

## CHAPTER 6

# INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS FROM SHANGHAI

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### **Introduction**

With over one billion people, China accounts for nearly a quarter of the world's population. It also has the largest population of elderly (60 and over) living under one government (approximately 80 million). These elderly make up approximately 8 percent of China's population (Banister, 1984). In the U.S., the same age group makes up 15.8 percent of the total population (U.S. Census, 1983). In fifteen years (by the year 2000), China expects a 63 percent increase in the size of its elderly population. The projected 130 million elderly will then constitute 11 percent of China's numbers. U.S. projections reflect similar growth, with those over 60 expected to make up about 20 percent of the population by the year 2000. China leads developing nations in longevity. Life expectancy has increased from 43 years in 1949 to 73 years -- testimony to the great strides the country has made in the area of public health. With this increased life expectancy comes the challenge of providing support for the elderly. Security for China's elderly derives from three sources: pensions, employment and family care. Government pensions ranging from 60 percent to 90 percent of salary are available to state workers who make up 80 percent of the urban labor force. Yet, current pension coverage in urban areas is far

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from universal. Of the 18 million people of retirement age in the cities, only 8 million (45 percent) received pensions in 1981 (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1984). In rural China, pensions are much less common. The estimated 3 million retirees who worked in rural collective enterprises receive small pensions. However, for the vast majority of elderly in rural areas pension support is not available. Instead, they rely upon a combination of marginal employment and dependence upon sons (Davis-Friedmann, 1983). Introduction of the production responsibility system in the late 1970s encouraged establishment of private gardens and raising of private livestock. By engaging in these enterprises the rural elderly contribute substantially to their families' standard of living. They also take on auxiliary jobs such as orchard watchman, stockman, and scavenger (Liang, 1985).

In both urban and rural areas the family continues to serve as the main support in old age. In fact, the constitution of the People's Republic of China specifically states that children have an obligation to provide for their parents. Those who fail to do so may be subject to criminal penalties (Zhu, 1985). The administrative structure of Chinese government includes resident committees (*danwei*), which help families meet this mandate by mediating disputes (see Parish & Whyte, 1984, for a description of the mediation process). Traditionally, sons assume primary responsibility for their parents. When a woman married she became part of her husband's household. Today, most of China's elderly live in three-generation households, usually with a son and daughter-in-law and their children. The elderly are important contributors to the household economy, assuming responsibility for child-rearing, cooking, cleaning and tending domestic animals.

The study reported here was conducted to investigate three components of China's old age support system: pensions, employment and family care, with particular emphasis on intergenerational relations. The theoretical framework was drawn from exchange theory. We investigated the norm of reciprocity as it is evidenced in the Chinese cultural context. Specific questions considered include:

1. In what way do the elderly contribute to the economies of three-generation households? How does this contribution influence intergenerational relations? We know in general terms the sorts of activities the elderly engage in. This study took a more detailed look at their contribution to maintaining harmony within the household.

2. Within three-generation households, do all generations have similar expectations and values regarding care of the frail elderly? If not, how do they differ? China differs from industrialized nations in its low proportion of "old-old". Proportions of elderly 75-79 years of age and 80 and over are 11 percent and 7 percent respectively, compared to 13 percent and 15 percent in the U.S. Thus fewer families have confronted the need to provide care to a frail elder. We anticipate that in coming years more families will face this challenge. This survey of attitudes of different generations will prove helpful, projecting possible difficulties in this area.

3. What is the specific content of intergenerational disputes and how are they resolved? We suspect that the norm of reciprocity is important in this context, and that disputes arise most often when elderly do not and have not contributed to their children's households. China's strength lies in its well-established system of family care for the elderly. This study was designed to contribute to both our theoretical understanding of the family and our ability to intervene in intergenerational disputes.

## Method

### *Sample*

This research was conducted in Shanghai, a city of 12 million. The sample included three generation households registered in two neighborhood committees: Jiang Er and Zhong Yi. In the Jiang Er neighborhood there are 760 households, with a total population of 2,608. The Zhong Yi neighborhood includes 575 households with 1,980 residents. A random sample of 58 households was drawn, and

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interviews were conducted with members of each generation. Children under the age of 10 were not included in the sample. A total of 256 individuals participated in these interviews.

