



Filial piety, love or money? Foundation of old-age support in urban China

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intertwining issues of filial obligation, material interest and emotional intimacy in driving adult children's provision of old-age support in family settings. Drawing upon multi-generational life history interviews with urban Chinese families, this article reveals how the configuration of these multiple forces is governed by the socio-economic and demographic context of a particular time. The findings dispute a lineal modernization model of transition and generational change (from past family relations structured by filial obligation to the present emotion-laden nuclear family). Instead the multi-generational analysis reveals a tightening association of multiple forces around the younger generation, intensified by the one-child demographic structure, post-Mao commercialization of urban housing and establishment of the market economy. Finally, this article highlights the role of performance in carrying out old-age support. "Surface work" is enacted in situations where tensions between conformity to public morality and private intents (emotional or material) cannot be reconciled.

Introduction

Early modernization theory hypothesized that industrialization, rural–urban migration, and the growth of modern social institutions such as the welfare state led to the weakening of filial obligations and reduction of familial support for older people (Burgess, 1960; Cowgill & Holmes, 1972). Since the 1990s, a new generation of modernity theorists have described changes to family practices in the late twentieth century as indicative of the late modern condition. In contrast to early theorists who focused on responsibilities and obligations, models of the new generation center on intimate relationships (such as Giddens', 1992 transformation of intimacy theory and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim's, 2002 individualization theory), theorizing them in terms of individualized and negotiated emotions and interactions. As part of responses to, and critiques of, new modernity theorists' work on modernity and intimacy, the subfield known as sociology of the family in the West (especially the UK) has produced an emergent body of literature focusing on the emotional quality of the relationship and ways in which different acts of intimacy sustain relational ties (Gabb, 2008; Jamieson, 2011). Scholarship on Chinese intergenerational relations also reflects this theoretical shift. Many studies conducted in China up to the 1990s concerned the question of whether traditional filial piety is eroded or sustained by societal modernization (see Davis-Friedmann, 1991; Whyte, 1997; Yan, 2003). More recent research focuses on affection and emotions within Chinese families (Evans, 2007; Liu, 2017; Yan, 2016) and this has led

some scholars to argue there is an "intimate turn" occurring in Chinese family life (Yan, 2021: 16).

This article joins the discussion of modernization and family change by challenging the artificial distinction – present in both early and new modernity writings – that traditional family relations are structured by filial obligation while modern family relations are emotion-laden and characterized by negotiations of intimacy. Disputing a lineal transition from past to present, this article draws upon Finch's (1989) conceptual model and examines how the moral imperative of filial obligation, material considerations and intimate ties interact to drive old-age support and how the configuration of various forces is shaped by the wider socio-economic context of a particular time. The empirical focus is China, where family culture has been a fundamental structure shaping people's experiences for over two thousand years (Lin, 1992), and where tremendous socio-economic transformations have taken place since the mid-twentieth century. Through 120 life history interviews (with both genders and three generations across three cities) from a larger research project on Chinese family life, this article investigates how the foundation of old-age support in China has evolved since 1949. Rather than focusing on one intergenerational relationship (e.g. between aging parents and their adult children – a common formula in existing research) this article answers the call of Aboderin (2004) and examines the motivations behind old-age support in three successive generations. This comparison enables an understanding of past practices rather than simply assuming a 'traditional' baseline prescribed by Confucian

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discourse of filial piety.

Generation and gender represent the theoretical lens through which the forces driving old-age support are examined here. Generation is particularly relevant in China, because Chinese society experienced various politically-driven mass socio-economic movements during the latter half of the twentieth century, alongside rapid economic growth into the twenty-first century (Lian, 2014), meaning the generations of a family alive today have had very different experiences at each stage of their life. Gender is significant, because of its traditional role in differentiating adult children's responsibilities towards their parents (Wolf, 1972), yet women's liberation has been a core component of the Chinese Communist Party's rhetoric since 1949. The generational and gendered approach to family dynamics moves the analysis beyond the early model of filial piety and the recent intimate turn in the study of intergenerational relations in China and enables a more nuanced understanding of what drives men and women, across three generations, to provide old-age support.

The Chinese context

Since Confucius, the cultural value of filial piety has been the normative guide for how elders should be respected and cared for by younger generations. Confucius wrote "In serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity" (Chai & Chai, 1965: 331). Key features of filial piety included a total submission of the will of adult children to that of the senior generation; adult children providing all-round support to their parents; and a patrilineal obligation undertaken primarily by daughters-in-law because patrilocal custom placed them on the filial map of their in-laws.

In the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals began to question Confucian ideas and demand greater freedom from family control for young people and women (Baker, 1979), albeit with limited impact beyond the elite (Barlow, 2004). The communist revolution in the mid-twentieth century, however, completely changed the political landscape. After gaining power, the Party set about launching various campaigns to reform the family with the aim of stamping out the power of family elders in order to reorient citizens' loyalty to the state (Davis & Harrell, 1993). In urban China, private housing was nationalized and individuals were allocated jobs to state-run work units meaning livelihoods were less dependent upon family and kinship networks. Importantly, the communist women's liberation movement mobilized able-bodied women into paid work outside the home and this secure full-time employment became a normative feature of urban women's lives in the Maoist era (Liu, 2007). While these campaigns in theory diminished the power and authority of family elders, countervailing forces such as material necessity and political chaos during the Cultural Revolution strengthened family ties (Davis & Harrell, 1993).

Since Chairman Mao's death in 1976, China has followed a development trajectory centered on economic modernization. Urban economic restructuring removed the 'iron rice bowl' (de facto permanent employment) leading to the loss of 60 million jobs by the end of the 1990s (Solinger, 2006) and also withdrew the welfare function from the work unit (e.g. ended the public housing allocation). Against this backdrop, the Party attempted to reinstate family as crucial for moral order and social stability by further legislating and reinforcing citizens' obligation to support their aging parents (Ikels, 2006). As a result, families remain the main providers of funding and services for their members in contemporary China (Shang & Wu, 2011).

Following an unprecedented level of state intervention, urban Chinese society now faces acute demographic challenges as many cities have aging populations. While improved living standards have increased life expectancy, the state's family planning policy – the "one-child policy" – has contributed most to the aging trend. This policy was formally introduced in 1979 in response to concerns that uncontrolled population

growth would jeopardize economic development and was strictly and effectively implemented in urban areas through workplace fines and other punitive measures (Liu, 2007). However, the first generation born during the one-child policy have now become parents themselves, placing on their shoulders the responsibility of having to support two parents and four grandparents (see Ikels, 2006). To address this inverse population pyramid, the state ended the one-child policy in 2015, initially introducing a national two-child policy and then a three-child policy in 2021. However, few couples – just 5 or 6 % – have opted for a second child, citing inadequate childcare and increased living costs in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai as the main reasons (Feng, 2021). The rapid economic and demographic changes that have taken place in contemporary China make it particularly instructive for a theoretical assessment of modernization and family change.

Conceptual framings

Early modernization and aging theory posits a contrast between the past and the present: "In all societies there is evidence of mutual obligations and responsibilities between aged parents and their adult children, but these obligations appear to be less clear and less binding in modern societies" (Cowgill & Holmes, 1972: 307). In other words, modernization leads to the weakening of filial obligations. In 'traditional' pre-industrial societies, support for aged parents was compelled by "norms of filial obligations" (Aboderin, 2004: 37, original emphasis). Through their property rights and positions of authority in the family, parents had the power to ensure children conformed with their filial obligation to provide support, regardless of affection. In 'modern' industrial societies, disruptive forces such as urbanization, education and technology have led to a loss of older people's economic or social authority and reduced their power to enforce the fulfilment of filial obligations (Aboderin, 2004). As a result, adult children prioritize their nuclear family and support for older parents has become more reliant on children's affection.

