"No place like home": Aging in post-reform Beijing

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ABSTRACT

This study shows the Western theorization and interpretation of aging, place and health are not well suited to a non-western case. The current generation of older Chinese has experienced the transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. Urban changes have taken place in various ways. This study explains the spatio-temporal processes of older people with their changing places by conducting in-depth interviews with 47 older people living at home in Beijing. Their generational consciousness and old place identities are deeply rooted in pre-reform Collectivism and shaped by socialist ideologies of the past. The representation of the old identity among older people is circumscribed by their living situations and selectively manifested. In most cases, there are limited mechanisms formed to recreate positive place meanings and reintegrate older people and place. The processes reflect the growing social inequality and changing cultural values in a society in transition. Growing social inequality and changing cultural values have a great impact on older people's health and well-being.

1. Introduction

In October 2015, the Communist Party of China announced the ending of the decades-long one-child policy and now two children are allowed for each couple in urban China. One of the major purposes of the new two-child policy is to deal with population aging, according to the statement from the Communist Party's Central Committee. The ending of the one-child policy leaves this particular generation as a unique social phenomenon of our time. China's aging pattern is unique compared to many aging/aged societies in developed countries. The public pension system does not apply universally to older citizens. Social inequality is increasing in all aspects in the process of rapid economic growth. The state has written aging and health into the National Strategic Plan for the next five years (State Council of People's Republic of China, 2011).

As people get older, their homes and neighborhoods become even more important in their daily lives (Buffel et al., 2013). Traditionally, older people in China prefer to age at home because the stigma about nursing homes still exists (Cheng et al., 2012). At the same time, they face the dilemma of choosing nursing homes if there is no one to support them. The public ones are funded by the government and located in inner city. With affordable fees, people's trust in state owned facilities and limited bed numbers, they are fully occupied and the waiting lists are extremely long. The private ones are more expensive and normally located in the suburbs, with many empty beds. Current

policy and planning points to home as the main site for people to age. In 2008, the government of Beijing Municipality proposed the "9064" elder care development strategy. The strategy calls for 90% of older people to age at home, 6% to age in place with government purchased community service and 4% to age in institutions by 2020. Therefore, older people's major living spaces, including home and the neighborhood are important sites to study aging and place in a Chinese context.

Current geographical studies on aging in China have focused on macro spatial characteristics, social impacts, environmental risks and planning at a population level. Quantitative methods are mostly used with few exceptions (See Cheng et al., 2011). Gao et al. (2015) commented on the obvious gap in the literature on aging and place in China. The current studies see older people as a homogenous group; the understanding of place is limited to location and region, not the social meanings attached to it. Thus, a case study is conducted to understand the current aging in place experiences and how the relationship between older people and place has changed over time for those who currently reside at home in urban China.

From a disciplinary perspective, Western studies and theories have occupied a dominant role in the field of geographies of aging since the "initial wave of inquiry" in the 1970s (Skinner et al., 2015, Pg. 2). Based on a comprehensive review of work from the mid-1990s to now, Skinner et al. (2015) argue that there is a gap, both empirical and theoretical, in geographies of ageing research beyond Western studies. Our study aims to fill the empirical gap by providing findings from a

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non-Western place. Also, driven by the question of whether Western conceptualization of aging and place can be replicated, this study starts with a discussion situated within Western studies and the Chinese context. We argue that socio-political and cultural histories of place and people are essential parts of conceptualizing aging and place.

This paper begins with a discussion of the existing research on aging and place, research context and conceptual gaps. It illustrates a series of relevant reforms, transformation and new policies in urban China in recent decades. Based on the research questions proposed, a qualitative approach is adopted. Then, a conceptual framework is developed based on the data. In the remainder of the paper, each part of the framework is elaborated. In the end, the study implication and limitation are stated.

2. Theoretical development and empirical context

In Western countries, old age and place have been studied and theorized by various scholars. Environmental gerontologists focus on the fit between older people and the environment. The mismatch between personal competencies and environmental press can lead to maladaptation in old age. (Lawton, 1989) Another group of studies focus on the subjective experience of aging and place. It is suggested that familiar places, accumulative attachment to place, shared memories with peers and historical events contribute to identity formation (McHugh and Mings, 1996; Fried, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Rosel, 2003; Andrews and Kearns, 2005; Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Taking a phenomenological perspective, Rowles (1983) proposes physical, social and autobiographical insideness to place attachment. He argues that the self-created autobiographical insideness is more important to personal identity in later life.