Seventy-three grandparents were interviewed. In this (G1) generation the mean age was 71 years, with a range of 59 to 92. Most (67 percent) of the grandparents surveyed were women. The most common occupation was worker (33 percent), followed by housewife (25 percent), clerical worker (18 percent), cadre (10 percent), intellectual (8 percent), and professional (6 percent).

A total of 113 parents were interviewed. The mean age for parents (the "G2" generation) was 44 years, with a range of 33 to 63. This group was evenly divided between men (50 percent) and women (50 percent). The most usual occupations were professional (23 percent) and worker (23 percent), followed by cadre (20 percent), intellectual (18 percent), and clerical (15 percent).

Seventy grandchildren were interviewed. Their mean age was 15 years, with a range of 10 to 26. Grandchildren were labelled the "G3" generation.

### Instruments

Separate interview schedules were prepared for each generation. In addition to demographic information, the instruments collected data regarding intergenerational assistance and gift-giving, daily activities, experiences and expectations regarding elder care, social contacts, and intergenerational conflict. In addition, both parent and grandparent generations responded to the Center for Epidemiological Studies - Depression (CES-D) scale.

An attitude scale developed by Elaine Brody and her colleagues (1983) was administered to members of all three generations. The scale includes 46 statements, and respondents were asked to indicate their response using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). A principal components analysis was performed to determine the major dimensions of this scale. The analysis resulted in four components with eigenvalues greater than

1.83, accounting for 25.4 percent of the total variance. These components were rotated to the varimax criterion. The four factors reflected attitudes towards: receiving and giving help, family care of sick elderly, social change, and personal control. Using a .40 cut-off point, 28 (61 percent) of the 46 items loaded onto these four factors. Analysis of variance was then used on the 28 items to identify those on which there were significant differences between generations ( $p < .05$ ).

### **Interviews**

The interviewers were psychiatrists and nurses working at the Shanghai Institute of Mental Health. Interviewer training sessions took three days, with a U.S. researcher (A.S. Barusch) serving as training faculty. Training focused on communication techniques for use with elderly and young children, as well as standardization of recording. Several rounds of mock interviews were conducted.

Pilot interviews were conducted with 20 families under the supervision of the U.S. researcher. These interviews provided data for use in establishing codes for open-ended questions. All interviews were conducted in respondents' homes between May and July, 1989. Completed interview booklets submitted by the interviewers were checked by supervisors to detect missed questions, illegible codes and illogical or inconsistent responses. The data were then entered, using a validation program set up specifically for this study, on a PC.

## **Results**

### **Grandparents' Contribution**

In what way do grandparents contribute to the household economies of three-generation households? Table 1 presents responses of each generation to an open-ended question regarding the grandparents' contribution. Grandparents were asked "What do you do to help your children and grandchildren?" and both children and grandchildren were asked "What does your grandparent do to help you?" Responses to the question were recorded in the order given. Results for the first answer (seen as the "primary" response) are considered here.

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The table reveals strong consensus regarding the primary contribution of grandparents. All three generations report that most grandparents help by doing kitchen work, such as preparing food and washing dishes. A few discrepancies are worth noting. First, grandparents are more likely than other family members to mention cleaning. This may be because others are unaware of the amount of time spent cleaning. Second, although both grandparents and parents list help with children as a primary form of assistance, grandchildren do not. Grandchildren are more likely to give responses coded as "other," suggesting need for additional content analysis. Since the majority of grandparents in this sample (67 percent) report receiving a pension, it is interesting that so few report that grandparents help by giving money or doing shopping. What do grandparents do with their pensions?

**Table 1**  
**What Do Grandparents Do to Help?**

	<u>Grandparents'</u> <u>Response</u>	<u>Parents'</u> <u>Response</u>	<u>Grandchildrens'</u> <u>Response</u>
	<u>Percentages</u>		
Nothing	16	15	17
Clean house			
Floor/room	23	7	3
Laundry	3	4	7
Heavy repair	0	1	1
Help with children	11	20	0
Shopping	4	5	3
Kitchen work	36	40	47
Give money	1	0	0
Provide house/food	3	4	1
Past assistance	1	2	3
Other	1	3	17

Percentages indicate proportion of generations who listed each task as their primary response.