Despite moving away from early modernization theory, new generation modernity theorists implicitly echo the assumption underlying the early modernization framework that families are now emotion-laden and argue that negotiations of intimacy are a defining feature of late modern times. In his landmark work on self, intimacy and modernity, Giddens (1991) talks about the ascendancy of the "pure relationship", i.e. "one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver" (Giddens, 1991: 6). The key feature of this pure relationship is that it is mainly sustained through mutual self-disclosure: constantly revealing one's inner feelings to the other (Giddens, 1991). Despite sharing Giddens' interest in the implications of late modern social change for personal relationships, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue the emphasis on negotiation and contingency in intimate relationships is a practice caused by the process of individualization in the late modern period. New modernity theories have been challenged for obscuring the empirical reality (Jamieson, 1998; Smart & Shipman, 2004) and the ethnocentrism of such claims (Jackson & Ho, 2020). Scholars have also questioned their narrow conceptualizations of intimacy (i.e. heterosexual couples and alternatives to heteronormative coupledom) and widened the scope of enquiry into the practices of personal and family life beyond couples and nuclear households (Gabb, 2008; Jackson & Ho, 2020; Morgan, 1996). The responses to and critiques of Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim over the last two decades represent a significant phase in the theoretical shift in British sociology of family from a functionalist focus on family structure to a practice-oriented approach encapsulating the quality of relationships that brings affective and emotional dimensions into the analytical equation (Jamieson, 2011).

Influenced by early and new modernity theorizing, the study of intergenerational relations in China has also witnessed an intimate turn in its focus of analysis. In particular, early scholarship on aging was preoccupied with whether filial obligation weakened with economic

modernization. Ethnographic research during the 1990s (see Miller, 2004; Yan, 2003; Zhang, 2004) described a decline in parental authority and painted a dismal picture of old-age life in rural China, inferring a “breakdown of the traditional mechanism of elder support” (Yan, 2003: 171). In cities, Cheung and Kwan (2009) found that development (measured by average gross domestic product per capita, average wage and percentage of the workforce employed in the service sector) erodes filial piety and financial support from grown children to elder parents. However, analyzing survey data, other studies have found a widespread and continuing endorsement of filial support in contemporary China in spite of modernization (Hu & Scott, 2016; Whyte, 2003). Adult children continue to provide financial, practical, and emotional support for their parents, despite not living together (Chen, Leeson, & Liu, 2017). What may appear to be separate nuclear families from the outside are in fact nodes anchored within an extended family network which have constant physical interactions and exchanges with their kin (Xu & Xia, 2014).

More recent studies engage with the new modernity theorists’ work and draw attention to the affective ties within Chinese families (Evans, 2007, Liu, 2017, Yan, 2016, Zhong & Ho, 2014). While this body of literature accentuates the importance of emotions in shaping family relationships, an implicit assumption is that the emotionalization of parent-child relationships is something new and a trait only associated with generations born since the 1980s. Evans (2007), for example, celebrates the communicative intimacy between mothers and singleton daughters in Beijing while highlighting such feminizations of intimacy have reinforced ideas about women’s gendered attributes and responsibilities. Yan (2016) suggests that the one-child policy dramatically increased parental investment in the only-child generation, which contributed to the “emotionalization of parent-child relationships, which in turn has generated a solid foundation for the emergent intergenerational intimacy” (2016: 253, my emphasis). Building upon Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s work on individualization, Yan argues the emergence of intergenerational intimacy continues early trends in family change reflected by the “disembodiment of the individual” from “the patriarchal order” with a decline in parental authority and a rise in youth power (Yan, 2011a: 208) as part of the processes involved in the individualization of Chinese families. Further, grounded in a conceptual dichotomy between money and intimacy, Yan considered the economic calculation and activities between generations a contamination of intergenerational intimacy (Yan, 2011b). This new body of scholarship has led to an argument for an “intimate turn” in Chinese family life (Yan, 2021: 16).

This article challenges the lineal transitional model from a past family structured by filial obligations to an emotionalization of family relations as societies modernize; that is, it debunks an underlying principle of both the early and new modernity theorists’ writing. While acknowledging the current intellectual turn to emotions and nuances in family relationships, this article cautions against viewing generational changes as a process in which early generations are more filial and younger generations are more attentive to intimacy. Instead, Janet Finch’s work on intergenerational relations provides an informative framework for understanding the multi-faceted processes of changes in family life across generations and across time.

Finch (1989) drew upon two early separate but related debates concerning family behavior in the disciplines of anthropology and history. In anthropology, one group of scholars argued that familial support in kinship groups was bound by moral obligation without desire for personal gain (Fortes, 1969) while their opponents argued that family relationships also considered the material interests of individuals (Leach, 1961). In the debate among family historians, the ‘household economics’ school of thought broadly focused upon the economic self-interest of family members as the key to understanding family relationships whilst the ‘sentiments’ school of thought emphasized attachments associated with family relationships at the center of family change (Anderson, 1980). Revamping and extending these theoretical discussions, Finch developed an analytical framework which called for

an examination of the balance between feelings of affection, moral imperatives of obligation, and material calculations and an understanding of “how the particular sets of economic circumstances in which women and men are placed shape the character of that balance at any point in time” (1989:77). Grounded in this framework, Finch and Mason’s study of the family support practices in north-west England in the 1990s found that filial obligations continued to play a role in family life but they had definite limits; the actual support provided was the outcome of negotiation over time rather than given automatically (Finch & Mason, 1992).

The work of Finch and Mason exposed the various forces that might simultaneously drive family support at a particular point in time, offering a dynamism absent from the lineal modernization and family change model. Unfortunately, alternative theorizations such as these (often by feminist critics) are seldom translated and taken on in societies beyond the English speaking world (Jackson & Ho, 2020) and so both early and new modernity theorists’ frameworks heavily influenced the scholarship in developing countries. This article is informed by these ‘alternative’ theorizations subject to a number of caveats. Britain has a deep history of individualism (MacFarlane, 1978) while China does not. While filial obligation exists in British families (Finch & Mason, 1990), it is on an entirely different scale in China where filial piety has been systematically institutionalized through state governance since the Han dynasty (Lin, 1992). As captured by the phrase “compressed modernity” (Chang, 1999), China has experienced extremely rapid economic and demographic transformations where the same process took nearly two centuries in Euro-American societies. China’s state-led modernization trajectories profoundly shaped and intensified the configuration of various forces behind old-age support.

Influenced by Finch (1989)’s framework, whilst taking into consideration Chinese local history and context, I highlight several ambiguities in classical filial piety that have escaped attention in existing scholarship but are crucial to analyzing the drivers in old-age support. First, classical filial piety emphasized the general principle and function of old-age support in Chinese families. To assess the quality of old-age support, individuals were evaluated against everyday rituals (for example, how to dress, talk, sit and walk in front of parents and in-laws) as specified in the Confucian classical text *Book of Rites* (Hu & Chen, 2007). While sharing the general principles of submission and support, actual care practices were more individualized for different elite lineage groups in various historical eras and this was reflected in their own family teachings (*jiaxun*) (Tan, 2007). Filial piety therefore entails an adaptability to suit the material conditions of different historical eras, but this adaptability may generate ambiguity. Whilst all forms of care behaviors can be embraced as a function of old-age support, ‘good-quality’ filial practices are subjective and flexible.

Second, in analyzing pre-modern Chinese society, Hamilton (1990) noted that as filial piety is symbolized in the duty of submission, the prescribed emotion interrelating children and parents in the family is respect (*Jing*), unlike in the West where love is the prescribed emotion. Although respect does not preclude a closer attachment, it requires no personal involvement and so filial piety does not necessarily entail love/affection by default. It remains undiscussed within the protocols of classical filial piety if a closer personal attachment would produce qualitatively different support practices.

