



Ageing, migration and familial support in rural China



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ABSTRACT

Accelerated by economic reforms, a large scale migration of younger workers from rural to urban China has taken place since the 1990s. This has separated many adult children from their ageing parents and imposed significant challenges on traditional patterns of familial support for rural older people. These challenges are augmented by the fact that in rural China the elderly have been deprived a state pension and other welfare provisions available to urban residents.

Drawing upon qualitative data from a project on ageing in rural China, this article examines the agency of older people and their families in responding to geographical separation resulting from the migration of the economically active to the cities. Through 32 life history interviews with multiple generations of nine households in one rural village, this article sheds light on the resilience and flexibility of rural households which have experienced migration and highlights the webs of interdependence that feature in the daily strategies of householding. It shows how members of the household across different geographical locations worked together to build and maintain the collective welfare of the family. In particular, this article argues that it would be over simplistic to suggest that migration is always detrimental to the older generation who stay behind. Contrary to assumptions in some migration studies and ageing literature in China, it shows that it is the breakdown of the webs of interdependence and reciprocity rather than the event of migration that will have inevitable negative effects upon old age care for the seniors in the household. Further, while highlighting the significance of householding, this article reveals the internal dynamics within a household. It identifies the role of gender in daily householding and suggests that the caring, supportive and kin-keeping roles performed mainly by women played a critical role in ensuring social and physical reproduction across generations. The article finds that while daughters took over some responsibilities which were traditionally expected from their brothers and sisters-in-law in old age support, the persistence of gendered practices and traditions in rural villages allowed sons more symbolic status and material benefits.

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1. Introduction

While population ageing is now a common feature of many societies, research has tended to concentrate on western contexts with ageing in developing countries receiving less attention. In China, the challenge of population ageing is an emergent area of concern with significant implications as the country enters a period referred to by some as 'super ageing' (Joseph and Phillips, 1999). In 2012 the number of people in China who were 60 years old and over had reached 185 million, comprising 13% of the total population. It is estimated that by 2053, this number will exceed 487 million, constituting 35% of the population (China Daily, 2012). Among the ageing population, the majority (it is estimated to be two thirds) of older people live in rural areas where many state welfare provisions are non-existent (Yao and Li, 2000). The position of the older people in rural areas is complicated by the fact that since the

1990s there has been a large-scale migration of younger workers from rural to urban areas (it is estimated that as many as 144 million rural residents are now working in towns and cities (Fan, 2007: 23)) and this has geographically separated many adult children from the ageing parents.

Published studies on rural ageing mostly use statistical data and focus upon whether a reduction in co-residence affects the health and wellbeing of older people and aim to quantify intergenerational transfer in the context of migration. Although statistical analysis 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 (e.g. Cong and Silverstein, 2008; Ye and He, 2008). Existing China rural–urban migration literature has identified the tremendous impact of migration on the wellbeing of the older people, who are frequently left behind with the combined 'burden of housework, children and farming' (Murphy, 2002: 64; also see Yan, 2003; Ikels, 2008). The Chinese media

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has coined terms such as 'left-behind older people'¹ and warn that the value of filial piety in the countryside is deteriorating because the young and capable have moved to the cities. These discourses often overlook the family context and agency of the people who stayed behind.

The objective of this article is to shed light on familial relations of support in both an early and contemporary context within rural families. Drawing upon qualitative data from a study on ageing in rural China, this article examines the agency of older people and their families in responding to geographical separation resulting from the migration of the economically active to the cities. Through life history interviews with multiple generations in one rural village, this article sheds light on the resilience and flexibility of rural households which have experienced migration and highlights the webs of interdependence that feature in the daily strategies of householding. It shows how members of the household across different geographical locations work together to build and maintain the collective welfare of the family. In particular, this article finds that it would be over simplistic to suggest that migration is always detrimental to the older generation who stay behind and instead highlights the active contribution of the older generation in daily householding activities. Contrary to some migration studies and ageing literature in China, it is shown here that it is the breakdown of the webs of interdependence and reciprocity rather than the event of migration that has negative effects upon old age care for seniors in the household.

While highlighting the significance of householding, this article also reveals the internal dynamics within a household. It identifies the role of gender in daily householding and finds that the caring, supportive and kin-keeping roles performed mainly by women play a critical role in ensuring social and physical reproduction across generations. In particular, the role of stay-behind daughters is highlighted. The article finds that while daughters have taken over some responsibilities which were traditionally expected of their brothers and sisters-in-law, the persistence of gendered practices and traditions in rural villages has allowed sons who migrate more symbolic status and material benefits.