## **Expectations Regarding Elder Care**

### **Who will take care of grandparents?**

Table 2 presents the views of each generation on who would care for the grandparents if they were to become sick or injured. All three generations seem to agree that primary responsibility would reside with the middle (parent) generation. However, there is some disagreement about the role of the grandchildren. Whereas grandparents and parents are unlikely to list them as a source of care, 14 percent of grandchildren responded that they would do so. Grandchildren are also less likely than other generations to view the spouse of the grandparent as a source of care. None of the generations anticipated relying on government or formal sources of care.

When we asked respondents why the person would provide the care, the older (parent and grandparent) generations were most likely to refer to duty or obligation. Grandchildren, on the other hand were most likely to refer to tradition and the person's role in the family saying, for example, "Because he/she is the son." There was relatively little reference to reciprocity, or the need to discharge a debt or repay a favor.

### **Who will take care of grandchildren?**

Table 3 presents the responses of grandchildren when they were asked: "When you are old, who will take care of you if you become hurt or sick?" Grandchildren were much less likely than the grandparents to anticipate relying on their children. Where the vast majority (95 percent) of grandparents expected a member of the middle generation to care for them, only 43 percent of grandchildren did so. In fact, grandchildren's responses to this question were quite diverse. Some (7 percent) expected their parents to provide care. Others expected to rely on a spouse (19 percent) or sibling (4 percent). One of the more creative respondents expected to be cared for by a robot!

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**Table 2**  
**Who Will Take Care of Grandparents?...And Why?**

<u>Who?</u>	<u>Grandparents' Perspective</u> (n = 73)	<u>Parents' Perspective</u> (n = 113)	<u>Grandchildrens' Perspective</u> (n = 70)
	<u>Percentages</u>		
Don't Know	0	0	0
Government	1	1	0
Daughter or Son-in-Law	40	29	13
Son or Daughter-in-Law	45	60	49
Spouse	8	4	1
Other relative	0	0	4
Friends/neighbor	0	0	0
Grandchildren	3	1	14
No One	0	0	1
Other	0	5	17

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<u>Why?</u>	(n = 73)	(n = 133)	(n = 16)
	<u>Percentages</u>		
Not Sure	0	0	0
Duty/Obligation	25	36	19
Tradition	3	4	25
Role	19	13	25
No one else can	11	11	19
Good Relationship	10	4	0
Live together	16	20	0
Reciprocity	6	5	6
Only child	0	3	0
It's his/her job	3	2	0
Other	8	4	6



**Table 3**  
**Who Will Take Care of the Grandchildren?**

(n = 70)

Percentages

No One	6
Spouse	19
Children	43
Parents	7
Government	4
Other Family Member	1
Sibling	4
Servant	3
Other (Robot, etc.)	3
Don't Know	10

**Intergenerational Disputes**

In order to learn about the specific content of intergenerational disputes, each respondent was asked whether he or she ever argued with other members of the family. Those who indicated that they did have arguments were asked what they argued about. Table 4 presents these results.

Grandparents seldom report arguing with other family members. If they do have arguments, they are most likely to be with grandchildren or daughters. Twenty-two percent of grandparents reported that they argued with at least one grandchild. Sixty-nine percent of those who argued did so with a male grandchild. It is interesting to note that a much higher proportion (51 percent) of grandchildren report having arguments with their grandparents. We suspect that this discrepancy is due to cohort differences in respon-

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dents' reactions to the interview situation. This difference is also reflected in responses of the middle (parent) generation. Nearly half (48 percent) of parents report having arguments with the grandparents, while only twenty-two percent of grandparents reported arguments with a daughter or daughter-in-law; and nineteen percent reported arguments with a son or son-in-law.