Third, since it is the son who continues the family line in a patriarchal society, classical filial piety is grounded in the father-son relationship (Wolf, 1972). Married daughters are located on the filial map of their in-laws (and the *Book of Rites* detailed the practices for them to follow in everyday family life in the presence of their in-laws). Within this cultural discourse, there is a lack of detailed guidance on the relationship between the natal family and their married daughters. Although existing literature has documented the increasing ties between married daughters and their natal families, the logic behind their interactions and how this has evolved across different generations in the context of wider socio-economic changes has received limited attention.

Fourth, there is an inherent contradiction regarding the role of

material interest in old-age support. Classical filial piety emphasizes ‘unconditional’ altruistic support provided by adult children (Lin, 1992), meaning material gain should never serve as a justification for filial piety. However, sons’ unfilial behavior could lead to economic sanctions and exclusion from inheriting parental property in China (Ikels, 2004). Examining archival data of rural household division practices in the 1930s, Wang (2002) found that in wealthy families, land and housing were used as important means to regulate adult children’s behavior. This ambiguity around motives raises a note of methodological caution: material consideration may underlie filial support even if individuals are unwilling to admit this to be the case.

Fifth, filial piety serves as a form of public morality. Finch (1989:139) highlights how people present themselves and their families to the outside world according to their “understanding of what are the dominant and acceptable public norms of family life”. The present article goes a step further to emphasize the *performative* element involved in filial piety. Being filial is critical to someone’s public standing in Chinese society and so displaying filial piety is as important as the practice itself. The performative element allows the caregiver to oscillate along a spectrum between a private practice of intimate care and a public act with spectators in mind, potentially reshaping the caregiver’s motivation and the quality of the care. I have reformulated Hochschild’s (1983) concept of “surface acting” (describing how people manage their emotions socially) as “surface work” to capture the way in which people behave in order to meet normative patterns of filial support even though they do not really feel like doing so. A feature of this “surface work” is that the care receiver and inner family circles are aware it is merely a performance but the extended family do not necessarily want to expose this motivation because filiality is linked not only to adult children’s own public standing but also the reputation of the extended family (c.f. Cao, 2019 on rural China).

Methodology

This article draws upon life history interviews from a larger project which adopted a multi-sited and comparative research design. Between October 2016 and October 2018, the author led a team of local research assistants and conducted a total of 330 life history interviews in multiple locations in China. Purposive non-random sampling techniques were adopted to identify and recruit interviewees in order to target particular groups of the population. Four key criteria were adopted in this sampling process: location (i.e. urban; rural; semi-rural/semi-urban), socio-economic background (i.e. professional and working-class occupations), age and gender. This article focuses on family data collected from the 120 interviews undertaken only in urban sites (Tianjin, Xi’an, and Guangzhou). The sample includes a mixed gender distribution among each generation, and families from different socio-economic backgrounds (see Table 1). The older generation (G1) was born between the early 1930s and early 1950s. The middle generation (G2) was born in the 1960s and the early 1970s. The younger generation (G3) was born between the mid-1980s and 2000s. The parents of G1 (majority born in the 1910s) are coded G0.

Each interviewee was asked to recall his/her childhood first and then encouraged to take the lead. If not covered during the course of the ensuing conversation, specific questions regarding relationships with family members were asked. Because in family interviews participants tend to “present public accounts of private relationships” (Finch, 1989:77) and so researchers “should not conclude that people are motivated by duty simply because they say that they are” (Finch, 1989: 6, original emphasis), the driving forces behind old-age support have been assessed indirectly through an analysis of intergenerational relations. The findings below focus upon two families (the Chen’s and the Li’s, see Fig. 1 for family characteristics) to present an in-depth and nuanced analysis of overarching themes. Complementary data from other urban families have also been included to develop general conclusions.

Table 1
Characteristics of interviewees from selected three generational families and two generational families.

| Family No. | Site | Members interviewed (occupation ^a and year of birth) |
|------------|-----------|---|
| 1 | Guangzhou | mother (factory worker 1952), daughter (civil servant 1976) |
| 2 | Guangzhou | mother (nursery teacher, 1969), father (sales manager 1961), son (1996, postgraduate student) |
| 3 | Guangzhou | mother (1936, factory worker), daughter (1968, social worker), son-in-law (1963, chef), granddaughter (1997, student) |
| 4 | Guangzhou | father (construction worker, 1944); son (factory worker, 1968); daughter-in-law (factory worker, 1967); grandson (student, 1997) |
| 5 | Guangzhou | mother (shop assistant, 1942); father (factory worker, 1932); daughter (school teacher, 1968); grandson (unemployed, 1994) |
| 6 | Guangzhou | mother (technician, 1943); father (engineer, 1941); daughter (office clerk, 1971); son-in-law (manager, 1969); grandson (student, 2002) |
| 7 | Guangzhou | mother (shop assistant, 1937); father (manager, 1936); daughter (school teacher, 1968); son-in-law (civil servant, 1964); son (postgrad student, 1994) |
| 8 | Guangzhou | mother (1961 factory worker), father (1956, senior civil servant), son (1991, social worker) |
| 9 | Guangzhou | father (factory worker, 1948); mother (factory worker, 1955); daughter (tour guide, 1987); son-in-law (academic, 1984) |
| 10 | Guangzhou | father (factory worker, 1958); daughter (sales manager, 1987) |
| 11 | Guangzhou | father (company driver 1965); son (office clerk 1993) |
| 12 | Guangzhou | father (factory accountant, 1940), mother (1947, factory worker), daughter (sales manager, 1970), husband (technician, 1969) |
| 13 | Guangzhou | Father (shop assistant, 1971), son (sales manager, 1996) |
| 14 | Xi’an | father (factory manager, 1949); mother (factory worker, 1952); son (factory manager, 1972); daughter-in-law (factory accountant, 1972); granddaughter (student, 1998) |
| 15 | Xi’an | mother (street vendor, 1951); father (railway station worker, 1953); daughter (school teacher, 1978); granddaughter (student, 2002) |
| 16 | Xi’an | father (small shop owner, 1949); mother (shop assistant, 1950); son (small shop owner, 1974); daughter-in-law (shop assistant, 1974); granddaughter (student, 2002) |
| 17 | Xi’an | mother (nurse, 1942); son (technician, 1964); daughter-in-law (cleaner, 1967); grandson (office clerk, 1992) |
| 18 | Xi’an | mother (small shop owner, 1947); father (factory worker, 1942); son (factory worker, 1975), daughter-in-law (nursery teacher, 1976); grandson (student, 1999) |
| 19 | Xi’an | mother (office clerk, 1964), father (company driver, 1961), son (1988, salesman) |
| 20 | Xi’an | mother (rental property manager, 1951); son (school headmaster, 1973); granddaughter (student, 1998) |
| 21 | Xi’an | mother (factory accountant, 1966); daughter (civil servant, 1989) |
| 22 | Xi’an | father (factory manager, 1940), son (factory worker, 1961); daughter-in-law (factory worker, 1956); grandson (shop assistant, 1986) |
| 23 | Xi’an | father (professor, 1940), son (administrator, 1977), daughter (bank manager, 1975) |
| 24 | Xi’an | mother (administrator, 1968), daughter (administrator, 1989) |
| 25 | Xi’an | father (company manager 1963), son (sales manager, 1989) |
| 26 | Xi’an | father (office worker, 1960), son (company manager, 1989) |
| 27 | Xi’an | father (senior civil servant, 1954), niece (technician, 1989) |
| 28 | Xi’an | father (doctor, 1969), daughter (student, 1998) |
| 29 | Xi’an | mother (shop assistant, 1972), daughter (nurse, 1996) |
| 30 | Xi’an | mother (factory worker, 1962), son (civil servant, 1985) |
| 31 | Xi’an | Father (company driver, 1973), son (sales manager, 1998) |
| 32 | Tianjin | mother (factory worker, 1947); son (sales manager, 1974) |

