of experiencing ambivalence towards sons is that this generation became more egalitarian in terms of providing educational opportunities to sons and daughters. This trend continued in the younger generation (interviewees born in the 1980s and 1990s); more than half of younger parents in rural villages wanted to have a daughter after having had a son and now made far greater material investment in their daughters.

This chapter also raises important methodological questions around the investigation of ambivalence in a Chinese context. On the surface, ambivalent feelings towards children and the ambivalence in respect of children's role in old age support are separate. However, my research reveals that these two dimensions are intertwined in China due to the discourse of filial piety and associated reputational damage of being labeled 'unfilial'. When probed about the relationship with their children, parents tended to avoid depicting a negative picture. However, when narrating old age care practices or plans, their dissatisfaction with their children's performance was revealed. Yet parents did recognize how societal constraints may confine their children's care capacity and so dissatisfaction with their children was not necessarily translated into conflict but the relationship was also not an intimate one. Among the middle generation, this chapter also points to a temporal dimension: whilst a more positive and intimate relationship with their children existed at present, the middle generation exhibited ambivalent feelings towards their 'future' children due to the uncertainties ahead. Indeed, the Chinese processes of expressing ambivalence in intergenerational ties indicate the subtle link between structural-level ambivalence and individual-level ambivalence.

### **Implications for the Future**

There are policy implications of the research findings around ambivalence. The trajectory of social welfare reform in China follows the residual model shaped by Confucian principles that emphasize the family's responsibilities and the state's residual function (Shang and Wu 2011). Indeed, in 2013, the Chinese state legislated further to enhance the role of children in providing support to parents, and in so doing aimed to strengthen the solidarity of intergenerational relationships as depicted in the traditional Chinese family (Xu, 2013). These social policies are highly inappropriate for the Chinese family that is being reconfigured due

to social change. As explained above, different degrees of ambivalence have been detected in parents' attitudes towards adult children and their role in providing old age support. A familialization approach, enforced by the state from the top, artificially bound all family members together as a welfare unit and ignored the emergence of ambivalent feelings among its members shaped by external constraint. I discussed elsewhere that rural older people had to paid into their children's pension in order to receive their own pension due to rural pension grounded in a family based policy framework (Liu and Cook 2020). Rather than expose ambivalence, the familialization approach which aims to strengthen the interdependence of family members would further disguise ambivalence and potentially escalate ambivalence into intergenerational conflicts.

Connidis & McMullin (2002, p. 566) warn us that 'family members are too often left to deal with problems that are structurally created and therefore can be solved only through fundamental change in structured social relations'. In the case of China, current social policies are particularly problematic for rural residents because they fail to take into consideration the long established rural-urban segregation and under-developed rural economy and infrastructure. For example, due to insufficient pension provision in rural China, the economic interdependence between older parents and adult migrating children is intense. However, migrant children also suffered from systemic urban-rural segregation and were placed at the lower end of the labor market in urban China. The lack of financial resources in rural households exposed in my research created further strains upon relationships (Liu 2016). The middle generation, who were migrants themselves, missed out on the growing up of their own children; lack of familiarity and everyday interactions created barriers in building an intimate relationship between parents and children which contributed to the production of ambivalent feelings on both sides. Only through further market

development to provide better jobs for rural migrants, improved welfare provision for migrant families (such as access to affordable housing and education in cities), improved financial support and care infrastructure by the state in rural China, can family members effectively combat structurally-created ambivalence.

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