Table 4 presents the topics of arguments as reported by grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. From the grandparents' perspective, most arguments tend to focus on what the other person (either grandchild, son, or daughter) should do or be. Arguments about general values or beliefs are most likely with the daughter or daughter-in-law. Grandparents and adult children are also quite likely to disagree about how grandchildren should be raised. Nineteen percent of grandparents reported having these disputes with daughters, and twenty-one percent with sons.

Notably, thirty-five percent of parents report arguing with the grandparents about how grandchildren should be raised. In fact, from the parents' perspective, this is the most common topic of disagreement. It is followed by general beliefs and values (15 percent) and what the grandparent should do or be (11 percent).

Grandchildren report that the most common topic of disagreement with their grandparents is what the grandchildren should do or be (24 percent), followed by general beliefs and values (15 percent) and television (15 percent).

**Table 4**  
**Intergenerational Conflict: What do Grandparents Argue About**

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Grandparents' Perspective</u>				
	<u>With Grandchildren</u> (n = 16)	<u>With Daughter or Daughter-in-Law</u> (n = 16)	<u>With Son or Son-in-Law</u> (n = 14)	<u>Parent's Perspective</u> (n = 36)	<u>Grandchildren's Perspective</u> (n = 54)
	<u>Percentages</u>				
He/she is critical of me	0	0	0	9	0
T.V.	0	0	0	15	0
What Grandchildren should do or be	75	0	0	24	0
What Grandchildren should have	0	0	0	0	0
What Grandparent should do or be	0	0	0	12	11
What Grandparent should have	0	0	0	3	2
General beliefs/values	13	13	7	15	15
What parent should do or be	--	25	50	0	4
What parent should have	--	6	7	0	7
Grandchildren (i.e. how to raise them)	--	19	21	0	35
Other	12	37	14	21	35
Not Sure	0	0	0	0	2

Percents indicate proportion of those who reported having arguments.

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### General Attitudes Towards Aging and Elder Care

Table 5 presents results from the attitude scale developed by Elaine Brody and her colleagues (1983). Items in the table are those which both loaded onto the four factors identified in this study and revealed statistically significant intergenerational differences. These differences emerged on each of the four factors.

When contemporary social changes are considered, the difference between grandparent (G1) and grandchild (G3) generations is striking. Both agreed that women should be more involved as leaders, but grandchildren were more likely to agree than grandparents. Grandchildren were less likely than grandparents to agree that adult children do not take as much care of elderly parents nowadays as they did in the past. Finally, whereas grandparents tend to disagree with the view that old people have too much power, the majority of grandchildren tend to agree. The middle (G2) generation more closely resembled grandparents on two of the items, but tended to agree with grandchildren that old people have too much power.

**Table 5**  
**Attitudes of Three Generations on Family support**  
**and Care for Elderly**

	<u>Percent Indicating Agreement</u>			
	G1 (n=73)	G2 (n=113)	G3 (n=70)	p*
<b>Social Change</b>				
1. Women should be more involved as leaders in solving today's social problems.	73.6	76.1	91.4	.02
2. Nowadays, adult children do not take as much care of their elderly parents as they did in past generations.	82.1	89.5	60.0	.00
3. Old people have too much power in business and politics.	32.9	59.3	54.3	.03
<b>Receiving &amp; Giving Help</b>				
1. One of the good things about having your family help you is that you get the chance to help them back.	73.5	78.7	70.0	.05
<b>Family Care of Sick Elderly</b>				
1. Older people should not expect much help from their grandchildren.	68.5	43.4	30.0	.00
2. Once adult children have families of their own they should not be expected to do household tasks for their parents.	57.5	46.9	32.8	.00
3. If there were enough government or private programs to help older people with services like transportation and home-delivered meals, they could get everything they need without asking their children.	68.9	46.0	27.2	.00
4. It is better for a working woman to pay someone to take care of her elderly mother than to leave her job to take care of her herself.	72.6	77.0	54.3	.00
5. Most people get upset when they see an older person who is paralyzed from a stroke.	76.7	71.6	51.4	.00
6. I think of old age as a depressing time of life.	58.9	50.5	38.5	.04
<b>Attitudes of Three Generations on Family support and care for elderly.</b>				
<b>Personal Control</b>				
1. Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen	42.5	31.8	58.6	.00
People's misfortunes result mostly from the mistakes they make.	48.0	32.8	48.6	.01

\*Significance levels based on analysis of variance.