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

| Family No. | Site | Members interviewed (occupation ^a and year of birth) |
|------------|---------|---|
| 33 | Tianjin | mother (factory accountant, 1945); father (factory worker, 1944); elder daughter (cashier, 1970); second daughter (manager, 1974) |
| 34 | Tianjin | mother (factory worker, 1943); son (taxi driver, 1969), daughter (shop assistant, 1968); grandson (office clerk, 1991) |
| 35 | Tianjin | mother (factory worker, 1954); daughter (nurse, 1983) |
| 36 | Tianjin | mother (shop assistant, 1957); son (salesperson, 1984) |
| 37 | Tianjin | father (factory accountant, 1952); son (bank manager, 1980) |
| 38 | Tianjin | mother (factory worker, 1947); daughter (manager, 1975) |
| 39 | Tianjin | father (unemployed, 1969); daughter (office clerk, 1993) |
| 40 | Tianjin | mother (factory worker, 1953); son (civil servant, 1981) |

^a When referring to interviewees born between 1930s and 1950s, the occupation indicates the main occupation before their retirement.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed (c. 2, 500 pages of transcripts for urban families). A thematic analysis was applied to each transcript to identify common issues emerging in each generation. Further in-depth analysis of intergenerational relations was undertaken by gender. Names and certain identifying characteristics have been altered to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. Intergenerational relations, as narrated by interviewees, covered a broad range of experiences.¹ The findings focus upon *why* people provide old-age support. Filial piety was cited almost universally as the motivation, but more nuanced narratives emerged when interviewees described their intergenerational relations.

This article has not included the analysis of rural families and migrant households² who could only provide old-age support to their aging parents from a distance. It is further acknowledged that the representativeness of an in-depth qualitative study of Chinese families is inevitably limited by the non-probability-based sampling strategy adopted here. However, the multi-sited and generational sequence design generated comparable and multi-generational family data in different sites to identify common themes and practices across generations and this fills a significant gap in the existing scholarship of Chinese family studies.

Findings

Intimacy

There is an implicit understanding in early scholarship that the Chinese family is institutionally antipathetic to personal feelings. For example, Fei Xiaotong's seminal study of rural China in the Republican era suggested that both intergenerational relations and the relationship between husband and wife was stripped of "ordinary emotions" by the demands of a family's practical activities; in order to maximize economic efficiency within the family, discipline and prescribed family relationship rules were required (rather than personal feelings) (Fei, Hamilton, & Wang, 1992: 85). This has been challenged by a more recent model focused on affective ties within Chinese families, drawing upon research with generations born since 1980 (Evans, 2007, Yan, 2016).

The lineal transition model was not supported by the data collected for this study. There is no clear evidence of a move from early

¹ Other findings from the wider project are reported elsewhere (see Liu, 2021; Liu, 2022a; Liu, 2022b; Liu, 2022c).

² The wider research project includes data from three generational rural families. However, the intertwining between filial morality, material consideration and affective ties in rural families will be discussed in other forthcoming publications.

generations devoid of emotions to younger generations more attentive to intimacy. In early generations (G1 and G2), due to the multiple-siblings' demographic structure, parents often had emotional favorites; as a result, the favored child developed a very close emotional attachment towards their parent(s) while other siblings might not. For example, when asked about relations with their parents, Ms. Li and her youngest sister (urban G1) provided contrasting accounts. Ms. Li recalled: "Every day I was concerned about my parents and how they were. My heart tensed when thinking about them" [she cried several times when referring to her past time with her parents]. Conversely, her youngest sister commented: "There is no particular intimate feeling towards them. Ever since childhood, my mother liked my younger brother best. My father liked my second sister [Ms. Li] best". In turn, when Ms. Li became a parent, she also had a favorite: "My husband favors the younger daughter; I don't know why. But I favor my elder daughter. She has been pretty ever since she was a child. When walking with her outside, passersby would comment how good looking she was! I felt very proud". Private interviews with the daughters confirmed that Elder Daughter Li was strongly attached to her mother while Younger Daughter Li loved her father.

This study finds that an adult child's strong emotional attachment to his/her parents in early generations differed little from the One Child generation's intimacy with their parents. In effect, the intensity of intergenerational intimacy among younger generation documented in existing literature may be more a manifestation of family demographics than a result of generational attitudinal change due to modernization. Among early generations, only child families were rare; but on these exceptional occasions, the relation between the only child and their parents was very strong. For example, Mr. Li (G1) recalled:

I felt intimate towards both of my parents. Because I was the only child, they doted on me. ...When my mother died, I wasn't at home. When I got back, her body was already in the mortuary. I wasn't allowed to go inside so I secretly climbed over the hospital wall and went inside, going through each body and looking for her. Once I found her, I kissed her forehead to say goodbye [he became emotional in the interview].

Similarly, the One Child Generation was given exclusive emotional devotion from their parents and bitterness between generations and among siblings became absent. When asked whom they considered the most intimate persons in their life, the majority of G3, including both single and married ones, chose their parents.³ Grandson Chen (G3) commented: "My parents are definitely number one in the ranking of intimacy. They brought me up so they would be number one without doubt and then my wife. I have spent the longest time with my parents and have deep feelings for them".

Filial obligation and prior emotional attachment can both drive adult children to provide old-age support; however, these two forces interact on a spectrum with private acts of intimate care at one end and public acts with spectators in mind at the other. Ms. Chen's father had been in the military and was absent from family life most of the time. According to Ms. Chen, "Even when he was at home, he was selfish and didn't care about the children at all". Moreover, Ms. Chen's mother did not like her husband because he beat her frequently earlier in their marriage. In his old age, when Ms. Chen's father became ill, Ms. Chen and her siblings visited and assisted their mother in changing his bedsheets and dirty clothes. Ms. Chen said "We were not close to him at all ... but after all, he is our father" implying the inexorable and binding nature of parent-child relations encapsulated in filial obligation, but overall she and her siblings supported their father largely in an effort to comply with the

³ Many of the One Child Generation complained about a childhood in which their parents often pushed them hard to excel academically but still considered their parents the most intimate because they felt that their parents' intention (wanting them to succeed) was a good one.