2. Understanding migration, ageing and familial support

Western modernisation theory hypothesizes that industrialisation, rural–urban migration, and the growth of modern social institutions such as the welfare state have all led to the declining importance of familial support for the older people (see *Ikels, 2008*). It continues that greater geographic mobility pulls extended families apart, as frequency of interaction decreases dramatically with greater physical separation. However, research carried out in Asian countries has found that social change brought about through modernisation has not necessarily resulted in the decline of family ties. *Ochiai (2009)* developed a 'care-diamond' framework to examine configurations of different sectors (state–family–community–market) in providing old age care and childcare in Asian countries. In China, by applying *Ochiai's* framework to analyse national survey data in 2000 and 2006, *Shang and Wu (2011)* found that the care regime remains traditional, relying heavily on the family because the Chinese state is reluctant to assume more responsibility for funding and provision. In Taiwan, parents supported migration of their children as they hoped it would enhance the economic prosperity of the family; and despite living in separate residences the adult children tended to retain strong bonds with their parents and other relatives (*Marsh and*

Hsu, 1995). In South Korea, one of Asia's most developed economies, the extended family network still provides the major part of old age support and care-giving (*Suh, 1994*).

To capture how the family institution adapts itself to the social trend of migration, the term 'householding'² has been developed to describe the processes of formation and sustenance of households that are increasingly reliant on the movement of people and transactions among household³ members residing in more than one geographical territory (*Douglass, 2006*). Exactly because this term is used as a verb, it reflects a fluid and ongoing process and effectively captures the dynamics in which 'creating and sustaining a household is a continuous process of social reproduction that covers all life-cycle stages' (*Douglass, 2006: 421*). *Douglass' (2006: 423)* discussion of the typical elements of householding include 'marriage/partnering, bearing children, raising and educating children (and adults), maintaining the household on a daily basis, dividing labour and pooling income from livelihood activities, caring for elderly and other non-working household members'. Householding is an on-going process which not only involves physical production but also social reproduction through generations.

To illustrate householding in the context of rural China, two further analytical concepts are deployed here. The first concept of interdependence originates from recent discussions in social gerontology. Western social gerontology has seen a development from a functionalist approach informed by the biomedical model of ageing to a political economic model which highlights the role of the state and exposes structural factors and resulting inequalities in later life. Both the functionalist approach and the political economic model tend to associate ageing with negative connotations such as a crisis of identity and a diminishing social status (*Phillipson, 1998*). By contrast, drawing upon the postmodern notion of the 'cultural turn', cultural gerontology turns to meaning and interpretation in the construction of later life and points out that 'ageing has become a much more reflexive project' (*Gilleard and Higgs, 2000: 25*).

Despite the development in mainstream gerontology theories, feminist scholars argue that issues of ethnicity and gender have not been properly addressed. When studying older women from ethnic minority groups in the UK, *Maynard et al. (2008: 41)* proposed a 'post-gerontological' approach which aimed to 'explore difference and the ways in which different cultures and systems of belief give meaning to stages and conditions of life and how these meanings might contribute to well-being in old age'. This approach questioned theories and concepts that focus on western stereotypes of ageing.

A key aspect in the development of a post-gerontological approach involves deconstructing the dichotomy between dependence and independence. Both academic research and political discourse in the West⁴ tends to view old age as a time when people lose their independence and become dependent either on the state or on those around them. Dependence is often considered in negative terms with independence seen as something that should be

² The term 'householding' (*Douglass, 2006*) originally developed to study the family in the context of international migration and globalization, but seems equally applicable to the analysis of familial support in the context of rural–urban internal migration.

³ In this article, I use the terms 'family' and 'household' interchangeably as rural households in China are usually composed of relations through marriage or direct lineage. This approach is different to *Douglass (2006: 421)*, who distinguishes between 'family' and 'household': in contrast to 'family', 'household' is used to allow for formations not strictly composed of relations through marriage or direct lineage; a household may consist of fictive as well as actual kin, of distant as well as under-the-roof members, and of hired domestic helpers and nannies who become household members'.

⁴ Such a conception has been further spread by '[w]estern policy-makers and funders through policy prescriptions for economic and social development' in a variety of countries (*Sen, 2001, Deacon, 2007 in Bowlby et al., 2010: 46*).

¹ The popular discourse in China refers to the people who remained in the countryside as 'left behind', which implies that they are the victims of migration. To acknowledge the complexities of migration and the agency of this group of people, I prefer to use the term 'stay-behind'.

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