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On the one item related to giving and receiving help, parents strongly endorsed the value of reciprocity. The majority (79 percent) of the middle generation agreed with the statement that one of the good things about having your family help you is that you get the chance to help them back. Grandparents and grandchildren also agreed with this statement, though less strongly.

Items related to family care of sick elderly consistently revealed a tendency for grandchildren to expect more of themselves and other family members than did parents and grandparents. This finding is similar to results reported by Campbell and Brody (1985) in their comparison of three generations of Japanese and Americans. This study differs from theirs as our sample included men and women and they surveyed only women. Still, it is striking that in all three cultures, grandchildren are more likely than both grandparents and parents to disagree with the statement that older people should not expect much help from grandchildren. In our sample, only 30 percent of grandchildren agreed with this statement, compared to 69 percent of grandparents and 43 percent of parents. Similarly, grandchildren tend to disagree with the view that adult children with families should not be expected to do household tasks for their parents. Only 33 percent of grandchildren agreed with this statement, compared to the majority (58 percent) of grandparents. Grandchildren are quite unlikely to agree that formal services could provide everything older people need. Only 27 percent of grandchildren agreed with this view, compared to a majority (69 percent) of grandparents. A majority of all three generations agreed that it is better for a working woman to pay someone to take care of her elderly mother than to leave her job to provide care. But grandchildren were the least likely to endorse this view. Only 51 percent of grandchildren agreed, compared to 73 percent of grandparents and 77 percent of parents.

Grandchildren tended to view old age more favorably than parents and grandparents. They were less likely than parents and grandparents to believe that most people find a paralyzed person distressing. About 51 percent of grandchildren agreed with this view,

compared to 72 percent of parents and 77 percent of grandparents. A minority of grandchildren (39 percent) agreed that old age is a depressing time of life, compared to about half of parents (51 percent) and a majority of grandparents (59 percent).

The generations also differed on two questions related to personal control. The majority of grandchildren (59 percent) agreed that they feel they had little influence over the things that happen. This compared to a minority of grandparents (43 percent) and an even smaller proportion of parents (32 percent). Yet both grandchildren and grandparents were more inclined than parents to believe that people's misfortunes result mostly from the mistakes they make. Nearly half of the grandchildren (49 percent) agreed with this view, as did 48 percent of grandparents. But a minority (33 percent) of parents agreed. Evidently, the middle generation is most likely to feel that they can influence events, and least likely to attribute misfortune to personal mistakes. This may reflect different attributional styles which result from various degrees of involvement in events outside of the family. Parents' greater involvement may lead to increased awareness of the large number of events beyond personal control which can produce misfortunes.

### Discussion

Consistent in these findings is the tendency of older family members, both parents and grandparents, to underestimate grandchildren's willingness and capacity to provide help. Grandchildren consider themselves a likely source of assistance to elderly, while grandparents and parents do not. This finding has been observed in three diverse cultures, and may reflect a near-universal definition of childhood as a time for education, play, and related activities, but not for elder care. If families cling to this definition in times of sickness, grandchildren may find themselves excluded from a primary family activity. Further, adults may deprive themselves of an important source of assistance. The grandchildren we interviewed were in their adolescence and certainly have the capacity to contribute to caregiving efforts.

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Professional and community leaders may counteract this view by encouraging grandchildren to be involved in caregiving efforts.

Findings of our attitudinal survey also reveal grandchildren's positive views regarding family care and old age. In fact, grandchildren were more likely than older generations to endorse the "traditional" view that families should assume responsibility for elder care. They were also less likely to view old age as depressing and upsetting. We might view these generational differences as developmental changes, suggesting that, as people gain greater experience with old age and life in general, their views change in the directions observed. In other words, they become "jaded." Or they may reflect historical changes in expectations of old age. Regardless, they testify to the strong generational bond between these grandchildren and their grandparents. In the future we may look to grandchildren as a source of optimism and commitment to family care of the elderly.



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