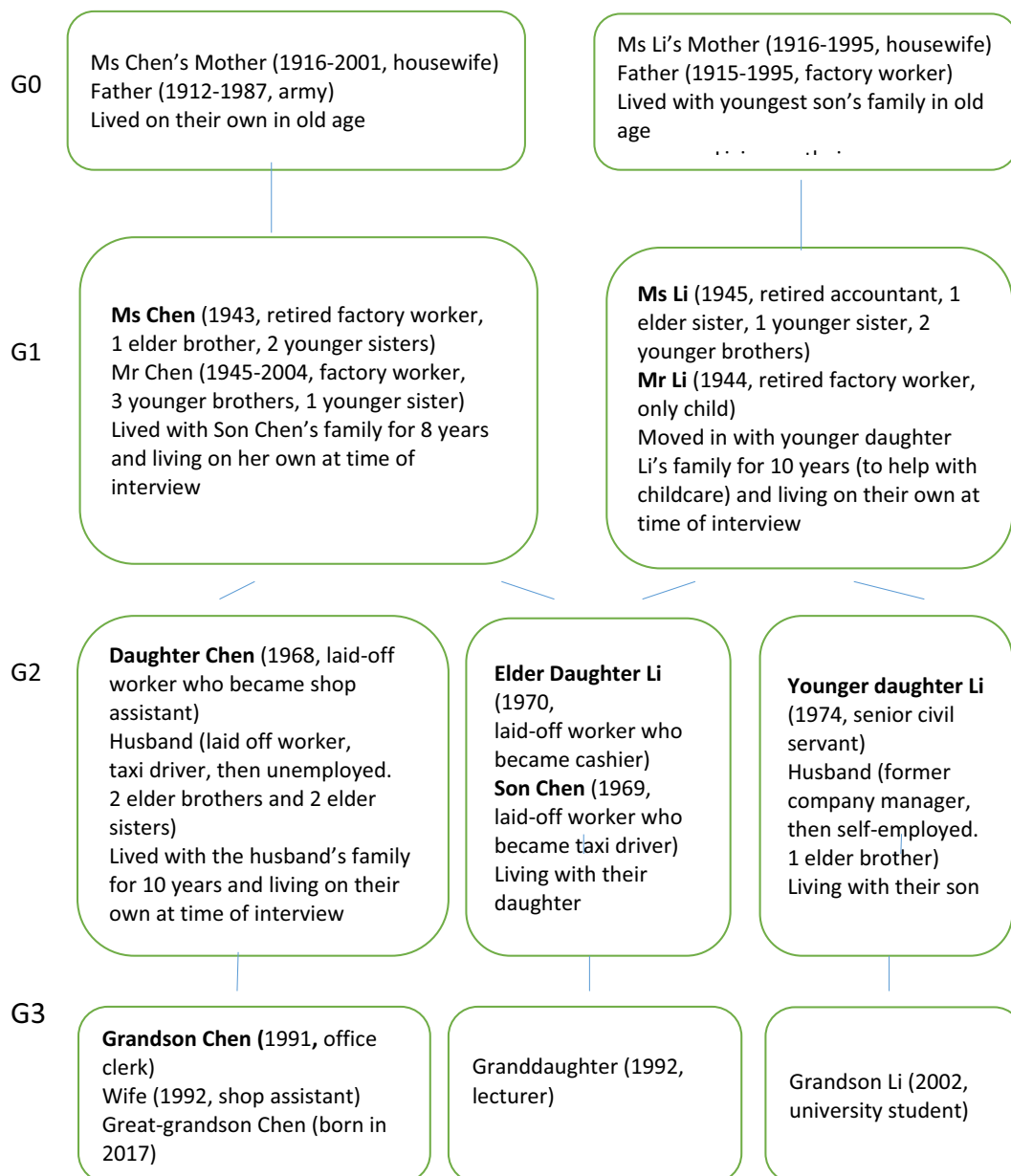


Fig. 1. Family structure of Ms. Chen and Ms. Li (those in bold were interviewed).

public morality of filial piety rather than as an act of intimacy.⁴

Prior emotional attachment (or the absence of it) did not determine whether or not adult children *performed* filial support to their parents, but stronger emotional attachment enhanced the quality of old-age care considerably. Ms. Li had an intense attachment to her parents: “I visited them every day. My husband always complained, saying that I cared far too much about my natal family”. Motivated by her love for her parents, Ms. Li asked her mother to move in with her when her father died as she felt her younger brother’s family (with whom her parents had been living) may not look after her mother well enough. In another family, Mr. Yuan’s widowed mother lived among her four sons’ families on rotation; his third brother had a particularly strong attachment to his mother and so willingly carried out intimate personal care such as

combing her hair and cutting her toenails when she stayed with him.

In studying care provision among transnational families, [Baldassar, Kilkey, Merla, and Wilding \(2014\)](#) suggest that the quality of the relationship is more important to the efficacy of care exchange than the mode and form of caregiving. This highlights the need to look beyond the care task and pay attention to the quality of care. Western scholarship on care has drawn attention to two different but interrelated dimensions of care in the English language: “caring for” and “caring about”. Caring for is an activity state, often associated with serving needs, specific tasks and obligations while caring about someone is a feeling state, linked with affection, affinity and emotion ([Thomas, 1993](#); [Ungerson, 1990](#)). Empirical studies in Western countries have shown that effective care necessarily embodies “caring about” emotions while some family care can be provided in an instrumental and calculative spirit ([Bowlby, McKie, Gregory, & Macpherson, 2010](#)). This study reveals that in the first two generations while “caring about” emotions often led to “caring for” activities (as seen in Ms. Li towards her parents), care activities alone did not automatically contain “caring about”

⁴ Because the children were emotionally close to their mother, old-age support for her father could be interpreted as an act of intimacy towards the mother. Simultaneously, children’s old-age support helped enable their extended family to retain a ‘filial’ image in the public eye.

emotions (as seen in Ms. Chen towards her father). For the One Child Generation, the high-level emotional attachment to parents corresponded to a firm declaration of filial support for parents in old age. Grandson Chen explained: “I have deep feelings for them [parents]. Their old-age support is definitely us. ...When they become immobile, I will definitely look after them”. For Grandson Chen, the feeling of affection and filial obligation had merged in his psyche. In others, a filial act (often expressed in monetary form among G3) served as a means to demonstrate the emotional attachment to parents. For example, a young professional (G3, male) had bought a private pension for his father to express his emotional gratitude for bringing him up after his parents divorced. Transcending the generational divide, a common feature that characterizes all urban families is that there is a qualitative difference in old-age support between intergenerational relationships built on intimate ties and those bound merely by duty and obligations.

Material interest

This section analyzes how material interest enters family emotional dramas and how such patterns shape adult children’s filial support. Here I focus upon parental property transmission as it has proved an important mechanism through which relations between generations and among adult siblings are structured (Goody, 1976). Household division was central to the enactment of property transmission in pre-1949 China and traditionally followed the principle of “equal division among sons” (*zhuzi jufen zhi*) (Yu, 2006). This normally happened when parents passed away but also if the parents agreed to the division request put forward by adult sons (Yu 2006). Since 1949, China’s social transformations from Mao’s political engineering through the post-Mao economic reform era have dramatically reshaped the socio-economic landscape and created various “micro-institutional” contexts (Whyte, 2020:355) for household division to modify and adapt. Consequently, the way property transmission shapes intergenerational relations and old-age support varies depending upon generation.

Material consideration was not pronounced in G1:G0 relationships because of the wider socio-economic context of the time. The planned economy (1950 to early 1990s) guaranteed most urban citizens lifetime employment (Liu, 2007). Although remuneration was low (around 30–40 yuan per month in the Maoist era), egalitarianism was prevalent in urban society and there was very little difference in wealth between parents and children, among siblings and among families. One interviewee (G1, female) explained “If one family could eat fish, the families in the whole street could eat fish”. Urban families also experienced a nationalization of housing during the 1950s, which transferred private rental housing stock to local government whilst state institutions and enterprises concurrently started to build housing for their employees as a form of social welfare. As a consequence, private sector housing declined to 10–20% of the total available by the 1970s with public sector housing the dominant mode in most Chinese cities (Wang, 1995). Against this backdrop, traditional household division was not practiced and many parents had little of material value to pass on to succeeding generations. Even among those who did retain their private housing, the value was low due to the underdeveloped real estate market. In Ms. Li’s family, after her parents died in 1995, their privately-owned accommodation was empty for a number of years and served as storage for old furniture.

