



Can ‘distant water ... quench the instant thirst’? The renegotiation of familial support in rural China in the face of extensive out migration

Joanne Cook^{a,*}, Jieyu Liu^b

^a Reader, Organisational Behaviour and HRM, Hull University Business School, University of Hull, (University of Hull), United Kingdom

^b Deputy Director, SOAS China Institute, SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

This article addresses debates on modernisation, ageing and intergenerational support in developing/emerging economies. By examining the impact of rural to urban migration on elder support in Chinese rural families, it examines how support is being renegotiated and the implications this holds for experiences of growing older. It is positioned critically within the Chinese rural families literature, both drawing on research that reveals the continued influence of familial culture (Silverstein 2009; Lin and Yi 2011, 2013; Guo, Chi and Silverstein 2011) while arguing that this research has under-examined the strain this places on rural families, emerging conflicts and the potentially negative implications for gender and ageing. A gendered intergenerational lens is adopted to examine how generations experience and interpret these changes in the form and delivery of intergenerational support. The article focuses on the experiences and lives of the older parents, and older women in particular, to address some of the oversights in existing literature.

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Introduction

The pace and volume of rural to urban migration in China are bringing about profound changes for rural families and their systems of filial support (Xu, 2001; Silverstein & Cong, 2013). Chinese society has simultaneously undergone rapid economic development and entered into a period that many have called ‘super-ageing’ (Joseph & Phillips, 1999). This rapid demographic change has led some scholars to question the role of adult children in the support systems of older parents (e.g. Lee, Parish, & Willis, 1994; Saunders & Sun, 2006). Indeed processes of modernisation and migration in rapidly developing and emerging economies have led social gerontologists to debate the ‘pending crisis in elder care’ (Aboderin, 2004; Lin & Yi, 2013). In the Chinese context, Du argues that families

and the state will increasingly come under pressure as by 2050 the population aged 60 and over will exceed 450 million (2013: 46). These changes pose particular challenges for rural families; where more than two-thirds of older people reside and where welfare provision is largely absent (Silverstein, 2009: 25). For example only 4.8% of rural elders receive pensions compared with 78% of those in cities (Huang, 2012: 23).

This article contributes to existing research by examining the adaptation and renegotiation of familial intergenerational support in rural China in the face of rapid waves of outward migration.¹ It is positioned critically within the Chinese rural families literature, both drawing on research that reveals the continued influence of familial culture (Silverstein, 2009; Lin and Yi, 2011, Lin & Yi, 2013; Guo, Chi, & Silverstein, 2011) while

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: joanne.cook@hull.ac.uk (J. Cook), jieyu.liu@soas.ac.uk (J. Liu).

¹ Following Finch (1989), we understand familial support as multi-dimensional, incorporating: financial support (including cash remittances or goods); instrumental support (assisting with tasks); emotional support (improving psychological wellbeing) and personal care (feeding, bathing etc).

arguing that this research has under-examined the strain this places on rural families, emerging conflicts and the potentially negative implications this holds for gender and ageing. While there is a growing body of literature which emphasises the active role of Chinese older people in supporting their children's migration through the provision of essential childcare, domestic and farming support (Chen, Lui, & Mair, 2011; Lin & Yi, 2013), the potentially negative and divisive implications of these changes are underexplored. Therefore the article combines the insights of migrant families research with anthropological studies of Chinese rural families to develop a gendered intergenerational lens to illuminate the importance of examining both conflict and negotiation in intergenerational relations post-migration (Miller, 2004; Zhang, 2004; Foner & Dreby, 2011; Creese, 2011; Lora-Wainwright, 2013; Cook & Waite, 2016).

Further the methodology of this article addresses gaps in the substantial literature on Chinese families. Since existing research is almost entirely based on quantitative data sets with a dominance of urban research (see Silverstein & Cong, 2013), this article brings new insights derived from biographical interviews around the lived experiences of rural families and their interpretations of the renegotiation of intergenerational support. While the scale is inevitably narrow only covering two villages (in two regions), it constitutes one of only a few qualitative studies of how families negotiate, perceive and experience these changes.