Research has been expanded to include more complex situations when both environment and individual are undergoing changes. Different theories and recommendations have been proposed to decrease environmental press, recreate place identity in an unfamiliar place and promote independence and autonomy in old age. For example, Gitlin (2003) and Petersson et al. (2008) conducted research on home and indoor environment modification. Phillips et al. (2011) challenge the place concept based on familiarity. They find the aesthetics and usability of the built environment contributes to place attachment in a changing place. McHugh (2007) argues by congregating in retirement communities, it helps the Second World War Generation to affirm their collective identity. Rowles and Watkins (2003) propose possession transferring, conscious and implicit memories in place making. Peace et al. (2011) challenge the studies that center on micro-environments and propose the concept of "layers of environmental press". They argue that macro-environments of neighborhood, towns and community changes should be included in the model. Besides environmental measures, studies have found individuals act differently to the changes. From an environmental behaviour perspective, Golant (2003) states older people will emotionally respond and adapt differently to residential changes due to their personalities and personal histories. Burns et al. (2012) find in neighborhoods that went through gentrification, some older people experienced alienation while others felt senses of social insideness. Golant (2003) suggests conceptualizing temporal properties of environments and individuals. Practical environmental applications are proposed considering residential environmental pasts and individual histories.

The adaptation processes of older people and place may result in aging in place, or relocation to institutional care facilities. Aging in place in a Western context has been discussed both in policy and academic contexts. Aging in place represents older people's ability to remain living in the residences or communities of their choice (Schofield et al., 2006). Wiles et al. (2011) find older people's conception of aging in place is pragmatic. It is seen as an advantage for senses of attachment, security, familiarity, identity and autonomy. Cutchin (2003) sees aging in place as integration and reintegration of

place and older people in different situations with social efforts. The problematic situations in home and community lead to mediation in service settings. He proposes the core processes of a person-place whole, including reshaping space, creating a sense of belonging and responsibility through activity, and contesting space with others. Action and meaning are interwoven in the process. Older people's habits are reconstructed and the attributes of home and community are recreated in new settings. Instability is ongoing in the process. Peace et al. (2011) define the point when adaptive behaviour cannot rebalance environmental press as "option recognition". Strategic responses of aging in place or moving will take place. They find central to decision making are control over routine and self-identity, that person's social capital, biography and experience in time and space explain the complex person-environment interaction.

The life experiences of the current generation of older Chinese cannot be separated from a series of social changes and turbulence. They have lived through wars and different stages of socialist construction after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. They carry strong imprints of their times. They have experienced the planned economy and Work-unit (*Danwei*) system, as well as the socialist market economy after the reforms. Before the economic reforms in urban China, the population was organized by the *Danwei* system. *Danwei* was not just a work place; it also provided housing, health care, education and other social security supports and benefits to the employees. Residential spaces were formed based on *Danwei*. Pension was provided directly by state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Since the economic reforms in 1978, cities have shifted away from socialist patterns in land-use, housing, welfare provision, administrative systems, etc. Cities have urbanized rapidly and *Danwei* system was gradually phased out. Housing is now largely commercialized, and social welfare and services are not solely provided by the public system. Pension became a huge burden for the former SOEs under reform and multi-pillar pension system was introduced in the 1990s including contribution from government, enterprises and individuals. The "Community", instead of *Danwei*, has become the new form of social organization. Community is used in official Chinese documents to mean small geographic areas within cities where street offices and residence committees are the legal entities for organizing the communities. In an academic sense, an equivalent term would be neighborhood in Western context. "Community construction" reform was initiated in the 1980s to establish the functions of policy implementation, service provision, public health, maintaining public orders and organizing community activities for individual communities.

The economy started to boom after the reforms. At the same time, urbanization and marketization have resulted in a growing wealth gap, new social and residential space formations, social segregation and other forms of inequality (Fan, 2002; Zhang et al., 2003; Wu, 2004; Li and Wu, 2008, 2013). A large number of people have relocated due to multiple urban renewal projects, some have purchased commercial housing, and others remain in their older dwellings. For older people, their immediate built and social environments have changed tremendously along the timeline between 1978 and the present.

People's value system and traditional family relations are also affected (Chen and Liu, 2009). In a traditional Confucians sense, filial piety stresses submission to parental authority and children's duty of caring for parents, especially the eldest son in a patriarchal system. Studies have agreed that filial piety remains an important virtue for Chinese society and older people's well-being (Cheng et al., 2004; Liu, 2000; Cheng and Chan, 2006), while modernization, urbanization, and the one-child policy have changed family structure and the concept greatly. The concept can be understood as dual dimensional: reciprocal filial piety (RFP) and authoritarian filial piety (AFP) (Yeh and Bedford, 2003). RFP is often related to intimacy, gratitude and voluntary support for older parents and fits better modern values of equality, while AFP refers to obedience to normative authority. It varies among studies how filial piety is conceptualized, expected and manifested