Material interest started to emerge with the commercialization of

housing⁵ in 1998 and the subsequent rapid increase in prices. The empty house of Ms. Li’s parents then became a source of tension among her siblings. To inherit the house outright, Ms. Li’s older brother claimed to have had a dream in which his dead mother asked him to guard the property. In compliance (feigned or otherwise) with her wishes, the brother approached an estate agent who, he claimed, had valued the property at 200,000 yuan. After giving 100,000 yuan to his younger brother and 10,000 yuan each to his three sisters, he then took sole ownership of the house. Ms. Li and her sisters did not challenge the gendered division as the cultural custom of patrilineal inheritance dominated their generation. Nevertheless, she was skeptical of the valuation presented by her older brother and felt that the younger brother (who was not well off) was robbed in this process. By the time the younger brother died in 2014, Ms. Li and her siblings were not on speaking terms with the older brother. For the very few G0 who survived into the 2000s, as a result of the property boom, parental housing came into play as part of their care arrangement. In her old age, Ms. Chen’s widowed mother-in-law decided to sell her flat in Tianjin and bought a two-bedroom flat in the suburbs for her youngest son in 2001. It was amicably agreed among all sons that the youngest would inherit this flat alone, but his family was primarily responsible for the old woman’s care.

Following this trend, with the housing urban G1 actually reside in increasing considerably in value over the last two decades, parental property transmission has become important leverage in negotiations between generations as well as between siblings. Son Chen and Daughter Chen were both laid off in the 1990s and subsequently engaged in various odd jobs; at the time of interview, Son Chen worked as a taxi driver and Daughter Chen ran a stall in a shopping center. Both offered to give their mother 100 yuan per month when she became widowed in 2004, but Ms. Chen declined the money as she felt both children were not better off than she was. Instead of giving a regular amount each month, Ms. Chen’s children gifted money during important festivals and birthdays.

Son Chen bought a flat in 1999 (through a combination of savings and mortgage finance) but needed to sell it in 2005 to pay off the debts arising from a separate unsuccessful investment. He and his family then needed to move in with his widowed mother. In 2012, when an opportunity arose to purchase a flat from the government at a heavily discounted price (a policy designed to support low-income families), Son Chen persuaded his mother to sell her flat and use the proceeds to buy one from the government scheme for his own family. As the location of the new flat was determined by the government, and his wife did not like his mother, Son Chen used the money generated by this transaction for a deposit to buy a second flat for his mother to live near to where his sister lived in the hope that Daughter Chen would provide more hands-on support.

Although Daughter Chen acceded to the gendered practice of property division, telling her brother “I won’t fight with you over our mother’s flat” (the statement itself revealing sarcasm embedded in a sense of unfairness), she reduced the amount of money given to her mother during festivals and birthdays. Daughter Chen did, however, continue a form of filial piety by calling her mother every day – a practice aligned to the gendered assumption that women are “naturally” good at communicating and so expected to provide more emotional support (Finch, 1989). This emotional support was not necessarily provided with communicative intimacy; she was never close to her mother as her brother had been favored since childhood – something

⁵ In the 1990s, urban citizens were encouraged to purchase the flat they lived in from their work unit at a heavily subsidized rate. The majority of G0 and G1, using their own savings or borrowing money from the extended family, acquired their flat via this route. In 1998, housing allocation by the work unit officially ended and a commercial market for urban housing developed. As a result, the majority of G2, and all G3, bought their flat on the open market, normally with a mortgage.

recognized by both Daughter Chen and Ms. Chen in their private interviews. When Ms. Chen was ill, Daughter Chen did not visit or take her to see a doctor. Although Daughter Chen declared her commitment to the future care of Ms. Chen in her interview, it was not with enthusiasm. By contrast, Son Chen visited his mother at least once a month (in addition to phoning twice a week), took her to see a doctor whenever she was ill, and insisted on paying her medical bills. Son Chen felt emotionally close to his mother and cried when describing her in private interview. For Son Chen, the emotional closeness and material benefit from selling his mother's flat strengthened his filial ideology and practice. For Daughter Chen, deprived of material benefit and starved of emotional intimacy, her filial piety was stripped to "surface work" – a public display of being filial.

For the G2:G3 pair, whilst there is an absence of conflict and competition among siblings for parental property transmission, parents have consciously guarded the timing of transmission as a useful tool to prevent children straying from the filial path. For example, Ms. Zou (G2) paid the deposit for her son's marital housing,⁶ but he wanted to buy another flat near a good school and enacting this plan would require selling the flat his parents owned rather than his marital housing as it was worth more. Ms. Zou strongly objected:

I said to him, "If you sell our flat and buy a new flat, the new flat would be in your name. In such a case, we won't have a flat in our name anymore". He replied: "How could we not look after you in old age?" I said: "It is impossible to speculate. I watch TV every day and there are plenty of news stories describing how adult children change quickly. If we become too old to move about, how could we have the ability to protect ourselves? We can't sue you⁷ nor physically fight with you". He replied: "how could I do that? All the relatives are there watching me. How could I not look after you?" I said to him, "if you really think it's necessary to sell our flat, you have to find a way to put your name and your father's name together on the title of deeds and also sign a letter to confirm that this flat actually belongs to us". I know everything that belongs to us will pass to him since he's our only child. But I have kept all the paperwork to evidence that we paid the deposit on his marital flat just in case.

In the end, Son Zou secured financial help from his wife's parents to fund the second flat (his wife was also an only child). Ms. Zou's (G2) concern contrasted with Ms. Chen's (G1) acquiescence when her son wanted her to sell her flat to fund new housing for his nuclear family. The temporal dimension may be the key to understanding the difference. In exchange for Ms. Chen's ownership of the accommodation, Son Chen offered an old-age support arrangement (i.e. living closer to his sister and being taken to hospital by him whenever she was ill). But Ms. Zou, who was still relatively young (in her 50s compared to Ms. Chen in her 70s), was being asked to give up ownership of her accommodation without an imminent return and would have to rely upon a filial ideology that may or may not be adhered to in future. With housing as an additional incentive, Ms. Zou was hopeful her son's filial ideology would turn to solid actions.

As with G1 and G2, none of the urban G3 cited inheriting parental accommodation as a motivation behind their filial will. But children's material interests intensified and could override emotional intimacy where family inheritance was disputed. In one (albeit exceptionally bitter) case, the widowed mother (G1) left a property in the center of Xi'an worth around 5.6 million yuan. As there had been no clear care rotation pattern, the three G2 children disagreed upon how to divide the

property's value as some felt they contributed more to their mother's care. Their extended family (G3) also participated in the dispute in an effort to win a larger slice for their own sub-family unit. This dispute led to numerous bitter quarrels across the two generations of family members, many of whom were previously on intimate terms. Whilst the family tried to avoid engaging lawyers, to maintain its social standing among wider friends and relations, no one was willing to make significant compromises. At the time of writing, the issue was unresolved, with the property frozen by the Municipal Bureau of Housing so nobody could sell it.

While parental property has become a useful tool to prevent children straying from the filial path, G3's parents' future old-age care is a wider, more difficult, challenge to navigate. Ms. Wang said "Whenever I thought about this issue (old-age care), I worried. Nowadays each family has only one child. You cannot expect them to wait upon you, they still need to make a living for their own family". G3's limited availability due to work commitments, reinforced by the precariousness of employment which is a feature of China's market economy, is likely to continue to be a legitimate excuse for not providing instrumental support and personal care. Indeed, data from Hong Kong and Taiwan families (i.e. the wider research project this article draws upon) found that live-in foreign domestic helpers were employed extensively to undertake the instrumental and personal care tasks in Chinese families whilst adult children were responsible for coordinating care logistics as well as providing emotional support. Following suit, with the expansion of care services in Chinese cities, it seems highly likely G3 will use a combination of paid care and familial care to practice filial piety.