This article first critically reviews modernisation theories application to China, contrasting this with the emerging body of familial research around the endurance of familial culture. It then draws upon more nuanced analyses provided by the research on migrant families and anthropologies of Chinese rural families which examine intergenerational support as bilateral, fluid and contested. The research approach and methods are then discussed to contextualise the families examined in this study. The second part of the paper presents the findings and focuses on how rural families, and older people in particular, perceive and experience the renegotiation of familial support brought about by migration.

Perspectives on modernisation and familial support

Modernisation theory argues that as societies develop they move away from traditional informal relations of support within extended families towards an individualisation of family members, the rise of the nuclear family and a decline in financial and social support transfers from younger to older generations (Cowgill and Holmes 1972 cited in Childs, Goldstein and Wangdu 2011). This theory assumes an almost linear transition from traditional to modern structures of elder support in any given socio-cultural setting (Portes & Rumbaut, 2005). These changes are assumed to bring about the decline of the extended family through fractures in intergenerational relations. Arguments around modernisation are not new to ageing research. Despite plenty of evidence refuting the 'abandonment' thesis, modernisation theory has continued to shape research and has witnessed a revival in recent years through its application to developing and emerging economies (Aboderin, 2004). Evidence supporting the abandonment thesis is patchy at best and Modernisation theory has failed to account for endurance of familial in shaping intergenerational

support (Kabir, Szebehely, & Tishelman, 2002; Aboderin, 2004; Palloni, 2009).

Perspectives on the resilience of filial piety in China

Research on the impact of modernisation on Chinese familial culture has provided evidence both supporting and refuting its effects. Several studies argue that modernisation is impacting detrimentally on intergenerational support (Saunders & Sun, 2006; Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Huang, 2012). For example Du (2013: 49) argues young adults are increasingly;

... redefining the concept and practice of filial piety by shifting part of their filial responsibilities to the state for the provision of social security, a medical insurance system and the development of a community service system for the older people.

In rural areas the income gap between those of working age and older people is increasing, and intergenerational solidarity is under strain as younger people find it difficult to meet their filial obligations (Cong & Silverstein, 2008). The assumed result is a fundamental change in the system of filial support whereby 'It is no longer the young who depend on the old, but rather the old who rely on the young for sources of living' (Xu, 2001: 309) yet 'the older ... generation cannot depend on their children for support in their old age in the traditional way' (Du, 2013: 54).

By contrast, there is mounting evidence disputing the demise of filial piety which reveals the continued moderating effects of Chinese familial culture (Mao & Chi, 2011; Silverstein, 2009; Lin & Chin-Chun Yi, 2011; Lin & Yi, 2013; Guo et al., 2011; Cong & Silverstein, 2012a,b; Hu & Scott, 2014). These studies argue that changes in intergenerational support are more accurately understood as transformations in the delivery of filial piety through a reinterpreted 'intergenerational contract' (Chen et al., 2011). While this research evidences the endurance of intergenerational support, key challenges to traditional expectations and the operation of familial support are identified. Challenges include physical distance impeding daily support, the redistribution of responsibility between siblings, adapting to a greater role for daughters and slow adjustments in filial expectations of sons (Guo et al., 2011; Cong & Silverstein, 2012a,b; Mao & Chi, 2011). All these studies argue that cultural norms, and local variations (Hu & Scott, 2014; Zhang, 2004; 2009), are paramount in mediating how families adapt to the structural factors that enable or hinder intergenerational support.

Lin & Yi (2011, 2013) analysis of the East Asian Social Survey (China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan), found a strong endurance of filial piety across all four countries. Importantly the Chinese data illustrated that.

... even when facing changing social conditions, Chinese families may continue to conform to the culturally expected pattern of sons taking the major responsibility for parental support (Lin and Yi, 2011:109).

As women engage more in paid work, they play an increased role in supporting their parents but identifiable gender divisions remain with sons providing financial resources and daughters providing domestic and emotional support (Lin & Yi, 2013). Cong and Silverstein (2012a,b) research on rural families found that migration has resulted in daughters stepping up their role,

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