Gender

Gender mediated the ways in which filial obligation mingled with economic consideration and emotional attachment in driving old-age support, as represented in the different logics behind sons and daughters' support practices. After her husband died in 1987, Ms. Chen's own mother was initially in good health, but she started to have heart problems from the late 1990s, was bedbound for 3 years, then died in 2001. In these final years, the families of Ms. Chen's four children rotated her care on a four-day rolling pattern. When it was the turn of Ms. Chen's family, she covered the day shift and her two children (G2) took turns to cover the night shift (with the same pattern adopted by the families of her two sisters). Ms. Chen and her sisters changed and washed her mother's dirty clothes and bedsheets during their rotation. But when it was her brother's family's turn, he or his wife only sent meals but did not assist with washing or changing sheets and no one stayed overnight. According to Ms. Chen and her youngest sister, their brother and sister-in-law felt that earlier in her life Ms. Chen's mother did not adhere to the norm of that time and prioritize bringing up the son's children over the daughters' children. Ms. Chen's youngest sister explained:

My brother was my mother's favorite. No wonder he was spoiled. If we daughters didn't visit her, she would scold us. If we didn't help with chores when visiting, she also criticized us. But for my brother, although he didn't visit her or assist her in chores as much as we did, she never criticized him... Just before she died, my mother said "If you want anything from this room, please take it. After all, these were bought by all you daughters, TV, electric fans etc. But my accommodation will pass on to your brother. Don't you dare argue about that.

The care practices of Ms. Chen's mother highlight several layers of contrasts. First, despite filial piety planting married women on the filial map of their in-laws, there is a general assumption that women are emotionally closer to their own parents than to their in-laws as the former relationship is based upon consanguinity and shared experience. The naturalizing assumption of emotional intimacy between daughters and their parents legitimizes daughters' involvement in their parents'

⁶ Neolocal residence has become the trend since 2000. The social norm among G3 is that when a couple marry, the husband's family is responsible for providing the conjugal residence upon marriage (see Liu, 2022b).

⁷ In families where there were disputes, family members did not want their dispute to be brought before the court as the extended family wanted to maintain its social standing among wider friends and relations.

care and also disguises the fact that daughters' intimate relations with their parents are largely asymmetric. While Ms. Chen's mother helped to look after one of Ms. Chen's children, she did not support Ms. Chen's youngest sister in the same way. Ms. Chen therefore recalled her mother with a sense of emotional gratitude while her younger sister recalled mostly orders to do various domestic chores before and after her own marriage. The old-age support daughters provided to their own parents was built upon the daughters' submission to parental power and varying degrees of mutuality.

Second, in contrast with daughters' lower position in their natal family, sons and daughters-in-law are grounded in a discourse of entitlement. As a result of the patrilineal tradition, Ms. Chen's brother felt entitled to his mother's emotional devotion and support. By looking after one of her daughters' children, rather than prioritizing all of her son's children (Mother Chen cared for two out of four in total), Ms. Chen's brother's family felt their right, as the only patrilineal heir, was violated and held a grudge against the mother in old age. Existing scholarship suggests that the hierarchal intergenerational relationship dictated by classical filial piety has been transformed into an intergenerational contract emphasizing mutuality and reciprocity (Croll, 2006; Ikels, 1993). This study suggests that for G1, reciprocity mainly operated in sons' families. Since reciprocity entails a process of calculation by an individual of their own and other people's position in structures of reciprocal support (Gouldner, 1973), the role of siblings (numbers as well as gender) is critical to the calculation of intergenerational transfer but this is often overlooked in existing literature, the main focus of which is on relationship between parents and only one of the children. The findings here suggest that the calculation of their own entitlement and contribution to parental old-age support was grounded in an assessment of other siblings' input and output. In a family of multiple sons, egalitarianism in parental treatment of sons was essential to avoid both intergenerational conflict and conflict between siblings. Even where sons' families were frugal in providing old-age support as a result of their calculation, most performed filial support so as not to violate public morality of filial piety, albeit more as a public display of filial piety than an intimate act of care; for example, Ms. Chen's brother and his wife's "surface work" in the care rotation for the terminally ill mother.

Third, despite post-1950 inheritance laws giving daughters and sons rights to their parents' assets on death in the absence of a will (Shen, 2020), G1 women were in practice largely excluded when the estate of their natal family was divided up. Like Ms. Li and her sisters, Ms. Chen and her sisters accepted the gendered inheritance practice. Underlying the inequality experienced by daughters was a principle of self-sacrifice that has gradually and consciously been imposed upon women through a culturally sanctioned preference for boys from a very young age. As a result, G1 women were accustomed to the patrilineal bias which prioritized the interests of their brothers in the extended family.

Among G2, daughters expected to be a beneficiary of their parents' estate when the latter died. Where daughters are excluded from the intended property division, they typically limit their contribution to "surface work" (seen with Daughter Chen and her mother). This resistance is closely tied to two interrelated factors that are specific to their generation. Firstly, many G2 had no university education and were badly hit by the economic restructuring of urban state enterprises during the 1990s and lost their jobs as a result (Liu, 2007). To an extent, the material constraints imposed by this structural transition accentuated economic considerations in intergenerational ties. Secondly, since the cessation of public housing allocation in 1998, there has been an exponential growth in the Chinese real estate market (e.g. urban flats in big cities increased their value by over 100 times from 2000 to 2020), meaning the potential for a significant inheritance is unusually high.

For G3, since they were the only child, all women interviewees took it for granted that they would ultimately inherit their parents' property. In contrast, in rural China where the one-child policy was modified to enable the birth of a second child if the first was a girl, daughters

continued to suffer from gendered patrilineal inheritance tradition. It remains to be examined the extent to which urban daughters' privilege in parental property inheritance will prevail when the three-child policy (2021-) works its way through the demographic profile of Chinese families.

Money, intimacy and filial care

Zelizer (2005) suggests that the monetization of economic life has produced profound transformations in the experiences of intimacy. The question, therefore, is not whether intimate ties and economic transactions mingle, but how people match economic transactions with intimate relations (Zelizer, 2005). Lian (2014) suggests that, in the case of China, post-Mao society is typified by "materialism and consumption". As Chinese society's preoccupation with wealth accumulation accelerates, money becomes an important mediator in family life. Various studies outside China have compared the emotional dynamics of family life of the poor and well off. Looking at Victorian Lancashire, Anderson (1980:178) suggested that "a really strong affective and non-calculative commitment to the kinship net" is associated with a relative level of "working class affluence". Medick and Sabean (Thompson 1977 in Medick & Sabean, 1984:22, original emphasis) observed "Feeling may be *more*, rather less, tender or intense *because* relations are 'economic' and critical to mutual survival". While disputing any lineal correlation between material affluence, emotional intimacy as well as the strength of filial piety, this study finds that the economic well-being of adult children affected emotional dynamics of family life as well as the old-age support agreement in various aspects.

The two daughters of Ms. Li illustrate these interactions. Ms. Li's elder daughter (with vocational school qualification) was laid off from her factory job in the mid-1990s and undertook various odd jobs before becoming an office clerk. The younger daughter (with a college diploma) worked her way up through the civil service to become the head of a small government unit. Money becomes one mechanism to mark the boundaries separating intimate relationships from other family relations by default. Ms. Li recalled:

Whenever the younger daughter came to visit, she always gave her dad extra money. If I spoke a bit louder towards my husband, she would say to her dad: "divorce her!" She always stands on her dad's side. Their relationship has been particularly strong since her childhood.

Younger Daughter Li elaborated in detail how her father cared for her, while her mother had favored her sister. Despite regularly giving her parents money at Chinese festivals to perform her filial obligation, giving extra money to her father expressed and emphasized how much she valued the relationship with her father. Similarly, Ms. Li's emotional attachment to her elder daughter had a monetary angle: "Since my elder daughter's economic circumstances were not very good, when she bought something for me, I would normally give her the money. Whenever possible, I would also secretly give her some money". In contrast with Younger Daughter Li's public gesture of giving her father extra money, Ms. Li hid this practice in order to avoid antagonizing her younger daughter.

While money does not forge intimacy, it may lubricate difficult family relations. Elder Daughter Li explained her difficult relationship with her mother-in-law:

Were I to have a lot of money and gave her 5000 yuan a month, my mother-in-law would definitely treat me extremely well. She only does something if it materially benefits her. Nowadays, my mother-in-law is just a stranger to me. We have basically no contact and meet only once a year (at Spring Festival).

Younger Daughter Li also had a difficult relationship with her mother-in-law: "I can only say that my mother-in-law does not have evil attentions towards me. She is not a bad person but sometimes her

comments can be hurtful. When I was living together with her [in order to provide childcare for her son], I was really unhappy". Despite the lack of emotional intimacy towards her mother-in-law, Younger Daughter Li regularly gave her in-laws 2000 yuan during Chinese festivals – the same amount she gave to her own parents – and her mother-in-law spoke highly of her in interview: "I now rely upon my daughter-in-law. She is (economically) very capable, better than my son. I said to my daughter-in-law, in future for all family major decisions, I will follow her".

Younger Daughter Li successfully converted her economic capital to symbolic capital she could draw upon in future decision-making of extended family affairs, for example, old-age care. Mr. Li explained the filial arrangement set-up by Younger Daughter Li:

The younger daughter arranged everything very well. The elder brother (of the husband of Younger Daughter Li) is working all year round in Guangdong. So the younger daughter's family will be the one to rely upon (for her in-laws). She relocated her in-laws to this compound and then bought us a flat in the same compound. Both flats are close to our elder daughter's flat. She is very good at planning, but of course she has the economic capacity to do so.

Younger Daughter Li explained her motivation:

I know what most older parents need is companionship. But I cannot satisfy this. My workplace is already like a battlefield 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.

She used work pressure as an excuse to transfer her filial obligation to provide emotional and instrumental support to her parents and in-laws onto her sister who was a low-paid office clerk. This was considered a legitimate excuse as it enabled her to make more money and facilitate a cooperative living arrangement for her parents and in-laws. In turn, her moral reputation for being filial was successfully consolidated in this process. What Younger Daughter Li did not spell out were the material benefits accruing to her from the change in living arrangements: the funds to relocate her in-laws were their own (i.e. sale proceeds from their original flat) but the new flat was registered in her husband's name so would belong to her family in future. While on the surface the economics served as means to achieve filial piety, material interest was enhanced through the arrangement of filial support.

Adult children with economic capital can choose and select the aspects of filial support to perform while maintaining a high moral ground. In this process of negotiation and reorganization, the siblings with the least material resources have limited capacity to resist or propose alternative plans. As Elder Daughter Li had a very close relationship with her mother, she went along with her sister's plan; but without blood relations or familiarity, the expectation on her to perform instrumental support for her sister's in-laws may not materialize. Perhaps aware of this, her sister's in-laws planned to form a cooperative support group with Ms. Li and her husband rather than relying upon Elder Sister Li.

Conclusion

There has been a profound transformation in old-age support practices in urban China. While filial morality as an ideological force played a role in all three generations, how it interacted with emotional intimacy as well as material considerations in driving adult children's behavior varied across three generations of men and women in Chinese families. The boundaries between emotion, moral value and economic calculation are more permeable than much of the existing China scholarship implies. The findings here reveal that the three forces are closely intertwined: sometimes overlapping or working alongside each other, but other times in conflict. Some examples confirmed Goody's (1976) argument that property transmission is a mechanism to structure interpersonal relations in the family setting. Other examples revealed emotional life does not necessarily follow the logic of market transactions (Zelizer, 2005). The interaction between the three forces are

fluid as all could serve means as well as ends, arising from the same complex matrix of family life. Nevertheless, some patterns in the interactions within Chinese families were identified: gender and the socioeconomic status of adult children can mediate the interaction of the three forces. The configuration in each generation is also not arbitrary but a response to a balance of cultural, economic, and demographic features in a given social era.

This article questions the lineal transition underlying early and new modernity writings as well as the existing scholarship of Chinese families, from a past driven by filial obligation to a present emphasizing emotional intimacy. As China transitioned from a planned economy to a market economy, the three generations considered here experienced a series of major policy shifts affecting their economic livelihood, welfare and housing. Rather than the emotionalization of family relations predicted by modernity writers, this article finds that alongside the increase of affection between parents and children (largely the result of the one-child policy) material consideration has become more and more important to intergenerational ties in urban families. Paradoxically, the increase of both emotional affection and the material interest *reinforce*, rather than weaken, children's filial obligation towards their parents.

While intergenerational solidarity has continued among younger generations, the findings of this article raise two important issues that need to be addressed as China's population ages rapidly. First, as the income gap among siblings and among families widens, aging experiences and old-age support practices will continue to diversify. Against a backdrop of increasing precarity in the market economy and an inverse population pyramid, adult children with economic resources are more likely to subcontract filial responsibility either to a private care provider (e.g. employing rural women migrant workers or working-class older urban women) or siblings/relatives with less economic resources (as seen in G2's support for G1). Consequently, we may see a "care drain" and "care replacement"⁸ emerging *within* China. Chinese families located at the bottom of this national care chain – mostly the rural poor – would bear the brunt of this old-age care transition. Second, exclusive reliance upon familial old-age support is not sustainable. The Chinese state successfully created the conditions to consolidate intergenerational solidarity among families during the Mao and early reform eras (see Davis-Friedmann, 1991). Over the last two decades, the state has continued to place great weight upon filial piety through legislation, education and propaganda, building upon and reinforcing the perception that old-age support from children to parents is a duty which rests upon allegedly 'natural' feelings. However, as shown in this article, the boundaries between filial morality, intimacy and economic calculation are more permeable than the government discourse implies. Consequently, older people with no property and who have strained relationship with their children are vulnerable to old-age neglect and abuse. It is essential for the state to offer alternative care⁹ beyond the family and market.

Finally, Finch's framework for balancing economics, emotions, and filial morality is very helpful in examining why people provide old-age support in China. However, Finch and Mason (1992) emphasized the concept of negotiation¹⁰ in explaining how family members balanced between the making of legitimate excuses and the construction of moral

⁸ These terms have been used to describe the unidirectional care flows from the global south to the global north through commodified transnational migrant labor (see Lutz & Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2012).

⁹ To date, state support for older people in China has focused on the expansion of pension and medical insurance provision but this is grounded in an urban-rural dual system (see Liu & Cook, 2020). With the exception of childless older people, there are no state-funded care facilities available for low-income older people in China.

¹⁰ Finch (1989: 190) acknowledged the performative element of family support, seen in Turner's study of middle-class American families, but Finch and Mason (1992) focused mainly on the concept of negotiation.

reputations in kinship groups when deciding how much support they provided to family members. In the Chinese context, while negotiation was incorporated in the process of adult children's decision-making on the type of support they might be able to provide, this article draws attention to the process of *performance* in carrying out old-age support. There is a spectrum of support practices, from being an intimate care practice at one end to an act simply to comply with the public morality of filial piety at the other. "Surface work" is enacted in situations where tensions between conformity to public morality and private intents (emotional or material) cannot be reconciled. While the performative nature of filial obligation is related to the institutionalization of filial piety in Chinese social relations, the extent to which the performance of surface work in old-age support drives non-Chinese societies remains to be examined.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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